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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 23 Meán Fómhair 2026

Wednesday, 23 September 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

Senator 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 Eileen Lynch - the need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on amending the early childhood care and education scheme eligibility requirements so that children can commence once eligible at age two years and eight months.

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 Anne Rabbitte - the need for the Minister of State with special responsibility for forestry, farm safety and horticulture to make a statement on the future plans for Portumna Forest Park, County Galway.

Senator Teresa Costello - the need for the Minister for Climate Energy and the Environment to make a statement on the systems in place for the disposal of nitrous oxide canisters and the supports available to local authorities to deal with this issue.

Senator Pauline Tully - the need for the Minister for Social Protection to make a statement on introducing a system where people in receipt of a jobseeker's allowance who become ill are automatically transferred to the supplementary welfare allowance.

Senator Patricia Stephenson - the need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the provision of sexual assault treatment units in different regions in the country.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Cosgrove, Lynch, Kennelly and Rabbitte and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Health Services

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State is most welcome to Seanad Éireann. The first Commencement matter is by Senator Cosgrove. She has four minutes.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I have spoken to her before about this issue. At the beginning of September, RTÉ's "Liveline" programme spent three days discussing the matter of dense breast material. The Minister of State might have heard it because it got huge coverage. It is something I have raised before in this Chamber, not only as a woman but as a representative of Sligo. I first became aware even of the existence of dense breasts with the tragic death of a Sligo woman named Marian Lovett. To give an outline of how the system failed Marian, in 2022, she received a clear mammogram. Less than 12 months later, she received a diagnosis of stage 4 terminal breast cancer. Sadly, she passed away then one year later. Marian's cancer was missed because her breasts contained more fibrous and glandular material than fatty material. The Minister of State will be aware that dense breast material appears white on a standard mammogram and cancerous materials also appear as white, so it makes it difficult to spot. Several of the callers to "Liveline", and fair play to Kieran Cuddihy for raising this so well on the programme, noted that the chances of finding cancerous material on a mammogram is akin to finding a snowball in a snowstorm. As a result of the campaign that was brought forward by Lobular Ireland, Siobhán Freeney and Marian's daughter, Martha Lovett Cullen, who brought this to my attention, we heard the women's stories. They were very brave when they came on and spoke about this and how they want the information made available to them that the HSE is receiving. I acknowledge HIQA is involved in looking at the issue.

I am going to give the example of Evan, who I heard speak about this. She got a private mammogram in her late 40s because she had a family history of breast cancer. At the private mammogram, she was told by the radiographer that she had extremely dense breasts and needed to be aware of this and that she would require additional screening. The additional screening was required because her breasts showed up as white on the standard mammogram, as would the cancer. Evan requested an ultrasound and a biopsy due to her family history and two weeks later, she was found to have stage 1 lobular cancer. She was lucky that her cancer was identified early. The point is that if she was just getting a standard breast check for cancer, people are not told with that mammogram.

I went for my first breast check during the summer. I was called back. The reason I was called back was because there was an unclear reading. However, I was not told either that I had dense breast tissue. I queried it. I asked, "Why am I being called back? Is it because I have dense breasts?" However, the clinicians were not able to give me that information. To me, it seems that if a woman can get a private mammogram and be told she has dense breasts

and can make an informed decision to look for a biopsy and a second mammogram, why should everyone not do so?

This is not a failure of BreastCheck. All the women said that. They all said that it is a fantastic service, but we should be told. We should be entitled to the information the HSE is getting. If the clinicians are not able to read it on the mammogram, the equipment or whatever is needed to update the software needs to be put in place.

HIQA is involved, but that is going to be 2027 and the results of that might not be put into play until 2028. In the meantime, can people be told the information the HSE has access to that their own GPs can have access to? Why can people not be told that they have dense breast tissue so that they are able to make an informed choice themselves? It is not that long ago that CervicalCheck was under discussion. I hate bringing that up but it is not that long ago that it also happened that women were not being told. Their information is there and they should be given the information if the HSE has it.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Senator Cosgrove for the opportunity to discuss this important matter of breast density notification. I have just come from the Dáil Chamber where I took a Topical Issue matter in relation to the important matter of breast screening. I am taking both on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

The first thing I want to mention, and the Senator said it as well, is the importance of breast screening. Unfortunately, only 70% of people take up their appointment; one out of every three does not. Any time we are speaking about women's health, and we are all unified in this, the more people who go for screening, the better. That is the first piece. One third of all breast cancers of the 3,500 every year are identified through BreastCheck. That is the first point I want to make. We are all in agreement about how important it is.

To move on to the matter of breast density notification, which is a really important thing, depending on a woman's body shape, as to whether breast density can be identified. It is common; around half of all women have dense breasts. It is a normal variation in breast tissue. Breast density is one of several factors that can influence breast cancer risk. It is very important to say, however, that having dense breasts does not mean someone will develop breast cancer. High levels of breast density can make mammograms more difficult to interpret in some women. However, breast density alone does not automatically mean that further imaging is required. Decisions about additional imaging are made on an individual basis by the clinical team as part of a women's assessment and diagnosis.

BreastCheck mammograms remain the best screening test available for population breast screening for women aged 50 to 69 years of age. It can save lives by finding many cancers early, often before symptoms develop. It is important to know that mammography detects the majority of breast cancers, including in women with dense breasts.

Consideration of any changes in Ireland's screening programmes is facilitated through established, evidence-driven protocols. The national screening advisory committee is an independent expert group that advises the Minister for Health on any proposed changes to Ireland's screening programmes. As Senator Cosgrove noted, at the request of the committee, the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, has commenced a health technology

assessment, HTA, to consider proposals for expansion of the BreastCheck programme. This is democracy in action. This is women with lived experience bringing their concerns forward through a committee, with recommendation made to the Minister and that recommendation has now gone to HIQA.

This review will comprise of three distinct components. First is the proposed extension of the age range eligibility to those aged 45 to 49, which I agree with. Second is the extension of age range to those aged 70 to 74. Again, I think that is really important. Third is the potential introduction of a standardised breast density notification. That is what the Senator is talking about. She talked about someone who went privately. I am not sure if it is across all private or if it was just that individual case. It is an interesting point. I do think the potential introduction of a standardised breast density notification would be really important to support women.

The HTA facilitates the assessment of relevant evidence on the effects and consequences of healthcare technologies or programmes. They seek to guide decisions regarding the appropriate use of technology and efficient allocation of resources. They involve a multidisciplinary assessment of clinical, economic, ethical, legal and societal perspectives that may be impacted by the introduction of a new technology or programme.

The Minister for Health wants to be in a position to develop services that are clinically effective and have positive health outcomes. She needs to be informed by the experts in order to do this. I will certainly discuss this with the Minister. She is not available today as there are a lot of budget talks going on. It is something I have heard about from my own friends, from colleagues and from Senator Cosgrove, who is such an advocate for women's health, and I compliment her on that. I have no problem coming into the Seanad any time to discuss women's health.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I thank the Minister of State for being so responsive. No one is disputing this, and we are totally in favour of extending the BreastCheck to both sides of the existing age range. It is a wonderful service and it is picking up many cancers. If someone has dense breast tissue it does not appear often as a lump. It is like a spider web and women are not feeling it. They have been encouraged to check their own breasts. If they have dense breast tissue, it is not showing up as a lump. At the moment we are not even looking at a second mammogram or ultrasound being referred. It is about women being told the information in order that they can decide if they want to do it privately themselves. I can see what the HIQA report will hopefully recommend, that is, that if dense breast tissue is showing up, women are to be referred for a second mammogram or ultrasound or biopsy; whatever is appropriate.

In my experience, when I was referred, it was really quick. Unfortunately, it was not in Sligo, and I had to go to Galway but it was really fast. I had a second mammogram and I had an ultrasound. I did not need to get a biopsy. What we are looking for in the interim before the HIQA report is concluded is that women are given the information so they can see that maybe they do need to pay for a second mammogram or maybe they need to look for an ultrasound. It is just so they have access to their own information.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank Senator Cosgrove. I assure her I will bring her views on this important matter back to the Minister for Health. It is important for me to clarify for the House

that the BreastCheck programme does not currently collect, record or report on breast density scores. Determining the merits or otherwise of introducing such a notification is precisely the purpose of the HTA process, which should be allowed run its course. It is under way. Population-based screening programmes are intended for individuals without symptoms. It is really important that we recognise it is for people without symptoms. If somebody has any concerns or symptoms related to their breasts, they should not attend screening but instead should contact a medical professional for appropriate advice, that is, their GP. That is important.

I actually got notified yesterday. My husband told me on the phone that I got a notification from BreastCheck to attend. I think this is my fourth time going. It is a very good service. It really is. Unfortunately, only two out of three appointments are taken up. It falls more in the summer. People are busy. They might be working. It might not be easy to get off work. However, it is important to contact them, and they will reschedule. That is the most important thing to say. It is very important that every woman is breast-aware, which means knowing what is normal for them so that if any unusual change occurs, they will recognise it. Further information is available on the HSE website and on *breastcheck.ie*.

To return to Senator Cosgrove's point, the Minister has said she has to allow the process to take place before she can make that decision, which is the Senator's request, that the person should be notified. That would mean training and everything. The sooner we get this done by HIQA, the better, and hopefully we will have a positive outcome. I do support what the Senator is trying to achieve.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I thank her for always being so available to the Seanad Chamber. It is lovely to see her here this morning.

While we are waiting for our next Commencement matter, I wish to welcome a special guest to the Visitors Gallery. We have Robert Watson, friend of Deputy Aindrias Moynihan. Good morning to them both. It is lovely to see them in the Chamber, and I hope they enjoy the proceedings.

Early Childhood Care and Education

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran, to the Chamber.

Senator Eileen Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as a bheith anseo inniu. I want to raise the issue of the ECCE scheme and its impact on children who miss the eligibility criteria by only a matter of days or weeks, particularly kids with additional needs. I would also like to ask whether any changes to these criteria are being considered.

Currently, there are no exemptions to the lower age limit for the ECCE scheme. This means that a child who misses the eligibility threshold by only a few days or weeks must wait an entire additional year before becoming eligible for a State-funded preschool place. Many parents are finding this incredibly unfair and a difference of only a few weeks or days in a child's date of birth will determine whether they receive one or two years of ECCE funding and can

significantly affect their educational pathway. As a result, some parents feel pressure to delay their child's entry to primary school in order that they can benefit from the full two years of ECCE prior to primary school. Others choose to send their child to school at the usual age and receive only one year of ECCE support.

This issue is particularly concerning for children with intellectual disabilities and other additional needs. The State recognises that early intervention is critical in supporting the development of children with disabilities. However, there does appear to be a contradiction within the current system. A child may be assessed by speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology services or children's disability network teams, CDNTs, and be deemed likely to benefit from early education participation. They may be developmentally ready for preschool and could greatly benefit from the environment yet there is still no provision or exemption within ECCE for a lower age limit regardless of disability or ability, developmental need or professional recommendation.

As an example, I have been working with a young child from the constituency I live in of Cork North-West. Noah is a young lad who is almost three years of age and has Down's syndrome. He is thriving and is making excellent progress in all areas of his development but because Noah was born in January, he did not qualify for ECCE when he began preschool a few weeks ago. Following professional advice from therapists, his parents still felt it was in his best interests to send him rather than waiting another year because delaying this could have delayed his development. As a result of this, they are now facing a full year of preschool fees without any ECCE support.

In addition, as preparation to ensure that Noah was able to attend preschool this year, he was attending private speech and language therapy, craniosacral therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy sessions each week. This was to ensure he was able to go to preschool this year and then he was ineligible for ECCE. This is all extra cost to his parents. On top of all this private therapy they have been paying for to ensure he was ready for preschool, they now have to pay for preschool because he misses out by three weeks due to the fact that he was born in January.

Children with disabilities often require earlier interventions. This is nothing new. As a Government, we are saying this all the time and not later interventions. A rigid age-based rule may unintentionally delay access to an environment that supports language development, communication, socialisation, independence and school readiness. We know early intervention makes a difference and it is insane that the ECCE scheme is not supporting that. We have situations, particularly with kids with additional needs, where they cannot avail of their extra year because of a rigid, mandatory age requirement.

Going back to Noah, he has now been in preschool for a month. His parents and therapists have already seen remarkable progress. He is a smashing little kid. He is doing really well. He is using new words, and he is engaging with other children. If he had not been able to go to preschool this year, none of that would have been possible.

His parents put additional therapies in place to ensure that he was, but then found out he was ineligible and missed out by a few weeks due to a mandatory age requirement. How many other kids around the country are like Noah? Fortunately, his parents were able to afford to pay for an extra year of the ECCE scheme. A lot of parents are not lucky enough to be in that

situation. I appreciate it is not quite within the remit of the Minister, but I thank her for taking this matter. Can any changes be made, given that it is an arbitrary requirement?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Minister would like to thank the Senator for raising this important issue and offering a full opportunity to respond. The ECCE programme provides two years of preschool free of charge to families and is based on the national practice framework, aistear and siolta. The programme enjoys a 96% participation rate, with over 1 million children enrolled in the programme since it was first introduced in 2010. The programme provides three free hours per day, five days per week, over 38 weeks per year.

Currently, children are eligible for the ECCE starting at two years and eight months and the upper age limit is five years and six months. The current eligibility criteria were set based on a number of considerations, including a review of international practice. The lower age range is informed by Tusla regulations and a minimum adult-to-child ratio for children in early learning and child care settings. These regulations take account of the needs of the developmental stages of children, such as toilet training and sleeping arrangements.

The Department recognises that the use of age limits for the purposes such of the ECCE programme can result in some children narrowly falling outside of the eligibility criteria in a given year. However, in the interests of fairness and consistency, the Department must apply a clear and fixed age threshold. The current arrangement ensures that all children have the same entitlement of two years of the ECCE, regardless of their birth date. Some parents may prefer children to start school at the age of four rather than five. These parents may, therefore, choose to avail of one year of the ECCE. However, it is important to note that this is a parental choice and the overall policy ensures that two years of the programme are available to all children.

The programme for Government commits to amend the ECCE programme eligibility criteria. The shaping the future early years action plan phase 1 report, published in December 2025, notes that the potential extension of the free ECCE programme and amending the age eligibility criteria will include consultation and analysis under the phase 2 of the action plan. Phase 2 actions, which will be undertaken in 2027 to the end of 2029, will be published in quarter four of 2026 before those actions can be specified in line with the commitment in the programme for Government. A broad public consultation process is currently underway.

Senator Eileen Lynch: I thank the Minister of State for the response. I note it is not quite within the responsibility of his Department. It is a very standard response. It is disappointing in terms of the question I raised. Again, I appreciate that it is not his responsibility. Unfortunately, I do not have a written copy and do not have a note of what he said.

He outlined the mandatory criteria. That is all well and good, but kids operate on a different basis. I heard an example today of a child who has additional needs. Nobody is taking account of that in the current ECCE scheme. I am not taking away from the scheme. The Minister of State outlined its advantages. It is a fantastic scheme for those who are born at the right time. Whether a child does or does not have additional needs, they can miss out on the full year of the scheme by a matter of days or weeks. It is an arbitrary date. I ask that the Minister consider

changing the criteria so that places can be accepted throughout the year on a rolling basis. As I said, whether a child has additional needs the dates are arbitrary.

Parents are being put under undue pressure. The scheme and funding are in place. The Minister of State outlined all of the advantages of the scheme, and I am not trying to take away from that, but it is unfortunate that many children are missing out because of an arbitrary date. A lot of discretion needs to be used. The Minister of State mentioned a review, but it is not coming fast enough. We have no indication as to whether the review will examine the eligibility dates.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I agree with the Senator. As I outlined in my opening remarks, I will bring this issue to the attention of the Minister. I meet many children and parents who experience the same difficulties the Senator has outlined. I feel for those people. The programme for Government is committed to delivering on this and we will do so.

Planning Issues

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the Seanad. I call on the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to provide a timeline for the publication of the national planning statement on solar energy development. Let us be clear. Ireland needs renewable energy and solar energy will play a major role in helping us to meet our climate targets. Most people will accept that.

However, communities also need confidence that solar developments are being planned in a fair, transparent, consistent and balanced manner. At present, local authorities, developers and communities are operating without any national guidelines or guidance. This is creating uncertainty and concern, in particular in rural areas where large-scale solar farm applications are being proposed. In one area of north Kerry there are currently ten solar farm developments approved or progressing through the planning process, covering over 4,000 acres of land in the Listowel municipal district. This demonstrates the scale of investment coming into rural Ireland and the urgency of having a clear national framework in place.

I want to be very clear that people, including me, are not opposed to renewable energy, but they want to know what rules are being applied and what protections are in place. Communities deserve certainty and consistency, rather than having these decisions made without clear national guidelines. The national planning statement should provide clear direction on a number of key issues in regard to solar farm planning applications. It should address location and site suitability, whether the proposed site is appropriate for solar development, landscape and visual factors, the effect of solar installation on the surrounding landscape and views, glint and glare issues, the assessment and mitigation of potential impacts on nearby homes, roads, airports and other sensitive locations, residential amenities, the potential impact on neighbouring homes, including the visual impact, noise and construction disturbances, setback distances from properties and proper screening. It should also consider the quality and productive use of agricultural land.

As is the case with wind energy, community engagement is important, especially in my area. Meaningful consultation with local communities before and during the planning process, outlining the community benefit arising from renewable energy projects is necessary. As I said, almost 4,500 acres in my area are being proposed for solar wind farms. This is not a question of choosing between climate action and protecting rural Ireland. We can and we must do both. Clear national guidelines would provide certainty for communities and landowners and consistency for planning authorities across Ireland.

This is not an argument against renewable energy. As I said, it is quite the opposite. We need renewable energy. We need to meet our climate targets. We need energy security and investment in rural Ireland. We also need public confidence. If we do not bring the public with us, we will not have their confidence. People living in rural communities deserve to know the large-scale developments are being planned strategically and that their concerns are being properly considered. We should not find ourselves in a situation whereby significant areas of our rural districts are being committed to solar development before we have a clear national planning framework in place. This should not be a choice between protecting our rural environment and achieving our climate targets. As I said, we must deliver on both.

Today, I call on the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to provide a firm timeline for the publication of the national planning statements for solar energy and to ensure local communities, local authorities, farmers, environmental interests and developers have a meaningful opportunity to contribute to the process. I thank the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Senator for raising this issue. He mentioned the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, whose remit is obviously very relevant to renewable energy. However, the national planning statements will be done by the Department of housing under the Minister, Deputy James Browne. Another point to make is that I cannot give an exact timeline for when the national planning statement on solar will be finalised. In that context, there are approximately 28 national planning statements that we are preparing at the moment. We have just done one on rural housing, as the Senator will be aware. There is quite a body of work to get through. I give that context at the start.

I highlight that the Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future reaffirms Ireland's commitment to the ambitious target of having 8 GW of solar capacity connected to the grid by 2030 to assist with meeting the requirement that 80% of electricity demand be supplied by renewables. Solar energy is a growing source of electricity, with installed solar capacity passing the 3 GW milestone for the first time in August of this year. However, further solar capacity is required.

As many Senators will be aware, my Department is working with the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, which holds policy responsibility for renewable energy matters in respect of the introduction of a number of planning statements related to Ireland's climate action plan target, to increase the share of electricity generated from renewable sources to 80% by 2030. This includes the preparation of a national planning statement for solar energy development.

Further to the commencement of Chapter 3 of Part 3 of the Planning and Development Act 2024 on 2 December 2025, provisions for national planning statements have been introduced

to replace the provisions for ministerial guidelines issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000. All existing section 28 guidelines will, over time, be revoked and replaced with new national planning statements. Any current section 28 guidelines will, however, remain in force until revoked or replaced by a corresponding national planning statement.

In respect of sectoral national planning statements in particular, there is also an important role for the relevant policy Department in collaborating with my Department on the development of these national planning statements. In that context, my Department is working closely with the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment as the Department with policy responsibility for renewable energy in order to identify the component factors relevant to the preparation of a national planning statement for solar energy, including any appropriate environmental reporting and public consultation requirements, European obligations such as the renewable energy directive, battery storage facilities and the possible timeframe for the publication of the national planning statement.

In line with EU directive requirements, a strategic environmental assessment will be carried out on any national planning statement regarding solar energy development, with opportunity for consultation by the public and all stakeholders on the draft national planning statement. Until the national planning statement for solar energy is finalised, it remains the case that no specific planning guidelines are currently in place that deal with solar energy development, as is the case for most types of development. I am satisfied, however, that in the interim, the existing and evolving planning system, supported by Government policy more generally, provides a sufficiently robust policy and legislative framework to facilitate the roll-out of solar energy development in a sustainable manner and to assist with meeting our renewable electricity requirements while balancing the perspectives of local communities and allowing for public and stakeholder engagement. In making a decision on a planning application for a solar energy development, a planning authority must consider the specific merits or otherwise of the application in line with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I mentioned the Minister for the environment. Are we saying that these guidelines have to be presented to the Minister for housing to implement? I am asking about the input from the Minister for the environment. I respect the response of the Minister of State but I do not respect the timeline or timeframe. Right now across the country, it is starting to creep up. It was brought to our attention in the Dáil last week by Deputy Kyne. He wanted a moratorium on any future grants of planning permission for solar farms until these guidelines are brought to our attention and that of the local authorities that make decisions on planning applications. I cannot build a house without a guideline. I cannot seek planning permission to build a house without any guidelines.

The one-size-fits-all approach is not suitable. Until the national planning statement for solar energy is finalised, it remains the case that no specific planning guidelines are currently in place to deal with the development of solar energy. I am here for one reason. It is starting to creep across the country. Unfortunately, there are more than 4,500 acres in north Kerry that will be covered. It is good land and the home of Kerry Group. We are on about land, lamb production and farming. The oversaturation in areas is going to require a big answer. I need the guidelines. If we can pass the buck to another Department, so be it, but I am here to look for those guidelines.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I would like to correct the record. I said there were 28 planning statements in the pipeline. Although there is a large number of planning statements, I was incorrectly reading a reference to "section 28". I correct the record on that point.

I totally understand the concern of the public out there. I totally understand the concern of people who are potentially living near proposed solar farms. That is an issue. There is a planning process in place at the moment that takes a lot of these concerns into account, including how visually obtrusive a development might be and other aspects that are relevant to planning. At the same time, offshore renewable energy is still a way off. It is something that we are focused on achieving and we are making progress there under the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. However, we still need a big mix of renewable energy, especially in the middle of a fuel crisis when we are relying on fossil fuels.

We have had a lot of objections - let us call a spade a spade - to wind turbines. We are now starting to see objections creep into areas where solar farms are planned. We are going to have to make some tough decisions. It is not going to be easy. The Senator is absolutely right that the national planning statement will help the likes of us when we are going back to our constituents who have concerns. However, I wholeheartedly disagree with the idea of a moratorium because of our need to ramp up renewable energy.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): I ask the Acting Leader to suspend the House for a few moments while we await the arrival of the Minister of State, Deputy Collins.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I propose the suspension of the House.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.11 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.27 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.11 a.m. and resumed at 11.27 a.m.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): We do not have a Minister to attend to Senator Rabbitte's Commencement matter. We will deal with that in a moment but before I do, I want to welcome some very special guests, Core Credit Union from Ballybrack and Dr. Shashi Murthy of UCD, to our Visitors Gallery. They are guests of Deputy Cormac Delvin. I hope they enjoy their stay here. For now, I propose that we will suspend the House until 11.30 a.m.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Through the Chair, it is unfortunate that I was not allowed to come in. I hope that I can still speak and I do not wish to allow the suspension of the House without-

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): Is this a point of order? The Senator can take it up during the Order of Business.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: No, with respect to the Acting Chair, I will take it up now.

I thank the Acting Chair for her time as she has been sitting here waiting for a Minister to show up to take my Commencement matter. It was Commencement matter No. 4 in which I was to raise Portumna Forest Park. While I understand the Minister is in the Chamber and quite rightly so, I am disappointed that there was not cover from the Front Bench to facilitate. I always thought the procedure was that when a Minister takes that chair, they never leave it until there is a Minister outside. That is the proper protocol and unfortunately that was not adhered to this morning and unfortunately we did not have Front Bench cover. That is something that needs to be addressed at the start of this season because it is quite embarrassing to be sitting here and to be stood up by our Lower House.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): I thank the Senator for her point of order. I accept that. For now, I propose we stand suspended until 11.30 a.m. Is that agreed? Agreed. I do not know what the protocol is for unsuspending the House but I can now welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, to the Chamber. We will continue the Commencement matter. I saw the Minister of State hotfooting it up from the Dáil.

Coillte Teoranta

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Acting Chairperson and I thank the Minister of State for making such an effort to be here. I really appreciate it. He was in the Dáil Chamber and I saw that. It is just unfortunate the somebody from the Front Bench could not have covered him at this moment in time because he cannot be in two places at one time.

I raise Portumna Forest Park. It is a park under the control of Coillte which happens to be under the Minister of State's remit. At the outset, I wish him the best of luck in that portfolio. Portumna Forest Park is both an economic driver for Coillte and a recreational forest park for the people of Portumna. Unfortunately, the last allocation of enhancement works that were to be carried out at Portumna Forest Park did not make the cut for numerous reasons.

One of the main reasons was that the people of Portumna were unhappy with the allocation in relation to accommodation that was within the overall plan, scope and design. After the summer just gone by, when we had no accessible toilets within a 1,500-acre park, I do not feel that is acceptable by any manner or means. While I acknowledge the wonderful work that is done by Coillte, particularly by Declan Garvey and David Harris on a daily basis, we have to make some arrangements to move forward with a design or plan that would be in keeping with what the park design is, would ensure we have accessible toilets and would ensure that people have a place to come in out of the rain and have their picnics when they visit the forest.

I am also looking for an upgrade and proper signage in relation to the various walkways that we have in Portumna. There is a fantastic accessible walking park within it, but the expansion of the accessibility would be really welcome. There has been huge investment in the blueway, but that blueway tying in with the greenway within the park would mean that the allocation of accessible bikes would actually get a full experience within the park.

I have no doubt that the Minister of State's office works very closely with the local authorities in ensuring those upgrades can be met to ensure the park can be both a place of recreation and economic driver. For us in Portumna, it is our centrepiece. It is the crown in the jewel for us. However, we got a lot of complaints during the summer. Older people in

particular who go out there cannot use what is available. I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Niall Collins): I wish to explain to the House and the Senators that I was in the Dáil Chamber and I was to be relieved at 11 a.m. to come in here to take this matter, but there was some kind of a mix-up. I was not relieved until 11.30 a.m. and I came straight here then.

I thank Senator Rabbitte for giving me the opportunity to update the House on Coillte's plans for Portumna Forest Park. Coillte, which is the custodian of our public forest estate, currently manages 440,000 ha of land, which represents 7% of the total area of the State. The company employs more than 800 staff. While Coillte is Ireland's largest producer and supplier of certified timber, its role is much wider than just managing productive forests. It manages much of its estate for nature and is the largest provider of outdoor recreation in Ireland. It records increases in the number of visitors to its recreational forests every year. Its locations include Beyond the Trees, located in Avondale Forest Park in County Wicklow, which was the most visited forest park in 2025, recording almost 350,000 visits.

Portumna Forest Park is also part of Coillte's portfolio of recreational forests. It covers almost 450 ha, and was acquired by the company in 1948. I recognise that this forest, located in County Galway, is very important for recreation and biodiversity in the area. It is a valued amenity that attracts more than 45,000 visits annually. Coillte has implemented a range of woodland habitat enhancement and ecological restoration measures across the forest, including the planting of native oak trees within mature Scots pine stands through an underplanting programme designed to increase woodland diversity, strengthen habitat connectivity and support the development of a more natural and resilient forest structure.

In recent years, in partnership with Galway County Council and with the support of Fáilte Ireland, Coillte undertook to explore opportunities to further enhance the visitor experience at Portumna Forest Park. This process included significant public and stakeholder engagement and consultation and helped to inform the long-term vision for the forest park. Following a review of Coillte's national recreation programme in the aftermath of Storm Éowyn, the company took the decision not to progress the planned redevelopment project at Portumna Forest Park at this time. The company has informed me that this decision was communicated to all involved stakeholders. While the redevelopment project is not progressing, Coillte remains committed to the management and upkeep of Portumna Forest Park and maintaining the visitor facilities available onsite. It is important to keep in mind that Coillte was established as a private commercial company under the Forestry Act 1988. Therefore, day-to-day operational matters, such as the management of its visitor centres and recreational forests, are the responsibility of the company.

Storm Éowyn caused significant damage to the Coillte estate. A satellite imagery-based assessment of wind-damaged forest areas has determined that 14,500 ha of forests were affected. To put this into perspective, this is more than twice the size of Coillte's annual harvest area. Despite the challenges experienced last year, approximately 30% of the Coillte estate, representing approximately 135,000 ha of forest and land, is now managed primarily for nature and biodiversity. Coillte's objectives to 2050 are set out in its forest estate strategic land-use plan, which was published in 2023 and supports the long-term delivery of climate, nature, wood

and people benefits across Ireland's forests. It is important to keep in mind that Coillte is a central part of Ireland's wider forestry sector, which supports more than 9,000 jobs and contributes approximately €2.3 billion to the Irish economy nationally. I strongly believe, in conclusion, that Coillte continues to have an important role in delivering the multiple benefits of forests for climate, nature, wood and people, creating lasting value for society while sustainably managing our public forest estate.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. It is greatly appreciated. While I hear what he is saying in relation to Storm Éowyn, I hope Coillte can look again at the recreational space, which is the amenity space, and at where the toilet block would be or the picnic area could be. If it could review that as one phase, along with signs and walkways, it would be greatly appreciated. Coillte is doing phenomenal work. It is great to get the up-to-date figures in relation to the 40,000 visitors. That is 40,000 visitors coming to a rural town in east Galway, and it would not be happening only for the management and the upkeep of Portumna Forest Park. That goes back to Coillte and the good engagement it has with the community.

On a final note, it has also done great work in Derrygill in Woodford. Going forward, when we are looking at signage and upkeep, if we could look at connecting Derrycrag and Derrygill through a local walkway, it would be well within Coillte's remit and would also be gratefully appreciated. I thank the Minister of State for his time and for coming here this morning. I really appreciate it.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Senator for raising this important issue, which I know she is very familiar with. I will bring all of the points raised by the Senator to the attention of Coillte.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.38 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.39 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.38 a.m. and resumed at 11.39 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Garret Ahearn: The Order of Business is No. 1, address to Seanad Éireann by MEPs representing the European Parliament Dublin constituency, to be taken at 2 p.m., in accordance with the amendments set out in the motion passed by the House on 22 September 2026; and No. 68(6), Private Members' business, motion regarding childcare, to be taken at 5.30 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Having just come from the Chambers Ireland briefing on businesses, I want to take the opportunity to wish the new Kildare Chamber CEO, Cliodhna O'Byrne, well. We have a very active chamber. It does an excellent job under the leadership of Ruth Murphy and it excels in representing the many businesses we have, small as well as large. It is very conscious of the cost of business and what we need to do to support our indigenous businesses in particular. I note the publication during the summer of the cost of business advisory forum report, which set out 63 recommendations to boost competitiveness

and cut costs. The report is very practical. Key actionable priorities were set out by the Department, including cutting administrative red tape and enhancing financial competition. The forum said it would meet in another six months to look for progress but we need to have a debate in this House with the Minister, Deputy Burke. This is really important and I think we would all support it.

Yesterday, I hosted a briefing in the audiovisual room with Age Alliance Ireland. This is a really strong organisation which consists of eight different groups that work with older people both on an individual basis and collectively. One thing that really stood out to me was that there are only two specialist fall clinics for the whole of Ireland. Over 62,000 older adults need medical care for falls annually, yet one in five has no access to a clinic. The Minister and the HSE urgently need to look at that care gap. As we all know, a fall for an older person is not just a minor medical emergency. It can be so much more and can be life altering. I would like the opportunity to have a debate with the Minister of State with responsibility for older people or the Minister for Health.

Having recently battled shingles during the recess, I can personally attest to just how debilitating and painful this illness can be. My immediate priority is to get the shingles vaccine as soon as I can, but I have to wait 12 months to make sure that I am protected against a recurrence. My experience underscores the very pressing need we should have to expand our preventative healthcare for older people. We do really well with our child immunisation scheme but we do not do so well for adults. Prior to this, I had been lobbying for a shingles vaccination for over 65s, particularly because of the 20% extra protection against dementia it can provide, but RSV is also really important and we need to have a debate on that.

Senator Mark Duffy: I would like to advocate for the introduction of further supports for third-level students, in particular for those who are commuting long distances to their local college or university. I am a former students' union president myself. I have seen first hand trying to help students in very difficult financial situations. It puts a huge pressure on all the family when someone goes to college. It is obviously a great moment of pride and experience in their life but it puts a lot of challenges and pressures on the whole family. The rising cost and lack of provision of accommodation means there are additional pressures on families, households and students. In my own case in Mayo, we have many students travelling to Galway, Sligo and other areas. The transport cost on a daily basis is very significant. That is why I am advocating for and encouraging the Government to consider a free travel pass for students who are travelling long distances and can demonstrate they do not have accommodation. A pilot programme could be done through the students' unions or something done to help encourage and take some of the burden off students who are under difficult financial pressure and commuting daily to universities around the country. It would be a very positive outcome if it could be achieved and accommodated within the budget cycle.

My second point is on the funding for the local improvement scheme, LIS. Anyone who has served as a county councillor will know the importance of the scheme in our rural areas. It is always oversubscribed and is of huge benefit to those who avail of it. People really appreciate it. It is bread-and-butter basic work and delivery for communities, rural communities, farmers and people in rural areas. From speaking to many county councillors, I know they would all like to see more funding for the LIS. This comes up regularly. I met county councillors in Mayo recently. The overwhelming ask among everything else was that

more funding would be made available for the LIS road scheme. I ask again that ahead of the budget, the Government provide additional funding through the relevant Ministries to make sure that local authorities are well resourced and funded to make sure that we look after people in rural areas who are looking for roads to be done under the LIS. I would appreciate support on that.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I will mention a recent ESRI report, published earlier this month, that describes how 200,000 children in Ireland are living below the poverty line. According to the report, when housing costs are taken into account, that brings the figure to over 260,000. This happened in a year when the average income went up by 4% and at the very top it went up by 7%. As Community Foundation Ireland recently said, "a rising tide does not lift all boats." The youngest children are hit the hardest. When we take into account housing costs, poverty in families whose youngest child is five or under has increased from 20% to over 26%, so that is one in four children. The ESRI has found that most parents are shielding their children by going without, but one in ten children are going without basic necessities that their classmates take for granted. I have brought this up many times in the House, but to have had 5,700 children on the emergency accommodation list in July was unforgivable.

The House will know I have worked in the homelessness sector for over 20 years and I have seen the necessity of food banks. I have seen families come down to our homeless café, the Lighthouse on Pearse Street. These are decent, ordinary families but they need to make ends meet, so we have to help them. I want to acknowledge the teachers, family support workers and homeless services that are holding these children up every day. However, we cannot make up an income gap. Only the Government can. The Government's target is to cut child poverty from the present 8% to 3% by 2030. The ESRI points out that at the moment, we are very far from that.

However, the ESRI has proposed a solution. It has suggested a means-tested second tier of child benefit. The ESRI says this would reduce child poverty more effectively per euro than increasing existing supports because many low-income families are not eligible to even take up the new increased supports. The budget is on 6 October, 13 days from now, so I ask the Leader to invite the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, to the House before budget day to ask him if a second tier of child benefit will be considered in budget 2027. If not, what will get us from the current 8% to 3%? Last year's budget committed €681 million to cutting VAT on hospitality. I love a nice coffee and a nice toastie but it should never come at the expense of supporting children. A child who is five today will be nine in 2030, so childhood does not wait for the target.

Prosperity that skips children is not prosperity, it will just be a good average. I ask the Leader to consider that.

Senator Conor Murphy: I have raised the issues and challenges faced by cross-Border workers many times in the Seanad Chamber. They are a significant impediment to the growing all-Ireland economy and the prosperity across the island that we wish to see. Those challenges have been exacerbated by the Brexit experience, by the fact that the North was taken out of the European Union by the British Government against its own democratic wishes. The pandemic and the change in working conditions and arrangements have also added to some of the

challenges. I have proposed that the Seanad Public Consultation Committee would do a consultation on a range of matters facing cross-Border workers. As part of the British-Irish summit in March, there was a commitment to look at the double taxation convention. I am pleased that my colleague, Caoimhe Archibald MLA, the Minister for the economy in the North has offered her support to this project to try to find some relief for cross-Border workers. I am pleased to hear from the British Treasury that a new convention is imminent. It will contain bespoke provisions for cross-Border workers, which are intended to provide greater certainty for workers and employers, reduce the need to engage with both tax administrations and lessen the payroll, reporting and double taxation relief burdens that can arise under the current arrangements. The plan is that this should make it easier for employers to offer flexible cross-Border working arrangements and reduce any burdens from tax administrations as a barrier to labour mobility. This is good news and I very much welcome it. We have been pressing for it for some time. The Government had committed over many years to making progress in this area. I am pleased work has been done with Treasury to try to move the issue forward. Something which is a significant impediment to developing the all-Ireland economy is finally being tackled, with real progress being reported. Of course, there are much wider issues than simply taxation. There are issues with accessing social protection, recognition of qualifications, and workers' rights. I have proposed that the Seanad Public Consultation Committee would do a piece of work examining some of the issues that arise from this. Nonetheless, it will be very welcome news to people who do work North to South, or South to North, that progress is being made by both Governments on this. I ask the Leader to request the Minister for Finance to come before the Seanad at the earliest opportunity to give us an update on these matters and what more can be done. There was a plan to look at this double taxation issue as a forerunner to many other matters being resolved. I am keen to see further progress in this regard.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I want to raise the serious concern around the glacial pace at which the new mother and baby mental health unit is progressing. We have reporting today from *The Journal* that nearly ten years after the unit was first recommended in 2017, a decision has yet to be made on where to locate the unit on the grounds of St. Vincent's. That is almost ten years, which is completely unacceptable. It is also an indictment of the State's approach and attitude to maternal mental health. Multiple feasibility studies have been conducted yet there is no progress on a location. It is really beyond belief. It is a sign that we are once again failing women and mothers in Ireland. The establishment of a fully resourced, multidisciplinary mental health unit was an explicit promise in the national maternity strategy published a decade ago. The absence of this unit means the Government is continuing to fail pregnant women and new mothers with mental health difficulties. It means that women experiencing severe mental health issues during pregnancy or post-partum are often treated in general adult psychiatric settings. It means those women are separated from their babies. Despite perinatal mental health difficulties affecting up to one in five women during pregnancy and in the first year after birth, perinatal care in Ireland remains horribly under-developed. I repeat the figure of one in five. Reports suggest women in crisis wait over a month for a first appointment, with others having to drive hours and hours to be seen by one of the only six specialist hubs in the State. Those living in rural or harder to reach areas have to drive hours to access this, with their baby in tow. Further reporting from *The Journal* notes that hospitals and specialist perinatal mental health services are having to restrict their acceptance criteria

due to increased demand. Critical gaps in support mean that women are falling through the cracks and we know this care is actually life-saving. I urge the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, at her meeting with the HSE and stakeholders this month, to do everything within the Government's power to expedite the delivery of this unit. It is incredibly long overdue.

We also need a more holistic approach to post-natal care in Ireland more generally, in line with the Year of Care campaign which has been calling for year-long, comprehensive post-natal support for mothers. Without this, we are not doing enough for new mothers and their children in Ireland. It is the glacial pace of so many of these things. We have good commitments around women's healthcare but their implementation is so incredibly slow. We are 50% of the population; we deserve access to the best. We keep reading about how well the country is doing, our great tax draw-downs and fantastic things, yet these basics, the bread-and-butter care that every woman in Ireland deserves, are not being delivered. I would love to have a debate around that issue.

Senator Teresa Costello: I want to raise the growing problem of illegal dumping across the Dublin South-West area. Over the past couple of weeks in particular we have seen significant amounts of waste being dumped in our communities on housing estates. One pattern that is becoming increasingly noticeable is the use of skip bags. Only yesterday, a large skip bag filled with waste was dumped close to houses in Aylesbury. This morning I got a report of a skip bag that was burned on an estate in Tallaght-Belgard. Over the past couple of weeks, I have been getting reports of dumped skip bags in areas such as Knocklyon, Springfield, Firhouse, and Kilnamanagh. These are all areas where the residents work tirelessly to keep the standards high and their communities really clean. To those dumping, shame on them. They are undoing the really hard work of residents.

We need to look at regulation of skip bags themselves. These bags are relatively inexpensive and can hold a substantial amount of waste. Unlike hiring a conventional skip, a person can purchase a skip bag from a retail outlet without creating a clear record linking the bag to the purchaser. Two changes should be examined. Skip bags should have to be registered and booked for collection by an authorised waste collector in a similar manner to a conventional skip. Second, every skip bag sold should have a unique barcode or identification number with sufficient traceability to identify the purchaser or registered user if that bag subsequently turns up dumped illegally. At present, the council staff investigate dumped material for evidence but it can be hard if there is no personal information. The issue of illegal dumping in our areas and communities warrants a debate with the Minister. I call on the Minister to come into the House to discuss the scourge of illegal dumping in our areas.

Senator Manus Boyle: I fully support the comments of my colleague Senator Duffy on local improvement schemes. Every local councillor in Donegal would feel the same; it is all about getting more money for lanes, which are important to the people of Donegal, as we know. Another issue I want to take up today is Irish Water. Through the summer my office was busy, as were those of the councillors of every party all over Donegal, dealing with problems with Irish Water, particularly in Inishowen, Burnfoot, Teelin, Copany, Clogher and Leghowney to name but a few. The staff on the ground are absolutely excellent when we get them. We can ring them and they are out doing the job. The infrastructure we have in Donegal is ancient and really needs to be prioritised. I ask to get a Minister in here to have a debate on Irish Water

and its priorities moving forward. Where does Donegal stand on the priority list? What is the list of works that need to be done for Donegal? It is crucial and people deserve water. We are so lucky we have the Wild Atlantic Way now and a lot of tourists. It is great that they are coming in the summer time but they do not have water to flush toilets. It is an urgent issue that we really need to address.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I wish the Taoiseach, and indeed the Minister, Deputy McEntee well in New York.

I was thinking of that this morning and of the significance in terms of our migration and immigration policy, our history of forced emigration, how families were forced to leave here, and the reception they may have received in Liverpool, London, Boston, Manhattan or New York. Then I thought what a difference. We would have seen, or people would have known and reported sightings in London at guesthouses of certain signs. A father and his son of 17 were walking in London and they saw a sign that said "No pets, no blacks and no Irish". The 17-year-old son was also looking for work and asked what all that meant and the father really could not communicate. There was that great sense of anxiety and disappointment. How do you explain to a 17-year-old with aspirations and dreams that this is what is happening? We know what happened to the many people who did not survive the coffin ships that went to New York, where the Taoiseach will be today, and other places. We know how many of those people were put into various categories and how some were rejected and turned back to the sea.

You could ask what we have learned from all that and how it impacts on us today, as people with a similar plight who have been forced to leave their countries come to Ireland. What reception do we give them? I will leave the House with that thought. It is not a very good one. It is not one where we can stand up with a good track record. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, will be going to the site of the Twin Towers today or tomorrow. She will be laying a wreath and paying respect on behalf of the Government. One of the things she will see there is the massive place of so many Irish names of people who were at the front line of the emergency services on that terrible day. Again, there is that link between the Irish and America. We have a lot to learn. I wish the Taoiseach well in his engagement with the Mayor of New York and others and I have no doubt he will do a great service.

I will finish by asking about something which I know is of huge interest to the Leader. We need to address the matter of the undocumented Irish in America. I hope that will be raised by the Taoiseach and the Minister for foreign affairs and I ask that we prioritise a debate on the undocumented Irish who cannot return home even if they want to. They cannot come home with dollars in their pocket because they are undocumented. What works here and is applied here must be applied there. Let us have a bigger and a more open heart. Let us think about the Irish who are trapped outside this country, and those from so many other countries who are fleeing those countries, are trapped and not necessarily getting a warm reception, based on the experience we have had ourselves.

Senator Paul Daly: Unfortunately, I could not be here yesterday so I want to be associated with the wishes of sympathy to the Bonner family and to my friend and colleague Senator Craughwell on the passing of his wife. Comhbhrón ó chroí leat, a chara.

I raise the possibility of the Leader organising a debate with the Minister for agriculture on a couple of issues that have come to the fore over the summer. One is the decision by Brittany Ferries to cease the transportation of live animals, which is a vital pathway for our calf trade to continental Europe. This will show itself as a major issue with the calving season commencing this autumn and especially next spring. The Minister might come to the House and fill us in on where the alternatives are on that.

The other matter comes on the back of what was a fantastic summer weather-wise. It was not fantastic for everybody as we have a serious problem with drought - not the failure of crops but a lack of yield as well as grass burning up. It is from Portlaoise down. The south of the country seems to be the problem. There was a recent Teagasc survey on fodder for the coming winter and the result of that is there is enough fodder in the country to cover the winter but it may not be located where it is needed. We may need to introduce a transportation scheme or a redistribution scheme of some sort to get the fodder from where it is available to where it is going to be most needed over the coming winter.

Those matters, coupled with the big ticket item of the multi-annual financial framework and ongoing CAP negotiations, mean it would be appropriate for the Minister to brief the House.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I too was not available yesterday but I would like to be associated with the condolences to Senator Craughwell on the passing of his wife Helen. May she rest in peace.

There are a number of issues I would like to raise. I could talk about the ongoing difficulties with school transport, the serious concerns across rural Ireland about synthetic and semi-synthetic cannabinoid vapes and the pressures on our National Educational Psychological Service, especially the lack of an educational psychologist available to schools in County Roscommon.

The main matter I wish to raise is women's health and I ask the Leader to facilitate a debate in the House on the subject. Senators Maria Byrne, Costello, Cosgrove, Nelson Murray and Harmon, to name a few, have raised multiple women's health issues but it is also important that men speak about them as well. Women's health affects our wives, daughters, mothers and sisters and it should be a conversation we all participate in, not just the ladies in this House. One particular issue I would like to examine is breast density and BreastCheck. Dense breast tissue can make cancers more difficult to detect on a mammogram and is associated with increased breast cancer risk, yet BreastCheck does not currently measure or report breast density to women.

I also mention something I raised last year following the Young Scientist awards - two remarkable young ladies from Coláiste Mhuire in Ballygar, Zofia and Emma, whose project was entitled "Raising Awareness of Girls' Menstrual Disorders and Health". Their research looked at conditions like endometriosis which the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has spent significant time on in recent months. They also looked at PCOS and ovarian cysts. More importantly, they asked young women what they knew and 82% of those surveyed felt menstrual health was not spoken about enough, while 79% wanted to know more about women's reproductive health. That should tell us all something. I am asking for a dedicated debate on women's health. I support Senator Stephenson's call for a debate. Both topics raised this morning could run in conjunction but the debate I am calling for would cover screening,

early detection, menstrual and reproductive health, endometriosis and other conditions but also, crucially, education and awareness among both women and men. Women's health should not be regarded as a women-only conversation. It is a health issue and something we can all participate in.

Senator Pauline Tully: September is Sepsis Awareness Month so I want to raise sepsis awareness, which I have raised before here. It is a really important issue to raise regularly because it is the biggest killer in Ireland and in the world. More people die from it than from heart attacks, AIDS, lung cancer, breast cancer, Covid and car accidents combined. About 20% of people who contract sepsis die from it. About 20% of those are children, so it affects people of all ages. Even those who do not die experience long-term effects that can reoccur over the years.

I commend the work done by North East Sepsis Awareness, NESA, which is a campaign that was launched roughly a year ago. It has done Trojan work since then to raise awareness about sepsis. It was formed by Hannah Tormey and Caithriona Flanagan, both of whom have experience of sepsis within their families. They have attended events and given talks to different organisations. They have done wonderful work and in fact they are doing the HSE's work for it. The HSE needs to be much more proactive. I acknowledge the action on sepsis five-year strategy was launched last week by the Minister and the HSE. I want to be sure the resources are made available to ensure that strategy is implemented between now and 2030 but a lot more needs to be done on the ground to make people aware of the symptoms of sepsis so they can ask for tests or have it considered. More importantly, medical personnel, especially in our emergency departments, need to be aware and need to be constantly asking could this be sepsis, doing the test to see and then taking action if it is.

It would prevent so many deaths. The work of NESA on its own in the last year has prevented deaths. People have come back to NESA and said that because of its campaign, they knew what the symptoms are and were able to stop someone getting seriously ill. I want to commend NESA. I call on the Minister and the HSE to do a lot more on this issue.

Senator Maria Byrne: I would like to be associated with the expressions of sympathy to our colleague, Senator Craughwell, on the passing of his wife, Helen, and also to the Bonner family. I knew Senator Bonner. May they rest in peace.

I am raising the plight of pubs and publicans. As the Leader is aware, I come from a publican background. More than 2,200 pubs have closed since 2005. That is a decline of 25%. In my county of Limerick, over 40% of pubs have closed. In Dublin that figure is 1%. That 40% versus 1% is a startling figure. The local pub is a social anchor. It is where everything happens, from the GAA after the match to weddings and funerals. It is part of our social fabric. Four people in five believe the Government should take action in protecting our pubs in budget 2027. The cost of doing business has gone up. Energy costs, labour costs and water costs have all gone up for publicans and many are operating on a margin of less than 1%. I accept that excise duty has not increased since 2014 but margins are very tight for many publicans. I am talking about the small rural and local publicans in cities and towns. The 64% of pubs that do not serve food did not benefit from the 9% VAT rate and without targeted fiscal support we risk triggering an avalanche of further closures. The Vintners Federation of Ireland, VFI, has brought forward an on-trade sustainability scheme. It is a targeted tax credit based on verified supply chain

costs of draught products capped at €20,000 per premises and it is specifically designed to support smaller, local pubs. The Government already uses tax credits to support film production, digital gaming and unscripted television production. The pub receives nothing. It is something that would be in line with what is happening in other industries. The proposal is not an excise rebate or reduction. It does not alter excise duty and has been specifically designed to comply with the EU alcohol structured directive. I would like for the Leader to support this and contact the Minister, Deputy Burke, and the Government in relation to this. I believe none of us want to see the fabric of society closing down. In France, they are now trying to reopen cafés that have closed down. Once a pub closes, I believe it will never open its doors again so I am looking for the Leader's support.

Senator Laura Harmon: I want to raise the issue of personal leave for injuries for teachers and special needs assistants, SNAs. I had legislation that was debated on Second Stage in this House that was supported by the Government on Second Stage but we have heard nothing from the Minister for education in relation to this. Thousands of teachers and SNAs are affected if they are injured in the classroom. Many are left without proper pay and supports. Sophie Cole is one example. I have been campaigning alongside her. She was a teacher from Carrigaline in County Cork, and she was left without proper supports and at a financial loss due to her injury in the classroom. I will be bringing my legislation forward. We have not seen any counterproposal from the Government so I am assuming the Government will support my legislation. We absolutely need to get this issue addressed. I have been working with the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, and Forsa trade unions in relation to it also.

I also want to raise this issue, which has been raised here this morning and extensively by my colleague, Senator Nessa Cosgrove, in relation to breast density. Women deserve to know if they have dense breasts. If they have dense breasts, they are more likely to develop cancer. This will often get missed on mammograms. This is about public information. People have a right to know about their own health information. We need to see the Minister act on this. We need a solution where people are getting adequate screening. This is about health, but it is also about life preservation as well. I have been speaking to a woman called Lorna Quirke, who is from Donoughmore in County Cork, in relation to her journey with breast cancer and the fact that her breast density was not detected. We need to act on this and we need to see more action from the Minister for Health.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Yesterday I said I would revisit some of the issues my family faced as my wife faced the end of her life. Helen was an extraordinarily strong person. Once diagnosed, she wanted to ensure that the family was unburdened with respect to making decisions for her. This brought about looking into two things in particular: the enduring power of attorney and the advance health declaration, AHD, form.

Today, I want to speak about the enduring power of attorney. Enduring power of attorney, EPA, is one of the most important legal documents a person can make. Under the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015, it allows someone to appoint a trusted person to manage their affairs if they lose capacity in the future. It is fundamentally about dignity, independence and preserving a person's voice in decisions that affect their life. I can assure the Members of the House that when you sit down with a family member to complete these forms, it is devastating stuff you have to deal with. You are talking about the end of life. Any one of us

in this room can have a stroke in two minutes and be unable to make a decision ever again. Any one of us can find ourselves unconscious in a hospital and somebody has to make decisions for you. I come from a family of 11 and, God help us, if we had to make a decision for somebody it would take the United Nations to come in and find peace among us. It is a hugely important thing.

However, an enduring power of health form is quite complex. The process involves solicitors, medical assessments, prescribed legal forms, notification requirements and registration with the Decision Support Service, DSS, who I must say are extraordinary people when it comes to filling in this form. The safeguards are important, but they create a lengthy and often costly process for families. There are also significant medical requirements. Capacity must be assessed when the EPA is created and again when it is activated. The activation series can be really problematic. For somebody with dementia, two medical professionals are required to say the person no longer has capacity. A person with dementia can have no capacity now and in an hour's time they can have capacity. So, that creates a huge problem.

Most concerning are the practical barriers. The DSS is experiencing substantial delays, with applications taking months to process. The Law Society has warned that the system is struggling with activation numbers far below those under the previous regime and thousands of applicants are still awaiting completion. Costs can also run into several hundred euro before the EPA is even enforced. Only 8% of the population have an EPA in place. None of this is an argument for removing safeguards. These are about the essentials but when a system designed to protect vulnerable people becomes so slow, expensive and difficult that relatively few citizens have an EPA in place, we must ask whether the balance is right. We need a system that protects people while also making it easier for them to plan for their future. I urge the House to support measures to simplify the process, reduce the delays and ensure that decision support services are there and resourced.

I cannot begin to say how important it is. I see the Visitors Gallery is full today. I am speaking to those present today and about their friends and relatives. I cannot begin to explain how important it is to have an AHD in place and to have an EPA. When the time comes, which will come to us all, when you are incapable of making a decision on your own, it is vitally important that you have somebody you trust to make those decisions for you. The AHD form, which I will deal with tomorrow, is massively important when it comes to how you will be treated in the final days of your life. I cannot begin to explain the courage my wife showed as she faced the end of her life.

I pray she rests in peace and thank her for the strength she had as she departed.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator. Again, condolences on your sad loss.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I apologise for going over time.

An Cathaoirleach: You are grand. Anois, an Seanadóir Andrews.

Senator Chris Andrews: I want to raise serious questions about the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA, and IWA-Sport's decision to send an Irish wheelchair basketball team to the

European championships division B in Switzerland where Ireland is due to play Israel. This team did not qualify for this tournament. Ireland was invited. It could have easily refused. I cannot imagine what the officials were thinking when they accepted this particular invite. The IWA said its board unanimously approved participation following a robust process. However, basic questions remain unanswered. When was Ireland invited? When did the IWA know Israel was participating? What alternatives were considered, including declining the invitation? What external advice was sought? The IWA has responded by citing the confidentiality of board discussions, but this is a major national charity receiving significant public funding. Board confidentiality cannot be used as a blanket response to legitimate questions about how significant decisions were made.

There are also serious questions about fundraising for this invite. The public was asked to financially support Ireland's participation yet the original fundraising page merely stated that Ireland would compete against three other nations. It did not name Israel as one of those three nations. Only after I challenged this omission was the page amended. That raises serious and legitimate questions about whether there was an element of deception in how funds were sought. If the IWA rejects that suggestion, it should explain why Israel was initially omitted.

There is an important equality issue here as well. This issue should not receive less scrutiny because it is a wheelchair basketball team rather than a football team. Disability sports should not be patronised or held to a different standard. The Stop the Game campaign is challenging Ireland's football fixtures against Israel. This deserves the same seriousness and scrutiny we would expect if it involved the FAI and a senior football team. Meanwhile, more than 900 wheelchairs donated for injured and disabled children in Gaza are sitting in Jordan, unable to reach them amid Israeli restrictions on aid deliveries.

The IWA provides essential services, partly because of gaps in State provision. That does not absolve the Government from questioning and challenging the IWA. I am asking the Minister with responsibility for sport to seek answers from the IWA and IWA-Sport. Public funding must come with public accountability. If this process was genuinely robust, the IWA would be able to explain what that process was.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator. That might be an issue for a Commencement matter.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Yesterday, there was a report by the National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI, that found that seven out of ten young people feel they want to leave Ireland. Those figures are not just a lifestyle choice, which is very obvious from the research it did. It previously carried out research that found that nine out of ten young people feel the employment opportunities are not there for them, which is a shocking statistic. The NYCI did that report and I hope it will be considered in the budget. We could have a debate around this but particularly about keeping young people in our country. I introduced a Bill last year on the abolition of some minimum rates of pay, but unfortunately it was shot down. One of the reasons that is cited in this recent report is pay. Because of the cost-of-living crisis, young people feel they have no quality of life here because they are on low wages. That is one thing for which they are calling. Another thing they are calling for in this report is that the lower rates of jobseeker's allowance for underage groups would be the same so that everyone would have the same rate of pay for jobseeker's allowance. They also called for free public transport for under-25s. I think these are very reasonable measures. We can see the success of targeted measures.

Credit has to be given for targeting free public transport for those aged under eight. That worked really well. We have an opportunity here to revisit the Bill I brought in about the abolition of sub-minimum rates of pay for young people. Trade unions are behind this. This statistic shows that young people are choosing to live abroad because the wages are not meeting the cost of housing and cost of living here. We have to acknowledge that in this House. I would love to have further debate about it.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I, too, want to raise the issue *The Irish Times* covered, and which my colleague has covered as well, of the tens of thousands of Irish people who are considering emigration. In February of last year, I raised the alarm bell on this issue and since then, well over 62,000 people have left the country. Let me say that again; it is over 62,000. That is the population of Drogheda or Dundalk. In fact, let me give the Leader another visual. We were all touched this year to see the images of Mayo winning the Sam Maguire Cup and the crowds in Croke Park cheering and singing. Now, I want the Leader to imagine Croke Park empty and silent because that is the number of people who have left in the past year alone. That is the number of people we have failed. Is this an abject failure by the Government? Let me be absolutely clear; it is. If we have a bumper surplus budget and if GDP and growth are up, why in God's name is this happening? We have failed young people on housing. We have failed to develop a real economy in industries that can employ them. We have failed to build liveable towns and cities where they can work and raise families. Ultimately, we have failed to deliver a liveable nation. On the flip side, when we question the open-door policy madness our Government calls an immigration policy, we are told that we need workers. We had the workers. As many as 600,000 working Irish people have left the State in the last two decades. These were mostly educated young people on whose education and training we spent billions of euro, and what do we do? We happily ask them to live with their parents until they are 40 if they are not happy to have their pay cheques extorted by rents and high bills. We say, "If you don't like it, tough - pack your bags and leave". We could do a hell of a lot better for our young people in this nation. We certainly need to do that because we are losing them. We are paying our education system to take our young people out of this country. What is happening is scandalous.

Senator Joanne Collins: As the Leader knows, I have stood many times in this Chamber and argued and advocated to reduce the cost of petrol and diesel. I stood in Foynes for five days with the protesters. I want to focus on home heating oil today. There was a debate in the Dáil yesterday and my colleague, Deputy Doherty, brought legislation through.

Home heating oil has never been reduced. Not one cent has ever come off it. It disproportionately affects rural Ireland because in rural Ireland, there is no other choice. There is no gas network. People cannot hook up to a grid. A lovely lady came into my office last week who I am going to call "Margaret". She lives in County Limerick. She has an adult child with disabilities. She runs her house on home heating oil but she has no immersion switch. Her home heating oil has to do all year for hot water and heat. As Members can imagine, when people have a child with disabilities, they need a little bit extra in the house. I am quite happy to wrap a blanket around myself if I get cold, but some people need it. They have to have that heat even just for running a bath. The oil is on all the time to heat the water, wash the dishes, run a bath and heat the home. She cried in my office because she just cannot afford to put any more oil into her house. It is absolutely heartbreaking to see this.

I am asking and pleading. There is still time because the vote in the Dáil is not until this evening. I ask the Leader to go to the Government TDs and backbenchers, the Minister's backbenchers and Independents, and ask them to just do the right thing. I have heard about how the budget is in two weeks' time. I really hope something is done in the budget, but I would also hope that if something is to be done in the budget - it is only two weeks away - we tell the people so that they do not go and spend every penny they have in the bank today getting oil because it is nearly gone. Tell them that in two weeks' time, there is going to be a reduction. I have a feeling it is not going to be enough. I plead with the Leader today to do the right thing. How can he go back to his constituency on Thursday evening or Friday and say, "I am sorry; you are still going to pay". A fill of oil went up €80 overnight. It just cannot keep going up. People cannot afford it. Again, I am sorry; it is disproportionate when it comes to rural Ireland because there is no other choice.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I, too, want to talk about energy costs today. Ireland has the highest electricity prices in Europe. Families are feeling it every time a bill comes through the door.

Where is the Minister for energy? He has not met the four largest energy suppliers in Ireland in the past year. He met Electric Ireland, Bord Gáis, SSE Airtricity and Energia once in September 2025. That needs to be addressed. Energy costs are putting enormous pressure on households. The Minister should sit across the table from these companies and ask what is driving the prices and what can be done about them. Is it too much to expect that from a Minister for energy?

The other question I would put to him is: why are ordinary households are being asked to carry the cost of an energy system increasingly geared towards massive data centres? Data centres used up 22% of Ireland's metered electricity in 2024. That is more electricity than every urban household in the country combined. Unlike normal households, data centres get a cheaper commercial rate of electricity. If a family keeps a shower going for five minutes, they have to pay for it, but the more energy gobbled up by the data centres the better rate they get. The Government is essentially saying to households, "Here is your electricity bill and here is the bill for the Silicone Valley business down the road". People want the Government to prioritise families, and I want the Government to prioritise families and households and not billion euro corporations. I ask the Minister to come to the House for statements on energy and to outline his plans to meet the energy companies.

I would like to support Senators Cosgrove and Keogan. I watched the reports of young people leaving the country. It is extremely sad. My kids are in Canada. It like what happened after the 2008 when there was a wave of sadness. I hope we can put in place something to keep young people in their own country. Other countries like Canada and Australia value their worth. We should value their worth more.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I would like to offer my condolences to Senator Craughwell and his family on the sad passing of his wife.

I want to speak about the school bus transport scheme, in particular some of the anomalies in how the scheme is administered that appear consistently and repeatedly year after year. I want in particular to address a point I raised in the Chamber on a previous occasion. There is anomaly in Wexford town with students who were unable to attain a secondary school place in

the town and had to take a school place in a different town, New Ross, but because they were not attending their closest local school they were ineligible to apply for a school bus ticket, be that concessionary or non-concessionary. At a time the Government is providing approximately €650 million for the scheme, students who, through no fault of their or their families, are unable to access secondary school place could at least be given a school bus pass. The budget needs to examine the entire school bus transport model, how it operates and how these type of anomalies can be ironed out for not only these children but other children who will be affected in the future.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I welcome the review of the hot school meals scheme for children. I encourage the Minister to examine the timing of the lunches for children. Many are expected to have a hot meal at 11 a.m. The Minister needs to look into that.

I heard many of my colleagues speak about how young people have to leave the country. I have been in contact with numerous youth organisations over the past two weeks. They are extremely worried about funding for communities and young people in the country. We hear about young people leaving the country, but the Government need to invest in young people in the budget in two weeks. They are the most vulnerable people in our society. So much is expected of young people in today's Ireland and there is no hope. One youth worker said to me there is no hope to be able to look after our young people. We tend to put young people down and look at them as being the problem while we invest in our gardaí, which I welcome - we need gardaí on the streets. We need to invest in youth services. I am a qualified youth worker. I was first introduced to politics through youth work. It is informal education and sets up young people for life. It educates them around drugs, responsibilities and opens up many doors of opportunities for young people. The House should write to the Minister collectively - I can draft a letter - to ask that the most vulnerable people in our society, that is, young people between the ages of ten and 25, are not forgotten about in the budget.

Senator Rónán Mullen: The Association of Lactation Consultants in Ireland receives, I gather, €100,000 a year from the HSE. It recently advertised a conference in Galway that would be addressed by an American gentleman, Jacob Engelsman, on the subject of lactation support for gender diverse families. I thought at first it might be about women who, in an attempt to transform into maleness, had compromised their ability to breastfeed any children they had. That would be problematic enough because Mr. Engelsman has been involved in advising mentally unwell women who want to bind their breasts for hours at a time on how they can do that and breastfeed. We are a long way from a child's best interests there. It is actually worse. This gentleman has spoken at conferences on the subject of inducing lactation. In other words, biological males, through some kind of hormonal treatment, would try to produce something akin to breastmilk. The reason for that attempt is to assert their feelings of parenthood. He referenced gender euphoria or the unique experience of it. He cited curiosity, fun or sexual gratification. Brenda Power, in the *Daily Mail*, asked the obvious question which is whether any parent who prioritises their own feelings and desire for euphoria over a baby's needs is potentially guilty of child abuse.

What worries me is the response of the HSE when asked about this. It said it was in line with equality legislation and inclusion strategies. That is a disgraceful response from the organisation responsible for delivering healthcare in this country. It is an astounding lack of

good stewardship. To make matters worse, the Minister for Health did not spot how unacceptable this should be and did not call it out. She is very quick, and often right, to call out problems that arise in the healthcare service. By failing to condemn that and publicly disapprove of a publicly funded organisation having a guest like that speak on a topic like that, the Minister acted as an enabler for highly ideological people in the HSE and the people they support. This is not about children's best interests. It is enabling a form of child abuse. We need to debate on this. The Minister should be called to account for this. I will write to the health committee to ask it to bring in the HSE over this. The response from the HSE and Minister is far from not being not good enough. It is a disgraceful and irresponsible response.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Cathaoirleach and the 22 Senators who made contributions. Senator O'Loughlin referred to Chambers Ireland. A Senator raised yesterday the report launched by the Minister, Deputy Burke, during the summer on the cost of business. I understand the report had 63 recommendations. I said yesterday, and will repeat today, that I am willing to have a debate on it with the Minister. The Senator also asked for a debate on older people, including vaccination programmes for older people. We are very good about vaccinating kids across the country, but not older people. She spoke about her experience during the summer. I am more than happy to have that debate with the Minister of State with responsibility for older people.

Senator Mark Duffy spoke about supports for third level students and raised a really good idea for students, particularly in rural Ireland, who have to travel quite a distance to college simply because they cannot get accommodation. The Senator's view is that there should be a free travel pass for those who have long journeys and can prove it. That should be considered and the Minister should be open to it because we should be doing as much as we can to support affected students in third level education.

Senators Duffy and Boyle spoke about the local improvement scheme. I know from talking to councillors right across the country, but particularly in Tipperary because there are so many rural roads and so much infrastructure, that the scheme is vital. We can never allocate enough money for it to meet the demand, but certainly an increase would be very much welcomed by most councillors.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy spoke about the ESRI report that states 200,000 children, or one in five, are living below the poverty line. He has asked for a debate. I am happy to ask the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary, for that, but he is actually coming in next Wednesday to speak about hot school meals. I am sure the Senator will be able to navigate from the subject of hot school meals to that of child benefit in that debate, and to the possibility of having a second-tier child benefit for kids whose families are finding it difficult in this cost-of-living crisis.

Senator Conor Murphy spoke about the double taxation issue for cross-Border workers. As he said, there are an awful lot of issues arising in terms of cross-Border working, including those associated with tax, social protection, education certificates and what people qualify for. An awful lot needs to be done. He is right and it is a very good idea to have the Seanad Public Consultation Committee do some work on that. I am aware the committee is meeting every week for the next number of weeks, presenting it with a good opportunity to do some work on the matter. When we talk about a united Ireland, it is important to talk about all of these challenging issues.

Senator Patricia Stephenson spoke about the mental health unit at St. Vincent's, which has been quite a long time coming. It is a very important care service for women going through pregnancy, or after pregnancy. I am not sure why there is a delay or why a decision has not been made. I have no doubt that it is very important to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. I am happy to have a debate on health. Perhaps a Commencement matter on the issue might be more beneficial to the Senator. In fairness to the Minister of State, she has done an awful lot of work, as Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, delivering legislation and prioritising awareness of mental health. I have no doubt that she has that same passion for the area of mental health in question and for the establishment of the unit.

Senator Teresa Costello spoke about the illegal dumping in Tallaght. This seems to be a scourge around the country. She had a very good idea about skip bags because it is hard for councils to find out whose fault it is. They have to go through the dumped material and determine whether there is any personal information in it to establish who is actually responsible. Sometimes none can be found, but having something like registered skip bags or a barcode on them would be much more helpful. We will never end illegal dumping by a certain number of people. I do not know why they do it. It is hard to understand. There is so much work done by people in communities like Tallaght and towns and villages across the country to try to keep our communities nice and clean. It can be incredibly frustrating for those decent people when they see this sort of carry-on.

Senator Manus Boyle spoke about Irish Water. I am happy to have a debate with the relevant Minister, Deputy Browne, on it, possibly after the budget, I suspect. It is incredibly frustrating. The messages he was giving today are no different from what we receive from people right across the country in each constituency. We have given Irish Water more money, asked it to deliver better and to improve its communication skills, but there is still constant frustration in this regard. I am happy to have a debate on this.

Senator Victor Boyhan spoke about the Taoiseach's visit to New York and wished him well. He also spoke about the visit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, to the site of the Twin Towers, where she laid a wreath. It is a really good opportunity to talk once again about the undocumented Irish in America. There is not a person in this country who does not have either a family member, neighbour or friend in America at the moment who cannot come home if a family member dies or there is something significant happening at home because of the fear of not being able to get back into America. I am sure that the Taoiseach, while he is in America, will, as he always does, try to highlight that issue for so many thousands of Irish people in America.

Senator Paul Daly asked for a debate with the Minister for agriculture. I am more than happy to request one. It is a good time for it. We have the European Presidency at the moment. The biggest issues within the European Presidency are in agriculture. The Senator and I know the Minister is very passionate about delivering on the multi-annual financial framework and CAP during his time holding the Presidency. Now that we are almost halfway through the Presidency, it is a good opportunity in this House to have a debate on those priorities the Senator outlined, whether they relate to fodder, fertiliser or the transport of live animals, which was a real issue during the summer. I am more than happy to facilitate the debate as soon as we can, possibly next week. We will try to see what we can do within the Minister's timeframe.

Senator Gareth Scahill spoke about women's health and having a debate on it. A number of other Senators spoke about this as well, in particular BreastCheck and breast density. The Senator is right. It is important that we, as men, are comfortable talking about women's health as well as women. During the previous term, I did an awful lot of work with colleagues in this House on hyperemesis, which is a very severe condition for women going through pregnancy, and on getting the drug Cariban approved. It is very helpful to women right across the country who suffer from severe illness while pregnant. We will make sure to have a debate on that with the relevant Minister.

Senator Pauline Tully spoke about Sepsis Awareness Week, something I have spoken about in the Seanad previously. I am very well aware of the condition because I contracted sepsis while in hospital. I was very lucky. As the Senator said, medical staff need to be more aware and need to be provided with more education. Often, a nurse is the first person who has to make a decision on what a condition is. I was extremely lucky that a nurse in Clonmel hospital spotted straight away that I had sepsis. Within two or three minutes, there were about ten people at the bed beside me making decisions. Awareness and education can save lives. As the Senator said, organisations in our area have saved lives. The Minister has launched the five-year strategy on sepsis. We have an opportunity to have a debate in this House on it.

Senator Maria Byrne spoke about pubs and their closure, particularly in rural areas. Over 2,000 pubs have closed and many of these were the backbone or fabric of communities and towns right across the country. We have done a lot to support rural Ireland and the industry, particularly pubs that serve food, but there is more that we can do. I totally support her call to introduce measures. The relevant Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, understands as much as the Senator and I do the importance of a pub as the nucleus of a village or town and what it means to a community. I am more than happy to support the Senator's call for supporting pubs in the budget in two weeks.

Senator Laura Harmon spoke about leave for teachers and SNAs who have been injured while working. She introduced legislation. I am not sure where it stands at the moment, but I can speak to the Minister about it and see whether she is willing to work with the Senator on it. There is always the opportunity for a Commencement matter, but we will talk to the Minister to see where we can go with that. It is not fair that people who are injured at work, particularly teachers and even more so SNAs, do not receive any supports.

Senator Gerard Craughwell spoke about enduring power of attorney and his own experience over the summer. It is incredible that only 8% of people in the country have enduring power of attorney. It is something people really do not address until they have to, so there is an opportunity to highlight the importance of acquiring the power in advance, as the Senator is doing very well. All of us, or most of us, already know who the power will relate to; we have just never got around to actually obtaining it.

To highlight that is very important.

Senator Andrews spoke about the Irish Wheelchair Association. In fairness to the Senator, I welcome this because one of the criticisms I had when this controversy started with the FAI is that it is almost like we just attack soccer and nothing else, when other organisations were playing competitive sports against certain countries, although not necessarily Israel - I will not name the sports, but one was playing against Afghanistan recently. Others were competing

against Israeli competitors in different sports but no one was talking about them; it was just this attack on soccer. I agree with the Senator that everyone should be held to account in the exact same way. I welcome the fact that he has raised it.

What I would say is that to get a response like “board confidentiality” does not wash. People have to say why they have made these decisions. The Irish Wheelchair Association does an incredible amount of work, as we all know from our own communities. However, it needs to be accountable for decisions like this. There might be a good reason, but we certainly have not got it yet. It is welcome that the Senator has highlighted it. As politicians, we would be sceptical when the association says that we are playing three other nations, but it does not name the nations. They might have known themselves that there could have been an issue here. It is welcome that the Senator has raised it today.

Senators Cosgrove, Keogan and O'Reilly raised the NYCI report on the number of people leaving the country. I accept that a lot of people, young people in particular, leave the country. The majority of those who leave this country leave for a short time and then come back. The number of people who are coming back to this country as Irish citizens after being away for three, five or seven years is increasing year on year.

Senator Cosgrove referred to people leaving this country because there is no hope and nothing here for them. She and I are, I suspect, of a similar age. We came out of college just before the crash started and everything fell apart. People had to leave the country because there was no work, and there was nothing they could do. There are work opportunities for everyone in this country at the moment, and we are lucky on that point. There are obviously challenges - housing is one of them - but if the suggestion is that 62,000 people are leaving this country simply because the country is failing them, I just do not believe or accept that. Young people want to better themselves and have a broader outlook on life, and travelling is a really good element of that at a young age. I hope that, just like in recent years, a lot of people are coming home. Those people who are leaving this year will also come home, and whether that is in one, three, five or seven years, they will always be welcome to come home.

Senator Collins spoke about fuel costs, in particular the cost of home heating oil, which has increased dramatically in the past year. We all talk about how 1,000 litres was about €900 a year ago, but now it is €1,600, €1,700 or €1,800. However, we also need to be realistic. That increase did not happen because of the Government. We did not double the price of it. The price has doubled because of the war in the Middle East and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. There are things that we can do, and I am hopeful that the Minister for Finance, Deputy Simon Harris, will make decisions on home heating and fuel costs in the budget that will support people. We understand what needs to be done, but we also have to be realistic. We cannot just cut back that increase of 100% overnight. It is just not going to happen. However, we will be there to support people, just like we were there in April with a budget that was higher than any other budget in Europe at €750 million, a budget that was not supported by Sinn Féin in the Dáil. That helped and supported people. Because we have had a surplus over the past number of years, we are in a position to do some of the things that the Senator is asking us to do. We would not be in that position if we had just spent all that money in the previous budget. However, there has to be a bit of realism in terms of what a government can and cannot do in supporting fuel costs, including heating oil. Some of the increases are just so vast and out of

control. Every country is managing them. At the moment, petrol in France is €2.50 a litre. We are not alone in these challenges.

Senator Byrne raised the school bus transport scheme. He outlined a really obvious thing that needs to be changed. If a child who applies for their nearest school and cannot get a place through no fault of their own and then has to go to a different school, that should not preclude them from qualifying for a free bus pass. They wanted to go to the nearest school, but the State could not provide it, so they had to go to a different school. Why would they be doubly punished by not having a school pass because they did not go to the closest school? It was not their fault. The Senator has spoken about this several times in the House. School buses always come up at this time of year, as we know, but it seems blatantly obvious that this should be changed. It does not cost anything or do anything; it is just a change in the terms and conditions when someone applies for a bus pass. I know the Senator will speak to the Minister, and I am more than happy to speak to her on his behalf.

Senator Flynn raised the hot school meals scheme. As I said earlier, we will have a debate on that next Wednesday with the Minister for Social Protection. The Senator can raise the issue of the timing of hot meals and the other issues she brought up, such as whether people should have the option of cold meals and things like that. It will be a good opportunity to speak about that.

Senator Rónán Mullen spoke about the association of lactation and a person. I did not catch the name, but the person was brought to speak in support of the-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: It did not go ahead. There was a protest.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Did it not go ahead? He was simply invited. I have never heard of that organisation before. I do not know the person at all. If what the Senator is saying is true, I think the majority of people will be uncomfortable about those sorts of things happening.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Not the HSE and not the Minister, it appears.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I do not know the case in general, and I do not know the person at all. I will speak to the Minister about it. We will have a debate with her at some point in the next couple of weeks, possibly after the budget. There will be an opportunity to put that to the Minister when she is in the House. That concludes the Order of Business.

Order of Business agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.57 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.08 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.57 p.m. and resumed at 2.08 p.m.

Address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome everybody to our engagement with our MEPs from the Dublin European constituency, including the former Leader of the House, Regina Doherty MEP. This is part of the Seanad reform we have completed over the past few years to ensure that Europe

is part of the focus of what we do. The engagement with MEPs has a central role in that link between the Seanad Chamber, Senators and Members of the European Parliament from Ireland and the wider European community.

The challenges that we face in Europe and the world are enormous in everything from the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine but also the bigger problems, including climate change. I think it was a decade ago that the Pope and the Pentagon said in the same week that climate change was a bigger threat to our security as a world than terrorism. We now also have the situation of artificial intelligence where many people are afraid for their futures and their jobs but also have concerns about how artificial intelligence will challenge us as a people. Europe has to play a leading role in that and it is not an easy challenge to get them all to agree.

Ireland's Presidency of the European Union and the MEPs' engagement here today is an important part in highlighting the central role that Europe is playing but also can play. I was at an event last night where Bertie Ahern was talking about our joining the European Union and how it transformed us over 50 years ago from an agrarian economy. There were legislators and business leaders from India trying to understand how Ireland transformed and what they could learn from us about how they can improve their economy, their society and their state for their citizens. They see us as a gateway into the European Union, not only from an economic point of view but also from a political point of view.

This engagement here today is a very important part of our engagement with Europe but also the Seanad's role when it comes to scrutiny of EU directives and all issues relating to Europe. I thank the Senators who are here today, not just from the Dublin area and also from across the country. I thank Mr. Barry Andrews, MEP; Ms Regina Doherty, MEP; and Mr. Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, MEP for being here as well. We will follow the format under the Standing Orders of the Seanad. In Europe they only get one or two minutes-----

Ms Regina Doherty: If we are lucky.

An Cathaoirleach: We are going to give the MEPs six times that. They will get six minutes each and then the group spokespersons will speak for five minutes in response and Members will have an opportunity to engage with questions and answers. It is meant to be robust and engaging. I really appreciate all speakers all being here. We have not done this by drawing lots or anything like that - it is based on alphabetical order. I call firstly on Mr. Barry Andrews, MEP, to address us.

Mr. Barry Andrews: The Cathaoirleach established the context very well with the threat of AI, climate change, insecurity and war on the Continent of Europe. Lots of people have repeated this but it really does illustrate the challenge that sets the context for Ireland's Presidency. I add to that something for the overall context. Europe made a three-way bet, essentially, on American security, on Chinese supply chains and manufacturing, and on Russian fossil fuels. Each one of these bets has gone wrong, frankly, and what Europe has embarked upon now is to try to mitigate the damage that has been caused by all of the transitions that are required, whether that is by investing in security and defence at a European scale, investing in renewable energy and replacing fossil fuels, or developing European industry to compete with Chinese supply chains. That is the context in which Ireland takes up this Presidency.

It is important that we remind ourselves what those priorities are for the Irish Presidency. Security is the first one. I am happy to discuss that and take any questions on security and defence. I wrote a number of papers on Ireland's neutrality in a changing Europe. Of course, it is a difficult area for Ireland to identify as a priority, given the generational underinvestment in Irish security over the years. The second one is competitiveness. Again, it is a slight challenge for Ireland because we are an open global trading economy and the instinct at the moment is about autonomy for Europe to develop an industrial policy for Europe and that sometimes runs against our instinct for open international trade. That is a difficulty as well. Finally, the third of our priorities is in values. Values are important for Ireland. It is the rule of law in terms of how that is going to look internally but also externally.

I happen to be the chair of the development committee in the European Parliament. It is a huge honour to be a chair. We have not had a chair of a parliamentary committee in the European Parliament since the 1980s. However, unfortunately, I come to this policy area at a time when the tide is really going out on international development and on official development assistance. Most governments across the European Union are doing what the Americans have done. There is a massive retreat from development aid, from humanitarian aid and from respect for international humanitarian law. I should also mention that I am vice-chair of the delegation for relations with Palestine. Again, I know it is a subject of major interest to members of the Seanad. If there are any questions on that, I will be very happy to deal with them.

I want to make some positive comments about the European Union. We are always told about the existential threat to the EU. I have probably created some of that sense in my opening remarks. However, we have to remind ourselves that the paradox of President Trump's approach to international trade and multilateralism is that he has now made the European Union look like a reliable and trustworthy partner that is rules-based and respects partnerships. A large number of countries want to join the European Union and a large number of countries have finally signed trade agreements with the EU. For example, we completed the Mercosur trade agreement at a European level after 20 years of negotiation. We completed the India trade agreement, and it is hard to convey how big a deal that is. India is one of the most difficult trading partners to sign an agreement with. We also completed the Australian trade agreement. To underline how difficult that was, the Australian Government got a lot of criticism at home, particularly from its farming lobby, about the nature of the agreement. We have developed all of these trade agreements. There are more to come. The paradox, if I may say again, is that Donald Trump has made Europe, despite its reputation for bureaucracy and slow-moving officialdom, an attractive place for partnership. Equally, on the question of enlargement, there is a huge waiting room of countries seeking to join the EU and that is important to emphasise as well. In addition to countries in the western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova, other countries are seeking to join the EU. That is a good sign of the health of the European Union, despite some of the negative situation about which we have heard.

The main achievement and indicator of success of the Irish Presidency will be if we can get the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, over the line. Unusually for a large institution, this is a seven-year budget. As Members and former Members of the Oireachtas, we are used to a single-year budget. That is what happens in the UK and in most countries, but the European Union has a seven-year budget. It starts in 2028. The expectation and the hope is that the Irish Presidency will be able to conclude the multi-annual financial framework discussions and negotiations by the end of the Presidency and by the end of December 2026. If we do that,

reputationally this will be one of the best achievements of the Irish Presidency. It will be a very difficult thing to do but if we do it we have to remember there are four big elections happening in EU member states next year. Elections will be taking place in Poland, Italy, Spain and France, and all of them are anxious that the MFF negotiations are completed before they get into campaign mode. That is a real indication.

I will finish by saying that Ireland really punches above its weight. It is a bit of a cliché but we are at the centre of the political world at the moment. We have had the American President here on a very successful visit. We now have the EU Presidency. We have the European Political Community coming here in November. This is a sign that Ireland is playing its role in a turbulent world.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Mr. Andrews. I now invite Ms Regina Doherty, MEP, to speak.

Ms Regina Doherty: It is a real pleasure to be back here today. I thank the Seanad for the invitation. As most Senators know, I have spent a lot of my political life in this building, whether it was in the Dáil in government or in the Seanad. For the last two years - it is hard to imagine it is two years - I have had the real honour of representing Dublin in the European Parliament.

I was struck when I was coming here by the thought that even though the world has intrinsically changed in the last couple of years, our job is still very much exactly the same. It is to try to represent, from our perspective, Dublin - my colleagues and I represent 1.5 million people - and to make sure we are talking about the things that are important to them and not lofty topics that we can sometimes get carried away on. Just like here, most of the work I am doing in the European Parliament happens in committee. The committees that I sit on are the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs, and the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs. I am the vice-chair of the Special Committee on the Housing Crisis in the European Union, which may very soon be a full committee as opposed to an emergency committee. I am also the vice-chair of the tax matters committee. I will focus on a few of the issues today that I think genuinely matter to the people we represent.

Over the last two years I have been working very hard with parents, researchers, psychologists, specialists, children and the tech companies to try to make sure we make the online world safer for our children than it has ever been. I was particularly pleased last week to see the combination of that work in the finalisation of the EU KIDS Act, although I wish to God it was called something else. For a very long time we have been trying to put pressure on parents to manage all of this themselves and it just is not fair. The proposal puts the responsibility now back, where I firmly believe it belongs, on the tech companies to make sure they are responsible for having a safe environment and one that is more appropriate from an age perspective for our children. I have got myself into trouble over this for the last while by saying a blanket ban would not work when other governments were saying they were going to do just that. However, without the changes to ensure safety by design and by default was rooted in the legislation for the tech giants, we were going to have our children, who are very intuitive, able to find back doors and side doors to get around any ban and we would not have made the place safe.

I believe that the legislation will be a game-changer. It is up to all of us to make sure that it lives up to all of our aspirations.

The second issue for the past number of years has been competitiveness, which everybody is talking about. We all know that Europe does not lack ambition. It certainly does not lack talent. However, we sometimes make things much harder for ourselves than they have to be. Our businesses have been telling us that for the past number of years. The savings and investment union, which many of us are talking about, has a real opportunity of working where the capital markets union did not. We have geopolitics to help us co-operate and work together where some of the national interests across the European Union have trumped central co-operation over the past number of years. The reality is that we need to work closer together to make sure we get proper investment for our businesses, start-ups and scale-ups, to make sure that ordinary, decent, hard-working people can get the money from Europe to invest in their businesses. We know what Irish businesses face because they tell us all the time.

Housing has been an issue that all of us have been working particularly hard on for the past 18 months. The committee was established. I thought it was very important, from my party's perspective and from our ambitions' perspective, that we got as senior a position as we could. I managed to become a vice-chair and was very blessed to be able to become a rapporteur. We worked hard for 18 months to get a body of work that had hundreds of recommendations as to what the European Union can do to try to assist member states. I know we can have the argument about whether we have competency or not. What we believe is that some of the things that are rooted in European legislation and regulations are slowing us down. Some of the financing inhibitors stop people being able to borrow money at a rate where it means that they could sell affordable houses. There is a lot we can do. I know there is lots that only national governments can do, but we can do a lot and I hope we see it shortly with the affordable housing legislation, which was launched last week. The part that I am really interested in is probably going to come after Christmas, where we will see simplification of all of those regulations and I am looking forward to that.

Then we have artificial intelligence, or as President Trump called it this morning, super intelligence. The only thing I recognise is that while we talk about a lot of the concerns that people have - they are right that we need rules and regulations and Europe has all of those rules and regulations but just does not have the companies to regulate - we also need to be talking about the phenomenal changes from a positive perspective that we can actually appreciate in life. We can have the rules, but we also need to realise the transformative way this is going to change all our lives for the positive as well as addressing the concerns we have.

Mr. Andrews spoke about the war in Ukraine and the support that continues to come from Europe for those colleagues. I will be very honest with the House. Before I ever went to the European Parliament or visited any of those eastern countries, I had a sense that they were making a big deal out of it. That is until you go to Finland, Estonia or even Poland and realise what normal people are living in fear of. They have bunkers under the ground and procedures to know how to get to them in the event of something happening. I came back and I realised this is so much more real and co-operation is desperately important. Ireland has been to the fore. The European Union has been really instrumental in helping Ukraine. That then brings us to the defence conversation. There is a different mood in Ireland now than there ever would have been when I was in this Chamber or the Dáil about having that conversation and the

realism that we need to have protections, even if it is only for our infrastructure. We are never going to change our stance on being militarily unaligned. However, to be able to protect the infrastructure we so heavily rely on is something we need to be cognisant of and do far faster.

I will stop there. I am looking forward to the interaction and the questions we will have later on. It is a real privilege to be a former Member of this House and to be back today.

Mr. Aodhán Ó Riordáin: As my colleagues said, it is a genuine honour to be here to share our work in the European Parliament with Senators and to be back in the Oireachtas. I ran for the European Parliament inspired in some way because of the racist riot that took place in November 2023 on the streets of Dublin. I was extremely worried about the rise of the far right and convinced that the prioritisation of Dublin in the political sphere was not being taken seriously enough.

On my first day in the European Parliament, I told my colleagues that I had three priorities; housing, housing and housing. As Ms Doherty quite rightly said, we have a housing committee and a housing Commissioner. We now have a housing report and our first European housing legislation. I hope that in the budget negotiations that will be finalised by the end of the year, we may have some financial assistance for housing. Having 4,000 children living in my city in emergency accommodation is an outrage and there is also the fact that tourists are living in homes while children are living in hotels. That is why there was such an emphasis in the Affordable Housing Act 2021 on regulation of short-term lets.

Some of the campaigning I have done in Dublin throughout my political life I have brought to the European Parliament. I have established a new informal committee on drugs and drug use, which has tried to bring some of the mainstream European talk when it comes to decriminalisation of the drug user, and the facilitation of injecting facilities and consumption rooms, to the mainstream of Irish politics. We also had a petition which we brought to the European Parliament from parents who are waiting for assessments of needs for their children.

I am on the UK-EU delegation, which means that we have an interaction with Westminster politicians every six months or so. I am a member of the S&D, which is the second biggest group in the European Parliament. We obviously have a political relationship with the British Labour Party and on that basis, I am encouraging my British Labour Party colleagues to take Northern Ireland much more seriously. Also, all of us are working collaboratively as Irish MEPs to ensure the recognition of Irish passport holders born in the North of Ireland. They are EU citizens and they deserve to have EU representation as well.

Simplification and competitiveness have been mentioned. As somebody of the left, we understand the importance of these two words but at the same time we are nervous about rowing back on the very things that have protected consumers and workers' rights over generations. When I was a young man, I became very aware that my mother had to leave the Civil Service when she got married. It is only because of our membership of the European Union that advances in workers' rights and gender equality have improved things. However, there is a body of far-right MEPs who are determined to row back all of that. It is important for all of us in the centre ground to co-operate with each other and not to allow anti-European and extreme voices to take over.

Ukraine and Gaza have been mentioned and they are extremely important. Sometimes we forget, as Ms Doherty quite rightly said, and think that Ukraine is something that happens on television, but it is not something that happens on television for those who live in a member state that borders Russia. It is a very real threat to their way of life. They have a memory within their families of Russian aggression. That is why, for me, solidarity with Ukraine and understanding the necessity of member states to react to what is happening is important. The issue of Gaza is also forefront in our minds. It destabilises the European Union to have an association agreement with a country like Israel, which flouts international law so readily. The EU-Israel Association Agreement is worth €45 billion. It would have much more effect on changing Israel's course of action when it comes to Gaza, the West Bank or other areas where it shows aggression, if we were to genuinely threaten the suspension or the ending of that trade agreement.

Coming back to housing, there is commitment from Government. We had the Minister for housing in Strasbourg last week. There is a commitment for a meeting of the housing ministers in November, with a focus on homelessness, which I look forward to engaging with. There is a commitment for a housing summit, which Ursula von der Leyen made in her state of the union speech last year. We are still waiting for details on that. If there were to be a housing summit in Dublin - I would hope before the end of the year with the main players of the European Union - it would bring more energy to the discussion of housing our people. If there is any momentum behind anti-European sentiment and behind those who wish to break up what has been the greatest peace process in history, it is because Europe does not seem to be reacting strongly enough to the needs of people on the ground. If people cannot house themselves, their families or their children then politics feels very distant from them. I hope we get to a position to be able to deliver on that housing summit before the end of the year.

In her state of the Union address last week Ursula von der Leyen said a lot of things.

She spoke about AI, which is something we are concerned about on the employment committee in the context of labour displacement. She also spoke about housing being a right. Many people in the European Parliament believe property is a right but we are trying to move to a situation where housing is recognised as a right so we can, as I said, house our children and especially those who currently live in emergency accommodation.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the MEPs for their opening statements on a broad range of topics. Housing was mentioned as one of those issues that has been weaponised and utilised but it is of fundamental importance to our young people, as we have seen in some reports this week. We will now hear from our group spokespersons from each of our groups, starting with an Seanadóir Fitzpatrick.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Cuirim fáilte roimh na MEPs. They are very welcome. It is really good to see the three of them. It is disappointing the fourth representative for Dublin is not here. It is incredibly important that we have strong relations between our national Parliament and our European Parliament. I thank the MEPs for the service they give to Dublin. It is important we have really strong, constructive representation in the European Parliament.

Fianna Fáil has obviously always been a pro-EU party. We have no hesitation in saying that and we are very proud to be the party that led our country into the Union. I am somebody who grew up in the European Union. I am somebody who learnt French and German in Cabra and went on to study Italian as well. I remember going to work in Germany when I had to get a *Gastarbeiter* permit. I have lived the European experience and I know for my children and their generation and for future generations the European Union is incredibly important. It is incredibly important because of all of the things the MEPs have mentioned, all the great work they are undertaking, participating in and contributing to - not just for Dublin but for the 27 member states - and the strength that the EU represents on the world stage. We are a single community of 450 million people. I do not think there is a bigger single market. That brings power to address the issues the MEPs have mentioned like security, defence, stability, democracy and freedom. These are words and values that we grew up with and kind of take for granted, but we should not. We should value them and protect them and defend them to our last breaths because we are privileged people. We are incredibly privileged to live in Dublin, to live in Ireland and to be part of the EU. I really thank the MEPs for the work they are doing.

There are a couple of things they mentioned that I would like to come back to. One of them is housing. It is obviously a huge issue. There is not a European city where you do not witness people who are homeless, who are without a home. If you do not have a place to call your own, one that is safe, secure and meets your needs, it is incredibly challenging to go to school, college or work and to function in society. I therefore commend the MEPs on the work they are doing at an EU level to promote and assert the right to housing. It is essential for us humans to have secure shelter. We have had a big challenge. I am very proud that house construction in Ireland is twice the EU average. I am very proud that we have a target to deliver 300,000 homes, that we are making great progress towards achieving that many homes and that we have record levels of not just affordable and private housebuilding but social housebuilding as well. The only solution to homelessness is homes and that is what social housing really addresses. There is more opportunity. It is a national competence but Ms Doherty mentioned it, I think, when she talked about the investment in and financing of housing. We see the EU as a great source of strategic financing. In the constituency I live in, a really obvious example is the urban regeneration and education project and the funding that came in for TUD in Grangegorman. The old asylum there has been transformed into a world-class campus. It is a fantastic campus. It is not just about education or culture but about people. It is a really open place. Consider the transformation that has been achieved there. It was a walled Victorian asylum where people were locked up for lifetimes and it is now a part of the city where lives begin. It is really fantastic and Europe played a part in that via the investment bank. We have another huge regeneration opportunity in the capital in the Carlton site. The State has bought that site for MetroLink and we could deliver affordable housing there. The State owns it.

I thank the MEPs for being here and their engagement with us. I encourage them to continue doing that because it is really important. When the public see politicians working in a practical way, they value our democracy and they value us.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: I welcome the MEPs. It is great to have them here. I was going to use all my time to speak about the European Week of Sport, which begins today, I think. I had the opportunity last year to go to Brussels and speak at the European Parliament

during European Week of Sport along with Nina Carberry, MEP. There was a great discussion about women in sport, inequality and all that. I will get to that because acknowledging European Week of Sport and what we can do both here and at EU level to encourage more people to get involved in physical activity is a good thing.

However, I have just come from the most infuriating media committee meeting with the social media companies. Ms Doherty mentioned online safety for children and Mr. Ó Ríordáin mentioned AI and the difficulties we are facing with AI in the employment space. I would like to reiterate what I said downstairs in the committee room, which is that artificial intelligence is very intelligent. I cannot understand how media companies cannot ban videos from being uploaded in the first place using AI. I could not get a response from TikTok an hour ago on why the company could not use this amazing tool called AI to ensure videos of dangerous driving, gender-based violence, criminal activity or any videos of that nature are not ending up on our platforms. I cannot understand how that is.

I am going to speak specifically about gender-based violence and about femicide and use some of the statistics we have for Ireland. Femicide in Ireland has increased by almost 50% this year. There have been ten instances of femicide, up from seven in 2025. Some 287 women have died violently in Ireland since 1996. In 63% of these instances they were killed in their homes and 87% of women were killed by a man known to them. We know gender-based violence does not just happen on a given day. These women are on watchlists. It is a result of behaviour that has often been festering for years. What has happened in the era of these tech companies and online social media platforms is there a place online now to cultivate, spread and encourage male supremacy and antifeminist behaviours and it is very worrying. There was a research project done recently by DCU, funded by the Department of justice. It was called "Recommending Toxicity". The authors created ten online accounts that were, *mar dhea*, owned by 16- and 18-year-old boys and men. No matter whether those accounts actively looked for misogynistic videos, they were fed them over and over again. Regardless of what was being sought or what was looked at in the first instance, these videos were being fed to these accounts, which were purporting to belong to teenage boys and 18-year-old men. The accounts were being run by researchers but it is very worrying.

Some 90% to 95% of deepfakes on the internet are nonconsensual pornographic images depicting women. I am aware addressing all this is not easy but there was mention of making tech companies responsible and there is a way to go there.

Addressing all of this is a priority for Fine Gael. I thank the Fine Gael Women's Network for its advocacy and submission of proposals to public representatives on how we can combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, particularly in an era of that online content because it is all just spreading.

There is a range of EU legislative instruments that aim to tackle these issues, including the Digital Services Act. The EU KIDS Act was mentioned as well. However, I would really like the MEPs to update the House on the work that is ongoing in the European Parliament to strengthen these legislative instruments further because from what I saw downstairs, *Coimisiún na Meán* is hamstrung. We are all hamstrung by certain regulatory and legal frameworks. At the moment, the likes of TikTok are getting away with uploading these videos. Sometimes they are taking them down in 24 hours, sometimes they are not, but they should not be going up in

the first place. We in this House, and in the Dáil and European Parliament, have a responsibility to be more proactive about making sure those videos cannot go up in the first place.

I will come back to European Week of Sport because it begins today. It is an opportunity to promote the benefits of sport and physical activity. It is an opportunity for the EU to connect with citizens across the Union to promote a vision of sport that is inclusive of all abilities and ages. The current framework that guides EU sports policy runs to December 2027. There will be a successor. It is interesting that it is parallel with the national sports policy in Ireland. I will be doing a bit of work over the next year or so with stakeholder engagement with the sector. I would be really happy if the MEPs would be happy to take a report from the research I do here in Ireland for the next Irish sports policy because it looks like the next European sports policy will run along the same timeframe. If they are open to receiving some of that information, I would be delighted to send it on.

Senator Tom Clonan: Fáilte abhaile ar ais chuig an Teach seo. I thank our guests for their exceptional public service. That commute over and back to Strasbourg and Brussels is very hard on families and individuals and it should not be taken lightly. It is a huge sacrifice, especially at particular times in people's lives. We are exceptionally well-represented in Europe. I recall that MEP Andrews recently appeared before the Joint Committee on Defence and National Security to talk about defence, security and priorities we ought to have. Unfortunately, I was called away to the Order of Business and when I came back, I apologised to Barry for missing his contribution. He said to me, "Do not worry about that, Tom. I was kind of hoping you wouldn't come back". When it comes to verbal acuity and discourse, we are exceptionally well-represented, not just in Dublin but nationwide. I know we all have our differences, but my experience of this House has been that people are very collegial.

I will ask a few questions. In our Presidency of the EU, the Government, Tánaiste and Taoiseach identified security as being a key theme. We have heard people like Kaja Kallas and Ursula von der Leyen say that we are on the precipice of a major ground invasion by Russia into continental Europe and that it is at the point of attacking a NATO member. I see frequently Irish media reports citing the head of German intelligence saying that an attack on Europe is imminent. Belgorod is the most important strategic military pathway into Ukraine for the Russians. It is in the Belgorod oblast and is 80 km from Kharkiv. That is less than 50 miles but in five years of war, the Russians have failed to get down the road to Kharkiv. Yet, we are told that it is on the point of, if you like, invading one of the Baltic states and perhaps expanding that and escalating to arrive in Helsinki and maybe Copenhagen or Stockholm. The Russians have been operating with brigade combat teams. Have the MEPs seen any evidence that the Russians have the hundreds of divisions it would take - the millions of troops in divisions, armies and army groups that would be required - to conduct a conventional land invasion of Europe? Have they seen any evidence to that extent? I do not mean "Dúirt bean liom go ndúirt bean léi". I mean that I take everything that Commission officials say with a pinch of salt because I do not see any evidence for that. What I do see, and I would be curious to see if the MEPs share this view, is that we are probably going to see a return to Cold War spending on defence and security, which is a pity. It is something that is outside of our control, prompted by Vladimir Putin and his fragile vanity.

The second thing I want to ask relates to drones during the European Union Presidency. In February 2019, a consumer drone caused the closure of Dublin Airport. In 2023, there were

six closures of Dublin Airport when small consumer drones about the size of my hand were sighted in the environment of the airport. On 1 December 2025, the *LE William Butler Yeats* confirmed it had sighted several military and industrial grade drones operating in the flight path of aircraft going in and out of Dublin Airport. However, no action was taken. Despite the fact that it observed those for hours, no notification to airmen or women was issued. The airport was not closed, flights were not diverted and, crucially, pilots and air crew were not informed of the threat. On 8 September, at 6,000 ft, a black military drone was observed and reported by an Aer Lingus pilot coming into Dublin Airport and, again, no action was taken, no notification was given to other aircraft, no airspace was closed and the airport continued uninterrupted. Last week, a red military grade drone was spotted at 3,000 ft, 20 m off the left wing or port wing of an Aer Lingus aircraft. Again, no airspace was closed and there was no notification to air personnel. Are the MEPs satisfied when they fly in and out of Ireland that they are safe? Across Europe, when these drones are spotted, they routinely close airspace.

In the 1990s, we had 600 commercial field growers in Ireland. We now have 60. We import 83% of our fruit and vegetables. I think of climate change. I drove from Bilbao through the centre of Spain and down to the south of Portugal. We drove through hundreds of kilometres of burnt, scorched earth. Food security and water security are priorities for us. Is there anything that we can do in Europe to identify and prioritise the real threats to Ireland's future security?

Senator Chris Andrews: I apologise for missing the opening statements. I had another presentation. Like Senator Clonan, I know that despite our political differences, we have great MEPs representing us and fighting for our city. I want to raise a couple of issues.

The GPO and Moore Street are currently in limbo waiting on Government plans for their future. It is very disappointing that what should be one of the city's most important historic and cultural quarters has been neglected by the State for so long. However, I am hopeful that progress can be made in the future after the planned public consultation. It would be huge missed opportunity if this process does not result in ambitious planning and serious investment in this part of the city. Moore Street and its surroundings can become a catalyst for the regeneration of Dublin's north inner city, while at the same time preserving our republican heritage and creating a vibrant cultural quarter with amenities and housing where it is most desperately needed. As Dublin MEPs, is this an issue they have engaged with? What kind of potential do they see this having for the north inner city?

Separately, I will raise the hardline support for Israel's genocidal regime by the European People's Party, EPP, of which Fine Gael is a member. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has, of course, been a staunch ally of Israel and Netanyahu and has been central in supporting Israel's wars across the Middle East and the genocide in Palestine. Within the Parliament, the EPP routinely blocks any sort of debate, motion or resolution on Palestine, trying to quash any scrutiny of Israel or attempts to recognise the human rights of Palestinians. The chair of the Parliament's delegation to Israel is a member of the EPP and regularly speaks on behalf of that party on this particular issue. Recently, she said in the Parliament:

For us Europeans and for our partner Israel [how do you see Israel as a partner?] international law matters because we have committed ourselves to it, but it's also clear that international law alone does not always provide solutions when dealing with terrorist organisations or violent and oppressive regimes.

This is an absolutely appalling statement, clearly designed to justify Israel's crimes against civilian populations. Likewise, last month she gave political cover to Ben-Gvir's barbaric demand for Israel to kill 40 Palestinians a night and tried to make excuses for why he routinely makes these sickening extremist statements. I would greatly appreciate if Regina Doherty MEP could clarify her position on the European People's Party approach to Palestine and the Israeli state and tell us whether there is any redline on this issue that would prompt Fine Gael to reconsider its membership of the EPP.

Senator Laura Harmon: I echo what other Senators have said. Regardless of some political differences, we are well represented in Europe. I am a Labour Party Senator and we are very proud of our MEP and my colleague Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and the work he is doing to progress a progressive agenda within Europe.

Aodhán mentioned housing and he is on the housing committee in the European Parliament. What does he think the Government needs to do to access more resources for housing? How can it work better with Europe on this? I am seeing figures in Cork, where I am based, showing we have nearly 300 children homeless between counties Cork and Kerry but this is obviously a national issue.

Another issue mentioned was the safe injection facility in Dublin, which has been a great success. This is something other cities, particularly Cork city, are looking to implement as well. Do the MEPs have any advice on how that should be progressed? What barriers might exist?

I watched with great interest the petition that was presented to the European Parliament in relation to assessment of need. I commend the parents who brought that position, particularly Councillor Ali Field. What now needs to happen with that? How can Europe put pressure on our Government to remedy that issue and those waiting lists that are in place?

Another issue that most of us have mentioned is artificial intelligence and workers' rights. How can we safeguard workers' rights here in terms of AI? I am on the Oireachtas artificial intelligence committee and this is a big topic of discussion over the coming months in relation to safeguarding workers' rights with advances in technology. What are MEPs in Europe doing to safeguard their rights?

Europe, as a whole, did not respond strongly enough to the genocide in Palestine and in Gaza. It was also slow to respond. It would have been better to see a more collective approach from the outset. I am very proud of our MEPs who have spoken out on that issue. It is very important we continue to do so and to show our support to other countries experiencing war. I know Ukraine has been mentioned specifically.

An Cathaoirleach: I believe the Senator wishes to share time.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I welcome our MEPs, particularly my new Green Party colleague, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin. We certainly look forward to the continued merging of the parties over time. I want to take up a point raised by Senator Clonan. It is about the wildfires and heatwaves we have had across Europe. A temperature of 40°C in many of our European cities seems to be the new norm and there is a new acceptance that these are the temperatures

we are facing. Over 700,000 ha of land has been burned, literally incinerated, across Europe. There is a food security issue.

There are also challenges around what is happening at a European level on the simplification agenda and what is happening with the potential loss of funding streams like the LIFE multi-annual financial framework, which our MEPs have a responsibility for. I hope they will fight not just Ireland's corner but Europe's corner. If we want to spend money on security, we should spend it on climate and nature. That is where our security lies. Our security lies in our food security and in having clean water, resilient nature and a stable climate. That is something I urge our MEPs to take on board.

My second point relates to Gaza. I share the disappointment expressed yesterday at the UN by Minister, Deputy McEntee, regarding a lack of concerted European action on it. I have deep sympathy for the Irish team, and I know Aodhán is a great follower of the Irish football team, like I am, but I have sympathy for the players and manager. I absolutely do not think they should have been put in the position that they are in. The onus should have been on the FAI. However, the onus should have been at a European level to sanction Israel for its atrocities.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on Senator Alice-Mary Higgins, I want to welcome guest of Senator Shane Curley, Ms Divyanshi Jain, along with guest of Senator Joe Conway, Mr. Kevin Rafferty, from Waterford, who is a former colleague but, I presume, a current friend. I thank you all for being here today.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: It is good that we have these sessions where we bring the debates happening in Europe here and make the connections clear. There are some really important discussions happening during Ireland's Presidency, so I am going to focus primarily on the MFF, the shift away from overseas development aid in a really worrying way and the move in terms of LIFE funding and other programmes, which are so crucial to small farmers and people doing the actual environmental work across the country and across Europe, and the moving of so much, like that fund for example, into a competitiveness fund.

This competitiveness framing, which we have heard again and again, means when we look at the MFF, it seems concerning that a lot of what remains, which is not getting moved directly into arms and into re-supporting the German automobile industry, which we know is now directly partnering with Israeli military development, for example, is going into competitiveness funds. I am very concerned.

I would like to hear thoughts on how we avoid the capture we have seen in the United States largely, but not solely, by very large billionaire tech advocates who have extreme interest expressed in political control. We see that now attached to things like the Rhine Group in terms of Collison and Draghi being part of that, and it parallels so much of what we have seen in the advocacy around the wealth tax, for example, in the United States, again, where there has been funding, and some of the really concerning messages.

I wonder about the competitiveness narrative because it seems to be mainly benefiting large US multinationals. It is ExxonMobil in the room when we are talking about the omnibus Bills. It seems that we are looking at a level of corporate capture by European institutions that I have not seen, as somebody very passionate about Europe, for years. The public see it too. I worry

that this level of corporate capture is diminishing public confidence in Europe. I would like to know what can be done on that. As part of that, a key test for it is where we balance and where we figure out where our priorities are. Where do European values, which we hear referenced very often, actually sit? Where do human rights and international rights sit within European values and where do values sit within the actual decision-making?

There are four specifics I would like to be addressed. One is the trade deals being negotiated at the moment. We have all wrung our hands about the EU-Israel association agreement and how we cannot get the qualified majority or unanimity to do the right thing, but Ireland also sat back on the EU-Morocco deal in relation to Western Sahara, and during this Presidency, we will see negotiations on the EU-Indonesia deal even as there are reports right now from West Papua about the large-scale assassination of civil society members.

I am asking how, within the Parliament, the MEPs plan to push in advance at the point when a majority is needed to make a new deal. This is the point when the balance of power sits with any voice willing to stand up, before the deal is made, for human rights, as well as for the enforcement and meaningful enforcement of human rights in other deals.

Another area I am concerned about, which sadly is something the EPP collectively voted against, is the reference to the United Arab Emirates, UAE, in the amendments on Sudan. I refer to amendments to specifically name its involvement in conflict. We know the EU is also negotiating a trade deal with the UAE.

When does the values bit kick in? Do we talk about it aspirationally afterwards or is it brought through in the discussions about money? Is it about values or is it about a price tag? That is at the core of public confidence in the European Union. It is also at the core of making it something we can be proud of. I look back to my involvement in the Future of Europe process and what the citizens wanted. They want a Europe that is good, not just a Europe that is strong and makes money. I would like to know how that is being translated into these key discussions and the decisions being made on our watch.

An Cathaoirleach: As agreed by the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight, the opening statements by Senators are to be five minutes, and the MEPs will then respond. Each of the MEPs now has five minutes to respond. Our Senators will then come back in for the remainder of the debate, with the MEPs concluding, along with the Leas-Chathaoirleach. We will go again in alphabetical order.

Mr. Barry Andrews: I thank all the Senators for their questions. I will get straight into the debate.

Senator Fitzpatrick raised housing. I did not make reference to it in my opening comments because my colleagues are on the housing committee. Before the last election, I published a paper with Housing Europe that contained a list of recommendations about what should happen in housing. I want to make reference to three of them. Two have already been implemented. First, we recommended that there be a housing committee in the European Parliament. That has happened already. Second, we recommended that approved housing bodies be taken off balance sheet for accounting purposes in order that the Government could invest more in affordable housing. That has not been done at this point but it would be extremely welcome.

The third point I referred to in the housing report was in relation to leveraging savings within the European system to create capital investment in affordability. That is very much an adopted policy.

On homelessness, I would now like to see some of the recommendations in Commission reports transferred into Council conclusions in November. Reference was made to the housing ministers coming to Dublin in November. The key thing we should be looking out for and pressing for, particularly in other member states, is making sure that the Council conclusions on homelessness are adopted in November. The momentum in Ireland is very strong.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn talked about sport. There is discussion of a sports Act because a lot of EU law on free movement and competition affects the way sports organisations conduct their business but that law is not really tailored to produce positive outcomes in sport. There is a big discussion now about whether there should be specific legislation on this. That is very much worth following.

On the media companies, I totally agree with the Senator. It is very frustrating. The Meta ruling in the United States a couple of weeks ago needs to be transferred into European law. President von der Leyen, in her speech on the state of the Union last week, said there has to be a shift of the burden of proof onto the media companies. That is crucial from a legal point of view because it requires them to demonstrate that their algorithms are safe and puts a positive obligation on them. I want to pay tribute to my former colleague, Frances Fitzgerald, who brought the gender-based violence legislation through the EU. We have seen with the proposed EU keeping internet digital spaces accountable and trustworthy, KIDS, Act that there is some progress being made.

I am conscious of time. Senator Clonan raised the nature of the threat that exists and whether there is a threat from Russia. If you are living in Ireland, it probably feels like there is not; however, if you are living in the Baltic states, where there are considerable Russian populations, it is a different equation, and there is a different threat assessment. I do not think the Baltic states are spending an awful lot of money on defence because they really enjoy doing it. They do not enjoy raising taxes to pay more for defence, they do not enjoy borrowing money to pay for defence, and they do not enjoy cutting social security provisions in order to pay for defence. They do it because they believe there is a real threat. We should respect that and really understand it.

Do I feel safe coming out of Dublin Airport? Yes, I do. I have had conversations with the Dublin Airport Authority. It has a red zone and a black zone and sensors to make sure any drone activity within the airport is dealt with appropriately. There are various agencies involved. Some of the sightings are not correct sightings. What the Senator said was seen at 6,000 ft, which some pilots thought was a military drone, was a light aircraft. Sometimes, you do not want to start shooting out of the sky what you believe to be drones. There is a lot of process that has to be followed to satisfy yourself that you are not creating a further problem.

A number of speakers, including Senator Andrews, raised the question of Gaza. I have been working very hard on this issue as the vice chair of the Palestine delegation. I agree with all of the points that were made.

I am going to run out of time. I will refer to Senator Alice-Mary Higgins's points and Senator Noonan's in my concluding remarks. I thank the Senators.

Ms Regina Doherty: It is a bit like speed dating, so I do not know whether I am going to get to everybody's questions. I very much acknowledge the thanks and the welcome because it really does feel nice.

On housing, I hope Senator Fitzpatrick can see what we are trying to achieve from a European perspective. I believe we will get there. The frustration some of us feel concerns the speed at which we are getting there. We could be doing things much faster. An example initiative is one the UK Government is currently working on. It is to use artificial intelligence in its planning system. It considers its planning permission system too slow, although it is about five times faster than ours. It is using AI to develop a system where, from beginning to end, with human intervention only at the very end before planning permission is granted, everything will be digitised. One could say this is something we could do here in Ireland if we wanted to but if we had legislation and recommendations from the EU, it would force us to deal with the issue. That is really positive.

Homelessness is something we are still seriously grappling with, not just at home. When one goes to other European countries, one sees how stark it is.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Absolutely.

Ms Regina Doherty: The housing first approach is something we absolutely have to adopt. The Senator is right to say that, across the EU, Ireland is building far more houses than any other country. That is sometimes why it is difficult to hear foreign colleagues coming here and criticising us when their own record is not great, to be honest. I just wanted to acknowledge that.

I would love to work on European sports policy, so maybe we should have more regular contact by email. I will take that on board.

To answer Senator Clonan's question, I do feel safe. I am particularly conscious of it flying back and forth. I spend more time on planes these days than I ever did in my whole life before.

With regard to food security, something we could start doing here is supporting our tillage farmers and foodstuff manufacturers to ensure we have an Irish industry that can serve the Irish market. Currently, we do not have that. Our tillage farmers, for whom I am seeking a meeting with the Minister, will say they are being left behind. As the Senator suggested, we do not have horticulturists in the numbers we used to years ago. In a few years, we will have no tillage growers either. That is really worrying.

I genuinely do not know whether there are thousands of soldiers waiting in the Russian wings to attack a European country. However, I do know the fear of very serious defence people in Poland and Finland. When they speak to us, I do not feel they are making it up. Their intelligence is based on the best information they have. Also, each of those countries has had a myriad and growing number of hybrid attacks that may be precursors to what they believe might be the worst-case eventuality. What I do know is that failure to prepare will definitely result in us not being ready. I hope to God an attack never happens, but if it does, solidarity and support for one another's countries has to be felt.

I do not know where to begin and end with Senator Andrews' response, other than to say that my position on Palestine, from an Irish perspective, as an Irish MEP, is very clear. The work that I have done in the Parliament for the past two years has not always been welcomed by some of my EPP colleagues and that is fairly obvious. Like every party, including the Senator's - and it is an awful pity that his own party colleague is not here today to defend her voting record when she votes against Ireland on myriad cases - my grouping in the EU is a broad church. We do not all agree with each other but we do not all agree with each other around this table, collectively, either, and the point of what we try to do is to collectively work to get a consensus. Ireland has led that charge over the past two years. That was clear from the Commission President's speech last Wednesday. She said that it would have been far more preferable if the 12 or 13 European countries now supporting the Irish and Spanish position had done so a number of years ago. Had they done so, we might have actually got a much better outcome. All of us will continue to fight, as I am sure will all Senators, for the Palestinian people to make sure that they do get justice. I will keep doing my part.

In response to Senator Harmon on AI and workers' rights, we have a quality jobs Act coming up in the employment affairs committee in the next number of months. A lot of it will be centred around people's rights as we currently know them. There is a huge opportunity for us to look forward into the future, even in terms of the ones that we already know will be displaced. First, we must make sure that there are jobs that can never be done by AI that have to have human interaction. We need to ensure that we have a programme of works to make sure that we can retrain people. Automated driving, for argument's sake, is something that we know about, as well as administrative works. What are we doing now to make sure that we retrain those people to the new jobs that have not even been created or developed yet? There has to be some sort of protection in law and that is a challenge for myself and Mr. Ó Riordáin in the next couple of months.

Senator Noonan spoke about wildfires across Europe. Again, the President spoke this week about the challenge and the frustrations between industry and climate. Those challenges were laid bare and were clear to see during the summer which is why she is establishing the EU climate insurance pact to make sure that we work to more cooperatively together. I look forward to helping to progress that.

In response to Senator Higgins, I appreciate her frustrations. She is a very passionate woman and she has been passionate on many topics over the years. The other side to the argument that she makes is the industrial accelerator Act. That is in stark contrast to the picture that she laid out, that we are actually putting money into the coffers of American companies. What we are desperately trying to do is to rebalance that competitive agenda, right back to European companies and manufacturers, to make sure that those people who have missed a boat to either China or America in the past five or ten years get supported by EU money to make sure that they are actually here to supply us, not just with food security but with tech security and job security as well. They cannot do that without a level playing field and the accelerator Act is going to do a lot on that in the next couple of months.

Mr. Aodhán Ó Riordáin: I will do my absolute best to respond to Senators. I thank them for their warm comments, which are genuinely appreciated. Housing was mentioned by a number who asked what we have done. We have changed the state aid rules so that individual local authorities now have a greater capacity to borrow. When I met the CEO of Dublin City

Council last year, he said that the collective borrowing capacity of the 31 local authorities in Ireland is €118 million. That is it. That is all they could borrow in the morning if they collectively went to try to access funding. When we changed state aid rules, that facilitated local authorities to get more involved in borrowing for housing if they want to. In addition, in terms of short-term lets, they do not need to be worried about EU competition law any more when trying to reduce or curtail the amount of properties that are let out through Airbnb or similar.

We had a very passionate contribution from Senator Ní Chuilinn on TikTok, which is very much appreciated. What is bizarre is that when one is in the European Parliament, one cannot access one's TikTok account because it is actually perceived to be so dangerous but yet we allow children to access it anywhere in the European Union. We need to start considering banning or curtailing platforms before we start considering banning or curtailing children. The emphasis, as Mr. Andrews MEP rightly said, needs to be put back on the companies, corporations and platforms and not on the families or the children, necessarily.

Gaza has been mentioned today and I have spoken about the Israel agreement previously. Similar to militarisation or security, although one does not have to agree - and I do not necessarily agree - one has to appreciate or have a sense or a feeling for where the average German or Austrian MEP is coming from. They have a Holocaust hangover. I do not want to put it in comical terms but that is exactly what they are trying to atone for in their politics. They know what their grandfathers and their great grandfathers did and in supporting Israel, they feel they are atoning for that. It is misguided, wrong and it is hurting Palestinian children. It is killing Palestinian children but that is, unfortunately, what we are trying to change,

On security, the security discussion in Ireland is similar to the abortion discussion. Irish society liked exceptionalism when it came to abortion, as long as we were able to allow 4,000 women a year to go to the UK. We also like our exceptionalism when it comes to security, as long as somebody else will guide and protect us. That is not the kind of attitude that a serious, European, modern nation should take. We should be an awful lot more understanding of those who do have concerns when it comes to bordering Russia and what they may be engaging with.

In terms of sport and gender equality in sport, I appreciate the Senator's leadership on this. I have an eight-year-old girl and she has to choose between soccer and GAA on a Sunday. The eight-year-old boy who lives beside me does not have to make that choice. She is eight. That is something that we must have a proper discussion about. How does gender equality genuinely work its way into every facet of Irish society when those who are trying to access support have those barriers in front of them?

There are about 200 far-right MEPs in the European Parliament and they are being pandered to on climate change, immigration, and violence against women. They will tell us that immigration is the issue when it comes to violence against women. They will tell us that housing is an immigration problem and they are climate change deniers. They used to be on the outskirts. There was a *cordon sanitaire*, whereby others did not vote for any amendment they put down or engage with them on any level but unfortunately, that centre ground of pro-European politics is under strain more than ever before and Ms Ursula von der Leyen has a lot to answer for when it comes to that. We have seen in European elections in different member states how the far right is gaining traction. That is because other centre right parties have taken on their clothing and normalised their politics.

On drugs and injecting facilities, which was raised by Senator Harmon, the facility in Dublin has been a huge success but the legislation needs to be amended to facilitate not just injection but consumption. If one goes to the injecting facility in Brussels, 90% of the people using it are actually smoking crack cocaine rather than injecting heroin. We need to be much more agile and reflective of the needs of the individual drug user. That mainstream, European knowledge and experience of drug policy or things like drug policy would really benefit us in Ireland. We need decriminalisation of drug users but also a consumption facility in other urban centres.

On the issue of farming and the LIFE project that needs funding to support 44,000 part-time farmers, some farming organisations are not properly representing those who engage in agriculture in Ireland. Sometimes their influence is too much and the nitrates derogation and the extension of it was a wrong turn for Ireland.

An Cathaoirleach: We will go to our final group of Senators before returning to our MEPs. Anois, an Seanadóir Clifford-Lee.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: Our guests are all very welcome. I am delighted to see the three MEPs before us but it is a pity that their fourth colleague is not here today. The work that they do is very important. Dublin is of strategic importance to this country. We are very mindful of the work our MEPs are doing in Europe and we commend them for working together for the betterment of Dublin and Ireland.

There has been a lot of talk about security, border security and fuel security. I am very concerned about food security and supporting our fruit and vegetable growers. Irish horticulture is competing with imported produce, much of which comes from outside of the EU, while Irish growers face rising costs in relation to energy, labour, land, compliance and regulation. We need to support our growers for our own food security. Given that the CAP negotiations are ongoing and entering a critical phase, it is timely that we are here to discuss this particular issue. If Europe wants Irish growers to meet higher environmental, labour and production standards, will the next CAP provide sufficient investment to support them and allow them to remain competitive with imported produce? Can our MEPs use their position with the European Parliament to strongly advocate for growers in Fingal who produce 47% of Ireland's field vegetables, 37% of protected fruit, vegetable and nursery plants, and 14.5% of the national potato output? Our MEPs will agree that the growers of north County Dublin contribute significantly to the food security of this country. If Europe is serious about food security, how do we reconcile that with the economic pressures currently faced by Irish growers?

What happens to European food security when farms in productive areas, like north County Dublin, become economically unviable? Has serious thought been given by the EU to productive agricultural land and whether this should be treated as a strategic food security asset? Should there be a stronger European food security test before productive agricultural land is lost to competing land uses? This is particularly relevant in Fingal due to the housing pressures of Dublin and the pressures farmers come under to give up productive farming land in favour of housing. We need housing but we also need our food security.

Farming is not often seen as an issue for Dublin-based politicians but as I have outlined, we have a significant agricultural industry in Dublin and I appeal to the MEPs not to forget about the farmers of Dublin. I note and congratulate the 2026 young farmer of the year, Shane Halpin, from Lusk, County Dublin. He is the first Dublin farmer to win this award. It is a testament to his work but also to the vibrant and innovative horticulture sector in north county Dublin.

I would also like to touch on Irish language issues. Nobody has mentioned them. We have the largest number of Irish speakers in the country in Dublin so I appeal to all three MEPs to keep that to the forefront of their work in Europe. It is very important to this country. The European institutions do not have the necessary linguistic infrastructure to provide that full equality to the Irish language in the European institutions and those of us who are Irish language speakers are very aware of the pressures on minority languages. Since January 2025, Irish has been an official language of the EU but we still have a road to go in relation to full equality. I appeal to the MEPs to provide the supports, and investment, for Irish-based people to train as linguists to support the equality of the Irish language in the European Union. I thank the MEPs for all the work they do.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome guests of Senator Eileen Flynn from Ardara Community Childcare and the Raphoe Community Playgroup. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Cathal Byrne: The MEPs are all most welcome to the Chamber today and I thank them very much for coming in. I have a very specific point to raise with them, which I raised it with some of their colleagues when they were before us a few months ago. It is the issue of a united Ireland. A number of years ago the former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, secured a commitment that when a united Ireland takes place, it would automatically become a member of the EU. It is important there are funds put in place in this EU budget to prepare for that eventuality and I ask that the MEPs raise that matter for us.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the three MEPs for being here. All three of them stand out in my mind for one thing and that is that they do not always observe the party line and are sometimes willing to speak against their parties' positions on different things.

Ms Regina Doherty: Me?

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Ms Doherty showed that, particularly when she was Leader of this House.

The work of Mr. Barry Andrews on defence has been second to none and I find it somewhat disturbing it does not get more prominence in this country. It really is important.

I hate to say this to Mr. Ó Ríordáin that, in speaking about housing we found out yesterday that seven out of every ten 18- to 21-year-olds in this country want to get out of the country and it is down to housing. I see massive amounts of housebuilding around Dublin but somehow or other, the message is not getting through that there is work being done.

The ideal behind the European community was a Single Market, that we would all be in the one market and working together. How do the three MEPs feel about the fact the Department of Defence has ceded all responsibility for procurement to one country, namely France, and somehow or other that every tender that goes out, France wins? Where does that sit in the idea of an open, transparent and free market?

There has been much talk in this country over the past few days about an increase in the defence budget of 43%. There has not been an increase of 43%. Ranging from €1.05 billion in 2022, I think, to €1.49 billion in 2026 is not a 43% increase because we are not taking inflation into account and we are not looking at some of the other parameters that feed into that.

As three of the MEPs representing Ireland, which is notionally a neutral country, in the middle of what is the worst geopolitical situation we have had since the Cold War, are they satisfied this country is actually putting forward its best foot on defence? Are we not just playing with words in this country? I admire Mr. Andrews for speaking out on defence and indeed Ms Doherty. It is not a vote-getter in this country. Yet we depend massively on foreign direct investment, FDI, particularly from the United States. If there was a serious incident in this country, do the MEPs agree that there would be a flight of FDI?

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the three MEPs for being here today. It has probably been covered but I have worked in homelessness for the past number of years. I worked with Mr. Ríordáin and Ms Regina Doherty on that. I have never seen numbers like what we see at the moment. There are 17,527 people in emergency accommodation and I spoke today about 5,659 children. That number does not cover people sleeping in their cars, on couches, etc. I set up an organisation 20 years ago called Tiglin. We work with people that are marginalised and we are seeing the face of homelessness absolutely change. I spoke recently in the House about a young man who came into the Lighthouse Café on Pearse Street for dinner and we got talking. He has a job. He was given notice by his landlord that he was going to be evicted so he had to leave and he is in a tent in the Sandymount region. He is not the typical cohort of homeless people that we would have been used to.

I hope Europe is finally acting. I know it has published its first ever affordable housing plan and proposed a Council recommendation on fighting housing exclusion. In November, Dublin will host the EU Ministers with responsibility for homelessness. I have two questions. First, the Commission's proposal asks every member to report back every five years. Is that frequent enough to hold people to account or does the target need to be stronger? Second, what have the MEPs seen work in other member states that we could not only study but copy and make work here?

Europe is committed to ending homelessness by 2030 and Ireland has adopted that commitment as well. However, I was in this House ten years ago when we were going to do away with homelessness by 2020, so I have seen these targets move.

I was in Ukraine two weeks ago and visited Kyiv and saw what was happening on the ground. The EU's €90 billion loan was discussed. That covers Ukraine's needs for this year and next but they were asking for it to be front-loaded so that some of 2027's loan could be taken in 2026. What is the plan going forward and how can Ireland as a neutral country best contribute?

An Cathaoirleach: I will now call on our members of the European Parliament to give their concluding remarks along with our Leas-Chathaoirleach and myself.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Could I just ask that the direct questions I had asked around trade agreements be addressed because they are so pertinent?

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Chair, while we are having interruptions, can we have a correction to the record on the statement made about the GPO and Moore Street? It is just factually incorrect for anyone to say in this House that there is nothing happening with the GPO and Moore Street.

An Cathaoirleach: I know-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Over €500 million has been allocated to it. The Moore Street national monument has gone to tender. It is disrespectful to the House and to everyone who watches and follows the workings of this House to mislead.

An Cathaoirleach: As Senators will be aware, notwithstanding that this is a debate-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: They are falsehoods and should be corrected.

An Cathaoirleach: Senators have opportunity to interrupt a Senator while he or she is speaking and the Senator in possession can give way or may not give way. The Senator interrupting has 30 seconds during which to make his or her point. Once the Senator sits down, unfortunately-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I did not want to disrespect the other Senators who were speaking and I would not do that or them or to our visitors.

An Cathaoirleach: It is not about disrespect-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: It is incredibly disrespectful for any Member at any point in time-----

An Cathaoirleach: The Standing Orders are-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: ----- to put falsehoods on the record of the House.

I really do not want to prolong the debate here because I want to hear from our MEPs, but I would appreciate if the Cathaoirleach would take it up with the Senator and ask him to correct the record.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: Hear, hear.

An Cathaoirleach: I believe the Senator who might have made that statement is no longer in the House so I cannot direct anybody to-----

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I am sure the Cathaoirleach's office will be able to contact him.

An Cathaoirleach: It is up to the Senators. This is a debating Chamber. Senators have the right to interrupt a Senator at any time during a debate and ask the Senator to allow them to make a point while the debate is ongoing. The Senator in possession does not have to give way, does not have to take the question and does not have to answer the question but that is the rule of the House. It is up to Senators. I am not the judge of what people say. I am not the judge of the orders as agreed by the House. Senators have the right to interrupt during a debate and question a Senator on any statement he or she makes. I now bring back in the members of the European Parliament and thank them again for their remarks so far.

Mr. Barry Andrews: I thank everyone for staying for the debate and for their contributions. In response to Senator Higgins, trade happens without trade agreements. We trade with lots of countries without a trade agreement on the basis of WTO rules but trade agreements give us leverage and allow us to introduce chapters to trade agreements, called trade and sustainable development chapters, with which the Senator is very familiar. That leverage allows us to engage with the likes of Indonesia, Mexico, Chile, New Zealand, Australia or any other countries on things like International Labour Organization, ILO conventions and human rights. We can argue about how well that leverage is used but we have no leverage without a trade agreement. All we have is trade on a most-favoured nation WTO basis. The trade and sustainable development chapter relating to New Zealand is state of the art. I would say that New Zealand puts us under more pressure than Ireland puts it under. That is the standard. The Senator asked about what we do as MEPs. MEPs on the trade committee have this role but I also have it as chair of the development committee. We very often provide opinions on trade matters.

As regards corporate capture, the process that has led to this agenda on competitiveness is a recognition that the situation we have with China and the weaponisation of vulnerabilities in our supply chain dependencies have to be addressed. It is not just the question of having a massive trade deficit with China, which is something like €1 billion per day. It is also the danger of these supply chains being weaponised and it also means that we cannot rely on batteries. Electric vehicles are hollowing out European industry and it is naive of us not to address this. That is exactly what Mario Draghi did in his report. He made many recommendations about how we need to address all of these issues. Sadly, only about 15% of the recommendations in the Draghi report from two years ago have been implemented and most of those are in defence. I often hear people say that this is just for the German car industry but we need the German car industry to be successful. The reason the AfD is doing as well as it is across Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Berlin and other parts of Germany is not because of migration. It is because the German economy is not functioning. The German economy has experienced a catastrophe because of all of these things and it is in our towering interest that the German economy thrives as a central part of the EU.

The Senator also raised the question of aid and I am very grateful she did. We have an existential crisis in official development assistance. There are girls who are marrying younger

and girls who are not going to school. There is an increase in cholera. There are incredible impacts from the retreat from aid and it is something we have to attach to the Irish Government's priority around values. If values are a serious thing for the Irish Government in the context of this Presidency, it must have resources and budgetary implications, which means the EU budget around official development assistance.

I agree with Senator Clifford-Lee about food security, which is a priority. There are four Irish MEPs on the agriculture committee so we are extremely well represented at parliamentary level. The Senator mentioned costs such as those involving energy, land and compliance. We are pushing an agenda on energy and compliance around trying to bring down energy costs. That is all about taking away our dependence on fossil fuels but also the simplification of European rules.

Senator Cathal Byrne asked about a united Ireland, which is a priority for all of us. Some of us are having a debate this evening in Belfast on the implications of the European connection. There are lots of elements in the Good Friday Agreement and the Windsor Framework that are not properly implemented that would really advance the case and use the EU as a platform in that regard.

I thank Senator Craughwell for his kind remarks. Public procurement in the EU is extremely well-policed. If a company loses a tender because somebody has only one client, it will go to court. I do not believe the Department of Defence is able to walk a circle around public procurement rules at EU level. However, the Senator may have other information.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: It does not just apply to defence.

Mr. Barry Andrews: Before Senator McCarthy came in, I made reference to some of the recommendations and findings of a report I did in 2023 on Irish housing issues in a European context. We compared it to some other member states and specific towns. I looked at it with a Dublin focus and I can share the recommendations with the Senator. There are some really excellent ideas, with cost rental being the one that stands out. Once again, I thank the Cathaoirleach for taking this initiative and thank all of my colleagues for their very good engagement on this debate today.

Ms Regina Doherty: To follow on from what Mr. Andrews said on the MFF negotiations and international aid, we have seen how the actions of the US Government have nearly given permission to other European countries to do something similar. Mr. Andrews spoke about how values make up one of the pillars of our Presidency. It is in here where we have an opportunity to show what we really do value. We recognise how many children are still dying from malnutrition in Africa alone and it is on our watch. I understand that CAP, cohesion and defence spending are really important. Everything is really important but there is nothing as intrinsically important as making sure a child does not die from starvation in 2026. That part of the values we purport to hold as Irish citizens and humans has to be shown in the walk we walk, not just the talk we talk. It is true in these negotiations for the MFF budget.

In response to Senator Clifford-Lee, I could not be happier when I saw Shane Halpin, who grows 12 million cucumbers every year. He is a gorgeous young man and a real testament to the wonderful growing and initiatives in north County Dublin. The Senator is right that most

of the time, people do not think there are any farmers in Dublin. There are plenty of farmers in Dublin with plenty of voices when they have issues. I wish Shane Halpin well.

Notwithstanding the fact that we are not on an equal level in Europe with regard to the Irish language yet, there are lots of opportunities for Irish-speaking jobs in Europe. Anybody who wants to know about this just has to contact us and we will be happy to help them.

Senator Cathal Byrne is right. Enda did ensure that what would happen with a united Ireland if and when it ever happens - please God in my lifetime - we would obviously immediately join the 27 member states. To that end, we can see PEACEPLUS, which is the co-operation and a very large fund of €1 billion shared between the EU, the UK, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, will make sure we maintain the relationships, the peace and the growth and development of opportunity and co-operation with each other in the North of the island. That is really important.

I never knew anything about security and defence before I came to the Seanad but I have learned an awful lot in the past two years. The one thing I am really cognisant of is the fact that despite the fact we are increasing our defence spend, which is obvious, it is not at a rate that anybody thinks is really fruitful or is happy about. Regarding the reputation Ireland has because of our laggard approach over the past number of years, there are some quite strong feelings about it. I felt sorry for Kaja Kallas when she was here a couple of weeks ago because she had to field that defence from an Irish perspective when she has no part or act in it. The only defence I can make to colleagues when I am talking to them is that when I was first elected here in 2011, we could not have decided to spend money on defence and security as opposed to keeping the lights on, social insurance and the social welfare budget - all of the things that needed to be done at the time the IMF was here and was controlling our purse strings. I know that since then the country has been very lucky and is very wealthy, but there always seems to be something more pressing on which to spend our money. That is the only way I can balance that. We are not anywhere close to even being in the middle of the class.

We need to move our grades right up to the top.

In response to Senator McCarthy, something that really is a conversation within the European Union at present is homelessness. One of the recommendations from the report we did a number of months ago were around making sure that the housing first policy was enacted in every member state. Second and more importantly - it obviously has not been enacted yet - is to ensure that any child who is living in a rented accommodation cannot be evicted and, therefore, put into homelessness. It would be instructive if the latter was something that came as part of the simplification agenda that we will have after Christmas. As for something about even looking after the welfare of the children to make sure they do not go into poverty and into homelessness, even in my own party, I have considerable rows with people over the €20 billion child guarantee. I vote for it every time. I vote against my own party most of the time. I cannot understand, even from the logic of people who are pro-business and pro-European, those who do not see the value in looking after the future generations today to make sure that they will be the workers and the pension payers of the future. We need to rebalance that conversation. We need to look after our children to make sure that they never get themselves into vulnerable positions and some of the recommendations that we have in the housing report will do that.

Mr. Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I will touch on as many issues as I possibly can. In terms of trade agreements, they must be on the basis of human rights and international law. They must be on the basis of consumer rights, protecting consumer rights, workers' rights and environmental protections and we need trade agreements in order for the European Union to survive. We are in a very hostile environment with the United States of America openly waging a trade war and a tariff war against us. Agreements are important but they have to be on the basis of what I have said.

On homelessness, there is any amount of things we could do. We have mentioned what the Affordable Housing Act is hoping to do. I would like to see the MFF provide direct funding for housing first for approved housing bodies.

A lot of what we are doing, though, at European level, assumes that we have strong local government. The Minister, I am glad to say, last week accepted that we do not. I would like to see a much stronger mayoralty system in Ireland similar to what we have in Limerick. A directly-elected mayor for Dublin would be something that the Government should move on to facilitate having that civic leadership over a period, which is much more important than a ceremonial mayor because there is an assumption across the European member states when you are talking about housing that the mayors can drive the agenda and that is not the case in Ireland. That is a change that the Government should take on.

As for why we have issues, our tenant rights are not as strong as the mainstream norm in the European member states and when you have weaker tenant rights and greater powers of eviction, you have higher levels of homelessness. It is a bit like collective bargaining. We had the employment committee here in Dublin and they were a bit horrified at the relatively weak collective bargaining rights you have in Ireland, which leads to a higher proportion of workers in low pay. It used be the case that addiction drove people into homelessness. Now homelessness is driving people into addiction. It has gone completely the other way around. In fairness to my colleagues in the European Parliament, we are in different groups and we have different ideologies but we do not have the level of disagreement, I might say, in terms of what MEPs in other member states have when it comes to delivering on homelessness and housing our people. We all can fundamentally agree on that.

In terms of food security, I absolutely agree with what has been said.

Ó thaobh labhairt na Gaeilge de, déanaim mo dhícheall chomh minic agus is féidir liom. Le bheith féaráilte, tá an Feisire Ní Mhurchú chun cinn ó thaobh stádas agus úsáid na Gaeilge de i bParlaimint na hEorpa. Déanaim mo dhícheall chomh minic agus is féidir. Uaireanta, cuireann sé iontas ar mo chomhghleacaithe go bhfuil ár dteanga féin againn in Éirinn. Uaireanta, ceapann siad nach bhfuil i gceist leis an nGaeilge ach an bealach a n-úsáidtear an Béarla in Éirinn. Tá sé go maith gur féidir linn ár dteanga náisiúnta a úsáid.

On a united Ireland, that is a vibrant discussion. Mr. Andrews and I are on a panel this evening in Belfast on what that means for membership of the European Union. In my own case, in the S and D group, what I have facilitated is that the SDLP, even though the North of Ireland is no longer a member of the European Union because the UK has left, now has observer status within my own party group meetings. It is a small gesture but it is important for that facility for Northern politicians to be in and around the European Parliament. We are serious, though, about maximising the rights that Irish citizens have who have a birthright of EU

citizenship on the basis that they were born in the North of Ireland and the representation for them and at least observer status for Northern politicians is something we need to take seriously.

On security, to be honest, we need to have a very mature conversation on where Ireland stands in the world. We are no longer the poor man of Europe happy to be in the room. We were 50 years ago. It is not like that any more. We are the sixth highest contributor to the European Union. We are the second highest *per capita*. We are taken seriously and we need to maximise that seriousness and that leadership when it comes to big existential, difficult and uncomfortable questions on Ireland and our nationhood and the threats that are facing us to the east and to the west. That means that the exceptionalism that we used to wallow in to a degree will be challenged and we have to mature enough to have conversations within our own citizenry about those challenges. As ever, we are always proud to be European. Membership of the European Union has done more for our nationhood and for our citizens than probably any other decision that was made over the past 100 years.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Leader and then the Leas-Chathaoirleach to respond and conclude the debate, I thank the MEPs for being part of this and all our Senators for their questions and the engagement in the questions and answers session, which is an important part of that.

I welcome to the Gallery guests of Senator McDowell who are from Indiana. They are most welcome here today. All of them are from Indiana, from the business leaders. It is part of 140-strong delegation that is over here from Indiana as part of the education sector, including university leaders, business leaders, political leaders and my good friend, Representative Tim O'Brien, who was involved in establishing the Indiana-Ireland Trade Commission through legislation in Indiana. I will be with them tomorrow morning as part of their ongoing engagement. I actually was having a discussion about the trade commissions with our MEPs and how our MEPs, as Representative O'Brien can clearly see here, are our voice on the ground and our eyes and ears on what is happening at a European level in terms of business, politics, and global diplomacy and security. In many ways, that is the kind of link between Indiana, Ireland and from there on into the European Union. I thank them all for being here this afternoon.

I will now call on the Leader and then the Leas-Chathaoirleach.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I thank the three MEPs, Barry, Regina and Aodhán, for being here today.

First, I know we did it in this House in June but, considering Barry is here, on behalf of the House, I pass on our condolences to him and his family on David's passing. I am sure the summer was difficult but in time, I am sure Barry will reflect on his career and the service he gave to this country with great pride.

This is the third debate we have had with all MEPs across the country. This one was not as boisterous as some of the others but it has been as insightful. The role they play is so critical to the future of our country and sometimes, from a layperson, it is not often seen. These debates that we have in this House give the public the opportunity to understand the important work that the MEPs do. They themselves do it in their own media performances and getting

messages out but when this started in the last term, it showed an important interaction between this House and the work they do in Europe.

No doubt the past couple of months and the next couple of months have been a busy time for these MEPs, but a lot of the work they do is representing Ireland on a global scale, and particularly as we hold the presidency in promoting Ireland. A lot of that is unseen and underground and although they represent different political groups in Europe, their ambition is similar. It is for the betterment of this country and the people on this island.

I wish them well over the next couple of years. They are almost halfway through and elections come quicker than they think. They work extremely hard. I ask them to continue that work into the future because it is at a European level that most of the geopolitical changes we are seeing right across the world are managed.

The work the MEPs do at European level is critical for the future, not just for Ireland or the European Union but the whole country. I wish them well and thank them for being here today and respecting this Chamber. Two former Members are here, which is great, and a former Leader. I wish our MEPs and their families well because it is a difficult job and they are away a lot.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank MEPs Andrews, Doherty and Ó Ríordáin. Certainly, the insight they have shared with us is wonderful. It was an opportune time, especially as we are almost halfway through the European Presidency. They are our voice and advocates in Europe. Their voices very much shape the future of Ireland, and not only Ireland but our citizens. It is really important for them to share their insights of the different committees and workings and to answer the engagement with Senators. I thank all of the Senators who came here and asked their questions. There were an awful lot of thought-provoking questions and answers that arose.

When we think of Europe, we think of peace, reconciliation, economic development, housing and all of the different topics that were covered. There is so much importance between Ireland and Europe. It is important our MEPs are here on an annual basis for us in this House to strengthen our ties with Europe. I wish them the very best into the future and thank them for all they are doing on our behalf. I thank the Cathaoirleach and the Seanad team for having them here today because it is really important to get that message out there, and for the public to realise what is happening in Europe and the role our MEPs have to play. That is really important. I thank all involved and wish them all the best.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I conclude, it would be appropriate, given the themes we are talking about in our Presidency of the European Union, to quote a previous MEP, John Hume, who won the Nobel Peace Prize, who always talked about what he described as a single transferable speech:

Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace – respect for diversity.

I thank our MEPs for their contributions, their ongoing engagement with the Seanad and their work in Europe on behalf of the citizens of Ireland.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.53 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.41 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.53 p.m. and resumed at 5.41 p.m.

Childcare: Motion

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Tá fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta Foley, chuig an Seanad.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I move:

“That Seanad Éireann:

recognises that:

- early childhood is a time of great opportunity to shape a child’s development and build a secure foundation for their future;
- for children to achieve their full potential they need opportunities for care and education;
- the role of the early years’ educator is valuable, as they play an important part in supporting children's development, learning and care;

agrees that:

- many families across the country are paying high fees for childcare places;
- demand for childcare remains higher than available supply in certain parts of the country, particularly for younger children;
- in a very competitive labour market and with low levels of unemployment, recruitment and retention is a challenge for the childcare sector;

notes that:

- Budget 2026 allocated a record of nearly €1.5 billion for early learning and childcare, a 12 per cent increase on last year and up from €260 million a decade ago;
- Core Funding for 2026/27 is a record €482 million, a €90 million increase year-on year, and an 86 per cent increase since its 2022/23 launch;
- over 93 per cent of eligible providers participated in Core Funding for the last full programme year, reflecting sustained sector-wide support;
- a key condition of receiving the significant State funding that is available through Core Funding is that a partner service adheres to the fee management system, which includes a freeze on fees at 2021 levels and fee caps;
- backed by €135 million in capital funding under the National Development Plan, the State is directly building and acquiring childcare facilities for the first time, with a number of new locations due to be confirmed this year;

- Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022 – 2028 aims to support and strengthen the ongoing process of professionalisation for the workforce in early years and school age childcare;
- ringfenced pay increases of €90 million over two years (€45 million in 2025 and €45 million in 2026) are in place to support improved pay in the sector;

acknowledges that:

- average out of pocket costs to parents for childcare are down 36 per cent since 2022;
- already, many families pay less than the target maximum of €200 per month;
- the number of childcare services is rising, with a net increase of 255 services in 2025;
- enrolments increased by 25 per cent between 2022 and 2025, from 197,000 to 247,000 children;
- this growth occurred despite a 12 per cent decline in the under-five population over the same period;
- childcare closures have decreased by 25 per cent since 2022;
- the early years' workforce has expanded to over 42,000 staff, a 36 per cent increase since 2020;
- the latest Employment Regulation Order (ERO) delivered an average 10 per cent pay rise to over two-thirds of the workforce;

calls for:

- affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare to be available to all families across the country;
- the reduction of childcare fees further in order to progress towards the target maximum of €200 per month, per child within the lifetime of this Government;
- continued State investment in childcare capacity, including the building or purchasing of State-owned facilities in areas of unmet need, especially those in rural areas and those with high population density;
- the prioritisation of co-location for all new school building projects, with the primary school and childcare facility located on the one campus, in order to create a more integrated education environment, and to ease pressure on parents when it comes to multiple school drop-off points;
- the Government to continue to support recruitment and retention in the sector; and
- the implementation of the Continuous Professional Development actions in the Nurturing Skills Workforce Plan by 2028 to enhance professionalisation and attract and retain a high-quality early years and school age care workforce.”

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I second the motion.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): The debate will follow our normal pattern. Each Senator will have six minutes. We will begin with Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony who, as the proposer, has 16 minutes. As I understand it, she wishes to share time.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: That is correct. It will be divided into one slot of ten minutes and two slots of three minutes.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony will have ten minutes, while Senators Fiona O'Loughlin and Anne Rabbitte will have three minutes each. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta Foley. I am pleased to speak today on this important Fianna Fáil motion on childcare. At its heart, this motion recognises a simple truth. While some families continue to face challenges in accessing affordable, high-quality childcare, substantial progress has been made in recent years. We must continue to build on that progress. Fianna Fáil is committed to ensuring that Ireland is a good place to raise a family where every child is given an equal start in life and equal opportunities to succeed.

We know that early childhood is one of the most important stages in a person's life. It is a time of enormous opportunity when children develop the foundations that will support them throughout their education and into adulthood. To achieve their full potential, children need access to quality care and early education, and parents and guardians need the necessary support to give their children the best possible start. That is why the Government has made childcare one of its key priorities.

Since 2020, State investment in early learning and childcare has more than doubled, increasing from €638 million to €1.52 billion in 2026. This represents an unprecedented level of commitment to children, families and the childcare sector. The focus of that investment has been clear - reducing costs for families, improving accessibility, supporting providers, increasing capacity and improving pay and conditions for educators and school-aged childcare practitioners. Budget 2026 further demonstrated that commitment, allocating almost €1.5 billion to early learning and childcare. This is a 12% increase on the previous year and a remarkable contrast to the €260 million investment just one decade ago.

We should not underestimate the significance of these investments. They are delivering real benefits for families throughout the country. Through the Government's phase 2 reforms under Shaping the Future, we are pursuing long-term challenges to ensure childcare becomes even more affordable, accessible and sustainable. These reforms include a commitment to reduce parental fees to a maximum of €200 per month over the lifetime of this Government; strengthen supply-side funding for providers; improve pay and conditions for staff; and increase childcare capacity through both existing services and new State-led provision where gaps exist. Importantly, these reforms are informed by extensive consultation with parents, providers, educators and stakeholders. The objective is to develop a childcare system that works for everyone, including children, families, workers and providers.

The progress already achieved is substantial. This year alone, approximately 277,000 children will benefit from the national childcare scheme subsidies. More than 105,000 children

will access free preschool education through the early childhood care and education programme, ECCE, while up to 9,000 children with disabilities will receive support through the access and inclusion model. Additional investment is being targeted towards disadvantaged children through the Equal Start initiative.

One of the most significant developments has been the introduction and expansion of core funding. Core funding has grown by 86% since its introduction and currently stands at over €482 million. More than 4,600 childcare providers are participating in this scheme, representing over 93% of eligible services. In return for this support, providers agree to fee controls, including fee freezes and caps, thus providing certainty and protection for families facing the cost of childcare.

For parents, the results are tangible. Average childcare fees are now 36% lower than in 2022. For a typical full-day childcare place, the maximum weekly fee has fallen significantly, delivering savings of more than €600 annually for many families. One quarter of families are already paying less than the Government's target maximum fee of €200 per month. Targeted measures also have ensured that support reaches those who need it most. Low-income and lone-parent families have seen childcare costs fall dramatically as a proportion of income. Income thresholds have been increased to ensure more families qualify for higher subsidy levels. Additional supports for families with multiple children have reduced accessible income calculations and enabled more households to access greater assistance. These measures help to ease financial pressure at a time when many families continue to face broader cost-of-living challenges.

Of course, affordability is only one part of the challenge. Families must be able to access childcare places when and where they need them. The Government recognises the concern that exists with childcare capacity. However, the evidence shows positive momentum. The number of registered childcare services is increasing. Service closures are declining and enrolments increased by 25% between 2022 and 2025, despite the population of children under the age of five declining by 12% over the same period. There was also a net increase in providers in 2025 and we are seeing significant growth in the workforce. More than 42,000 people now work in the sector, representing growth of over one third since 2022. Qualification levels continue to rise, reflecting a more professional, skilled and supported workforce.

Through core funding and successive employment regulation orders, significant resources have been directed towards improving pay and conditions. The latest employment regulation order delivered an average pay increase of 10% for over two thirds of workers, while further increases are proposed for 2026. These improvements are essential because high-quality childcare depends on attracting and retaining highly skilled educators. The role of early years educators is invaluable. They support children in their learning, development and well-being during some of the most formative years of life. The Government must continue to support the professionalisation of the sector and the implementation of the objectives contained in the Nurturing Skills plan.

I acknowledge the important contribution of childminders across the country. Childminders provide an essential service for many families and communities. The new framework has been developed following consultation with the sector. It aims to strike the right balance by ensuring standards while recognising the unique nature of home-based childcare. Ongoing review and consultation will ensure these arrangements continue to work effectively.

Another important development is the State's direct involvement in childcare provision for the first time. Supported by €135 million in capital funding, the State is building and acquiring childcare facilities with the aim of creating up to 800 new places in 2026. This is a significant policy shift that will help to address gaps in capacity, particularly in areas where private provision alone has not been sufficient.

The first site in Shanganagh Castle in Dublin has already been secured and is expected to open later this year.

This motion is balanced and realistic. It recognises that many families still face significant childcare costs but it also acknowledges that demand remains greater than supply in some parts of the country, particularly for younger children. It accepts that recruitment and retention remain challenges in a highly competitive labour market. It recognises, importantly, the substantial progress that has been made and the clear direction of travel.

The motion calls for affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare for all families; further reductions in childcare fees in budget 2027; continued investment in childcare capacity, including State-owned facilities, where there is unmet need; greater co-location of childcare facilities with new schools; and continued support for recruitment, retention and professional development in the workforce.

Beyond the figures, funding allocation and policy reforms, we should remind ourselves why this matters so much. Childcare is not simply a service; it is an investment in our children, our families, our communities, our economy and our future. When families can access affordable, high-quality childcare, parents have greater opportunities to participate in the workforce, if they so choose, to pursue education, if they so choose, and to build financial security for their families.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): I welcome to the Public Gallery the members of the European Committee of the Regions. We hope they have been enjoying their visit to Leinster House. This group is an advisory body to the EU and they are guests of the Department of housing. They have joined us for a debate on a motion relating to childcare. The Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley, has also joined us for the debate.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I also welcome the delegation. I took the opportunity in the House yesterday to mention the important work the Committee of the Regions does and the fact it had the bureau in Mullingar yesterday. I also congratulated the leader of the Irish delegation, Gillian Coughlan, on being the incoming leader of the Renew group. It is the first time an Irish councillor has taken this position. It is great to see Gillian. I hope all our guests have an excellent evening and a really good trip.

I thank the Minister for being here. It gives me great pride to second the motion. There was a myriad of topics we, as a Fianna Fáil group, could have taken for our first Private Members' business after recess but we agreed collectively this was one of the main topics that impacted so many people in the areas we live in. Weekly, if not daily, we have people contacting us, particularly in developing areas, on childcare and its importance. The motion refers to affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare and to the need to support workers

in the childcare system. We really depend on them. The motion is strong on continued professional development for them. For childcare to work, it has to work for everybody. It has to work for the families, for the proprietors and operators of the physical facilities and for those working in the system. If we did not have proper childcare, how would many people who work in this building come here? Think of all the wonderful people who help organise our days as Members of the House. It is really important.

The Minister has done a lot of work and a lot of investment has gone in. We are on a pathway to reducing the cost but having the physical places is every bit as important, as is supporting childminders in the home. I was very struck recently at a meeting at quite a large employment facility in Mayo, where 300 people worked, that it was the first issue the employers brought up with us as a delegation. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, was there. They faced a challenge as employers in getting women to come back into the workforce after their maternity leave. There was a real problem in accessing childcare. We need to look at it from the employers' point of view too. They want to support those who need to avail of it.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The Minister is very welcome to the House. I am glad to make an opening contribution and I want to acknowledge that State investment in early learning and childcare has more than doubled, with approximately €1.5 billion in 2026. Budget 2026 provided €1.48 billion for early learning and childcare, supporting the national childcare scheme, ECCE, the access and inclusion model and core funding.

Childcare goes beyond crèche- or centre-based childcare provisions. I agree with Senator O'Loughlin that it is also the after-schools and childminders. The number of childminders has dwindled over the years. I do not wish to fly a kite in the House this evening but we need to double the tax incentive for childminders at home. We give them a tax incentive of €14,000 but we need to look way beyond that to get more childminders into provision of services. People have different working hours. There are flexible working hours and people on shift duties. The childminder provides a home from home and a flexible experience. Many of the childcare centres operate Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. or 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., but parents, including nurses and gardaí, need a lot of flexibility.

The Minister's portfolio includes disability as well. Could we support the centres in expanding the access and inclusion model, AIM? It has been phenomenal in its role of getting children accustomed to going to crèche and preparing them for the school experience. At the other end of it in after-schools, could we encourage providers to open their doors more so mums or dads might not have to choose to finish at 3 p.m. when a child finishes? If there was that flexibility, a parent could do the normal working day. The Minister is doing phenomenal work in the Department. This is a brief she takes very seriously. She works closely with the sector on it. We need to look beyond centre-based childcare, focus on childminders and think about how we could expand AIM.

Senator Joe Conway: Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an Aire agus í anseo don díospóireacht seo. I am delighted to make my small contribution to this debate, which is timely and valuable. Notwithstanding the fact we have a beautiful country and have so many assets in our beauty and in our resources, we sometimes overlook the fact that probably one of the greatest resources we have - this will come as no surprise to anyone, particularly those of us who served in

education - is our young people, our children. They tangibly and unquestionably are the future, the well-being and the welfare of our country.

When we talk about childcare, we are talking about a vast number of young people who are being looked after by the childcare industry, which does invaluable work on behalf of parents or guardians who are out at work or unable to look after children. I want to sing a little tune for the, according to 2022 CSO figures, roughly 100,000 totally unpaid child carers. Mostly, these are grandparents who look after children without any financial reward or tax consideration. Many of them would completely eschew the idea of payment for their work. It is a reciprocal and symbiotic thing. These people get a huge amount back through being closer to their grandchildren as they grow from babyhood to toddler stages.

These grandparents absolutely rejoice in seeing all those stages. We have an expression that "Eaten bread is soon forgotten" but in the case of the input of grandparents or those unpaid carers, it is not so much eaten bread that is soon forgotten but eaten bread that is never remembered at all. I do not think I have ever heard any of us politicians publicly stand up and validate the work that is done. Maybe I have missed it but I do not believe I have ever heard a Minister, the Taoiseach or the Tánaiste celebrate and validate in some public way the work that these people do. It should be not just once but should be done regularly. If we extrapolate from the CSO figures, on a replacement value alone it probably would cost €5 billion to €6 billion. On the overheads measurement, it would be in the order of getting closer to €20 billion. It is phenomenal money that we are getting free of charge. It is done out of love and care. We should have some way of endorsing and validating the work done by these lovely people - grandparents in the main - and I ask the Minister to give serious thought to it with her Cabinet colleagues and maybe devise some scheme or some little word of recognition for those people who give so much to the State out of love.

Senator Gareth Scahill: The Minister is very welcome here this evening. I welcome the opportunity to speak on childcare. I commend my Government colleagues on bringing this motion to the House today because we have to be fair about where we are right now. There has been real progress. There has been record investment. The national childcare scheme has reduced costs for families. Average out-of-pocket childcare costs are down 36% since 2022. Budget 2026 provided almost €1.5 billion for early learning and childcare while core funding for 2026-27 has increased to a record €482 million. That is progress and we should acknowledge it but we also must acknowledge that we are not there yet. The programme for Government has committed us to progressively reducing the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child. We need to deliver on that commitment.

I wish to particularly acknowledge my colleague, Deputy Emer Currie, who has done a huge amount of work on childcare. Deputy Currie has consistently raised affordability but importantly, she has also focused on the other side of the problem, which is availability. We can increase subsidies and reduce costs but a subsidy is not much good to a parent if they cannot find a childcare place in the first place. That is still the reality for too many families. This motion recognises that demand remains higher than supply in certain parts of the country, particularly for younger children. We also have a challenge around staffing. Again, there has been progress there. The early years workforce has grown to more than 42,000 people. The employment regulation order delivered an average pay increase of 10% to more than two thirds of that workforce.

However, there is one figure from the Minister, Deputy Foley, that stood out to me. In the context of budget 2026, the Minister stated that improving recruitment and retention could help unlock approximately 17,000 existing childcare places that cannot currently be filled because of staff shortages. That is a remarkable figure. It tells us that this is not simply about building more childcare facilities. In some cases, the capacity is already there, but we do not have the people to staff it. At the same time, demand continues to grow. More than 286,000 children are expected to benefit from the national childcare scheme this year, which is approximately 35,000 more than last year. Now, we are moving into another important phase. The Government has committed €135 million to directly build and acquire childcare facilities for the first time. The initial State-led facilities are intended to provide more than 100 places each with thousands of additional places planned over the coming years. The motion before us recognises this major policy change, but it raises a question. Do we have a workforce plan capable of producing, and more importantly, retaining enough qualified early years educators to staff all these additional places?

An issue that I have repeatedly raised regarding plans in this House is that we cannot plan buildings today and then start thinking about the staff skills needed tomorrow. The workforce plan must go together with the capital plan. We have training routes available. The programme for Government commits us to removing barriers to training and introducing an earn-and-learn apprenticeship model where people can work in childcare while gaining qualifications and progressing their career. I would like to see more movement on that. If we are serious about creating all these additional childcare places, we need to make sure that we are training enough people, attracting them into the sector and giving them a reason to stay. When this motion references State investment in areas of unmet need, particularly in rural areas, the Minister will not be surprised about me mentioning Boyle, County Roscommon. Multiple representatives have made for the Boyle Community Childcare Committee and the work that they have done in the past. They did not simply say there was a problem; they did the work. They commissioned a detailed childcare needs analysis. They gathered the evidence that clearly demonstrated the shortage of childcare in Boyle and the surrounding area. In a break from norm, I acknowledge Deputy Claire Kerrane, who has consistently advocated for additional childcare provision in Boyle. This also has been a real cross-party effort locally. I recognise Deputy Martin Daly, the Minister of State, Deputy Frankie Feighan and Councillors Liam Callaghan and Sean Moylan, who have all highlighted the need and worked to move this project forward.

There is an important point here. We can all regularly call publicly for Government intervention. That is part of politics, and those calls are important. Ultimately, if we want to see something delivered, we must bring that immediate need directly into the Government, put the evidence on the table and make sure that the people making the decisions understand the urgency of it. That is why I particularly wish to acknowledge the Minister, Deputy Chambers. He came to Boyle. He met Deputy Daly and me. We sat in the family resource centre in Boyle. We listened to the community representatives - the people involved - and heard directly about the difficulties that families are facing. The case for Boyle has been raised by us all at the highest level in Government. I acknowledge the Taoiseach and Tánaiste for listening and understanding why this is so important for Boyle and north Roscommon. I acknowledge the Minister for her engagement on this particular issue. Last week when the Dáil returned, Deputy Kerrane raised the issue of Boyle with the Minister. The Minister's response indicated that an

announcement on locations for the State-led childcare facility is due shortly. I am certainly not going to pre-empt any announcement on that. Boyle has made the case. The evidence is there. The need is there. The community has done the work. The Government now has the mechanism to respond to that. For the first time, the State is directly building and acquiring childcare facilities in areas where the existing system has not been able to meet demand.

I also strongly support the point of colocation childcare, which is mentioned in this motion. Councillor Caroline Brady in Lucan recently raised this with me and highlighted the issue regarding Aderrig in Adamstown near Lucan. Senator Curley is there as well. We sit on the education committee. If we are building these schools, colocation is a very important factor. I have run out of time. I met a nurse in Roscommon on Monday. The nurse was doing a very important job in a busy healthcare facility. When she saw me coming through the door, she mentioned the lack of childcare facilities and the decision that she has to make in the next three months of whether to continue in her important and necessary role or to look after her kids because of the lack of that facility. I will leave the Minister with that thought.

Senator Pauline Tully: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion.

Childcare is extremely important. Early years and school-aged childcare are fundamental to a child's development, to family well-being and to the social and economic life of our society. It needs to be a service that is accessible, affordable, sustainable and of the highest quality. There are a number of different points that deal with different issues here. I will look at affordability first. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to reduce the cost of childcare to €200 a month. I think Sinn Féin was the first party to bring forward this proposal prior to the most recent election. This was also committed to by the Government parties, which is very welcome, but we have not got to that point yet and we need to. I recognise that some families are only paying that or less but many families are paying a lot more.

It can be like a second mortgage for them, so that needs to be addressed first.

Affordability is one thing, but availability is another. If you cannot avail of a place, the amount of money does not matter. We have up to 46,000 children under the age of three waiting for a place. I have had a mother in tears on the phone to my office because she could not get a childcare place for her child and could not return to work. I was talking to another woman who was a special needs teacher who, when her last child was born, ended up giving up her job for three years. Her child was three before she could access a childcare place and she is now trying to return to work, but there are issues there because she is at a financial loss; she has been out of work for a few years. You also lose experience and gaining seniority in your workplace. Again, it is mostly women this affects. I am not saying it is all women, but it is mostly women.

The main issue affecting availability is recruitment and retention. We need to see much better pay for our early years educators because many of them are highly qualified with level 7 or 8 degrees, yet they are getting barely above the minimum wage. I welcome the increase announced in the minimum rates of pay for educators. However, it is not good enough that some employers have delayed this for months. We need to see an improvement in and a more stable level of pay because people who are working in this sector are leaving it to go into jobs as SNAs or teachers because of better pay and better conditions, as well as more job security

which we all need in this day and age with the cost of living and difficulties in acquiring a mortgage to obtain housing.

We also need to see better conditions for our early school educators. Continuous professional development, CPD, is so important. Many of our educators have to access that CPD in their own time or at their own cost. I recognise the provisions included within core funding but many providers do not recognise that as such and use it for general administration time, so staff do not see it. It should not be an additional or optional element of the system. I really think it benefits our children if our staff within that sector receive continuous professional development on an ongoing basis, which leads to a much better quality service for all our children.

I would also love to get an update on the progress of the development of the State-led services. It says in the motion that "the State is directly building and acquiring childcare facilities for the first time", which I welcome. It was also announced in last year's budget, so I would like to know where those facilities are. How many facilities have been built or acquired, and when will they be operational? How many children will be facilitated in those facilities?

The motion also mentions "the prioritisation of co-location for all new school building projects, with the primary school and childcare facility located on the one campus". I think that makes absolute sense and would lead to better communication and co-operation between the two sectors, which is not happening at the moment. Again, it is something we need to be looking at. In fact, there needs to be a plan for the future of childcare. I met with Early Childhood Ireland earlier today and there is a quote on the back of their literature which says, "If you want to understand the future of a country, do not start in its universities. Start in its kindergartens, creches and nurseries." That is very important. Our education needs to start there and it needs to be of quality and properly supported.

I would really like to see a completely State-led service, similar to our primary school system where the State owns the buildings, pays the educators and ensures there is a quality service provided to our children. If our children were going into primary school and teachers were leaving every second week because they were moving to a different sector due to pay and conditions, there would be uproar. We need the same situation within our early education sector so that our children receive the education on a continuous basis from someone they are familiar with.

After-school care is also very important, but the ratio for after-school care is 1:12. We have an increased number of children with additional needs. They are maybe coming from a special class in a primary school where it is a ratio of one teacher and two SNAs to six children. They are then expected to go into a setting where there is only one person to 12 children. I know that when the Minister visited the community crèche in my locality last year, this was raised with her at the time. There was a parent there who had twins who were in the local school in a special class and she needed after-school care. The facility was reluctant to take the twins, not because it did not want to help, but because it felt it could not keep them safe with that ratio. I have spoken to other providers who feel the exact same. This is an issue that needs to be addressed. We have AIMs but we do not have anything in the after-school facilities.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Before I call the Minister to speak, I take this opportunity to welcome to the Chamber the UCD political science undergraduates from Spain

and South Africa, who are guests of Deputy James O'Connor this evening. They are very welcome. They have joined us for an important debate on a motion on childcare, and the Minister for children is about to speak.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I join in welcoming Deputy O'Connor's guests. I hope they find the debate beneficial in what we are seeking to find a pathway forward through, which is very important. It is about putting children at the centre of the country and the services we provide for them.

I sincerely welcome the opportunity to speak with the House today on this very important motion. I thank my Fianna Fáil colleagues for putting forward this motion. I also thank everybody here in the Chamber who has contributed, of all persuasions and none, because this is something we share. We share a positivity and an absolute determination to deliver to the very best of our ability for young people. I have always said that if we can get it right for children, then we ultimately get it right for society. I appreciate that shared objective here in the House.

The motion, as outlined, reflects a clear ambition I believe is shared among us all, which is that every child should have the opportunity to access high-quality early learning and childcare, and that every family should be able to afford those services. In addition, those who work in the sector should be valued and supported in the vital role they play in children's lives.

The motion also recognises a very important reality. While there remain significant challenges across the sector, Ireland has made substantial progress in recent years. The debate we are having today is no longer about whether the State should play a major role in supporting early learning and childcare. That question has been answered very clearly and resolutely. However, the challenge now is how we continue to build, strengthen and improve the system that has emerged through unprecedented investment and reform in recent years.

The foundation for that programme has been sustained Government investment. In recent years, public investment in early learning and childcare has increased to levels that would have been unimaginable just a decade ago. Annual expenditure now exceeds €1.5 billion, reflecting a clear commitment by the Government to transform the sector and recognise early learning and childcare as an essential public service. This investment has been driven by a clear understanding of the benefits for every individual child, their parents and guardians, our society and our economy. High-quality early learning and childcare supports a child's development, assists parents to participate in employment and education, contributes to social inclusion and strengthens the economic and social fabric of communities throughout the country. This has all been articulated already by the speakers at this point. Importantly, this investment has not been confined to any single programme or initiative. Rather, it has supported a strategic and integrated programme of reform which is improving affordability, accessibility, inclusion, quality and sustainability across the entire sector.

The phase 1 report on *Shaping the Future: The Early Years Action Plan* sets out measures to achieve key programme for Government commitments on the affordability, quality and accessibility of early learning and care and school-age childcare. Two of the main objectives of *Shaping the Future* are to reduce parental fees to a maximum of €200 per month over the lifetime of this Government and to increase the supply of places. This would strengthen funding to support services' sustainability and staff wages, while also introducing State-led

facilities to complement other measures to increase capacity. The action plan appoints a phased approach that enables action to be taken in 2026 while allowing adequate time for a broad public consultation and analysis on longer-term actions. The consultation process has been taking place throughout this year and will inform phase 2 of Shaping the Future. Phase 2 will be published this year and will set out actions to be undertaken from 2027 through to 2029.

We have an action plan, and the final part of the consultation for that plan took place today. It was a summit gathering, if you like, of parents, providers, educators and children.

We invited them to come to a town-hall type meeting to discuss their vision and their aspirations for the future. That is on the back of the previous consultations that have taken place throughout the year. More than 11,700 parents engaged in a public consultation. There was engagement with children, who, through art form, gave their thoughts and their views on the future of education. There was engagement with the providers. It has been a long-standing engagement for a year and that will inform the second and final phase of Shaping the Future.

A key pillar of Government policy has been to improve affordability and access for families through the national childcare scheme and the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme. Through a series of enhancements, substantial reductions in out-of-pocket costs have been delivered for many families. Parents and guardians of 277,000 children throughout the country are benefiting from increased national childcare scheme subsidies in 2026. The scheme continues to support participation in employment, education and training while helping families manage the cost-of-living pressures that many households have experienced in recent years. That point about the importance of ensuring there are opportunities to support people who need or wish to go out to work has been made by all of the Senators here.

These improvements matter because early learning and childcare costs have a direct impact on family decisions. They influence, as we said, whether parents, in particular, as has been referenced, mothers, can return to or remain in work, whether they must reduce, maintain or increase working hours and whether they can pursue education and training opportunities. By reducing childcare costs, we are not only supporting families financially but also creating opportunities that strengthen participation in society and the economy, as Senator O'Loughlin referenced quite significantly.

Alongside the national childcare scheme, the ECCE programme continues to provide universal access to high-quality preschool education. This year, over 105,000 children will benefit from two years of the ECCE programme participation, giving them opportunities to develop key social, emotional and learning skills through a critical stage of their development. The programme is one of the most successful social investments made by the State, ensuring that all children, regardless of their background, have access to high-quality early learning experiences before beginning primary school.

While considerable progress has been made through these programmes, the Government recognises that affordability remains an important issue for many families. That is why we remain committed to continuing the work of reducing costs and supporting participation while maintaining the sustainability and quality of services.

Alongside universal supports, the Government is also committed to ensuring that children who face disadvantage receive the support necessary to access and benefit from early learning and childcare opportunities. The award-winning access and inclusion model, AIM, is

supporting up to 9,000 children with a disability to access the ECCE programme. AIM has now expanded beyond the ECCE programme, where ECCE children are benefiting from AIM support outside the ECCE programme hours, both in term and out.

The equal start model represents another important development in this regard. At its core, equal start reflects a commitment to ensuring that the benefits of early learning and childcare are available to all children, irrespective of background or circumstance. Equal start seeks to address those challenges that may be faced by families through targeted support and intervention, helping services to respond more effectively to disadvantage and ensuring that children who stand to benefit most from participation are supported to do so. In doing so, the equal start model supports not only inclusion but also equality of opportunity. It reflects a belief that every child deserves the chance to thrive and that early intervention can play a transformative role in children's lives.

Central to the success of the Government's reform programme has been the introduction of core funding. Core funding represents one of the most significant changes ever made to the funding model for the sector. Through this scheme, the State is providing direct and sustained support to providers in a way that strengthens their sustainability, supports affordability for families through fee management measures, and supports quality services through better terms, conditions and professional development for staff. Core funding has grown by 86% since its introduction to over €482 million in its fifth year and latest data shows over 4,600 providers, or more than 91%, are now participating in this fifth year of the scheme. For many providers, core funding has brought greater certainty and stability, enabling them to continue delivering services while responding to increasing costs and growing demand. It has also strengthened the partnership between the State and providers in delivering public policy objectives. The importance of core funding extends beyond financial sustainability. It has established the platform upon which the interconnected reforms of affordability, quality and workforce development are delivered.

No discussion of the future of the sector would be complete without recognising the absolute importance of the workforce. The quality of children's experiences within early learning and childcare settings is fundamentally linked to the dedication, professionalism and expertise of the excellent staff who work with them in settings right across the country. Early years educators, managers, school-age childcare practitioners, providers and childminders make an extraordinary contribution to the lives, and to the development and well-being of our children. Historically, the contribution made by the workforce was not always adequately recognised. The Government has, therefore, placed a significant emphasis on workplace development and professionalisation. Through the nurturing skills workforce plan and a range of workforce supports, significant progress has been made in strengthening qualifications, professional development opportunities and career pathways across the sector.

Moreover, the independent joint labour committee is now proposing increases of over 6% to the minimum rates of all roles in the sector. This is building on substantial progress made in pay through three consecutive employment regulation orders, EROs, in the last four years negotiated by the committee - all supported by the Government's core funding scheme. In fact, €45 million was made available this year specifically for the ERO and a further €45 million the previous year, comprising €90 million specifically made available to boost supports for the workforce. If these new rates of pay as outlined are commenced, the minimum hourly rate of

pay for an early years educator will have increased from €10.50 to €16, with similar increases across other roles in the sector, including lead educators, deputy managers and managers.

The workforce remains central to every ambition we hold for the future of early learning and childcare. If we are to improve quality, increase capacity and expand access, we must continue to attract and retain talented professionals within the sector. I am committed to ensuring that we do that and support it going forward.

The motion also references one of the most significant challenges facing the sector, namely, capacity. While many families are successfully accessing services, there remain areas where demand exceeds supply and where additional places are required. That has been referenced here by the House. Population growth, demographic change and housing development have increased demand in many communities, thereby creating pressures that require careful planning and sustained investment. As new communities are being developed and as new schools and public facilities are planned, it is important that early learning and childcare services are considered from the outset. Families benefit when services are planned in an integrated way and when early learning and childcare forms part of the essential infrastructure of growing communities. The Government is committed to working across Departments and agencies to ensure that capacity expansion remains a central element of future policy development.

An important part of that future capacity will be delivered through childminders. Childminders have always played a valuable role in supporting families and providing flexible forms of early learning and childcare in communities throughout Ireland. Recognising this important contribution, the Government has undertaken significant work to support the development of the childminding sector. The national action plan for childminding is helping to bring greater recognition and support to childminders while creating pathways for participation in regulatory and support structures.

Notwithstanding the progress that has been made in all of the areas outlined, it is important to acknowledge, as always, that challenges remain. Affordability remains a concern for many families despite the improvements delivered through the recent subsidy increases. Workforce recruitment and retention continue to present difficulties for many services and capacity constraints remain evident in some communities. The Government neither underestimates these challenges nor wishes to suggest that there are simple solutions to complex issues. However, it is equally important that we recognise the progress achieved and the strong foundations that have been established. We now have a level of investment that would have been considered impossible only a few years ago. We have a long-term strategic framework through *Shaping the Future*, *First 5* and *Nurturing Skills*. We have strengthened supports for families through the ECCE programme and the national childcare scheme, targeted disadvantage and inclusion through AIM and equal start, enhanced sustainability and workforce development through core funding and established a clear pathway for further development of capacity and the regulation of childminding. The task before us now is to build upon these achievements.

I, therefore, welcome the motion before the House. It recognises the progress that has been achieved, acknowledges the challenges and opportunities that remain and sets out a constructive direction for future reform and I am pleased to support its objectives. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues across Government and across this House to

strengthen early learning and childcare for children and families throughout Ireland. I am absolutely committed to prioritising further investment through the 2027 Estimates for that purpose.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Dee Ryan): Before we move to our next Seanadóir, I welcome the guests of Senator Joanne Collins to the Chamber: Karen Ronan, CEO of Galway Chamber; Cáit Noone, president of Galway Chamber; and Marilyn Gaughan Reddan of the board of the Chambers Ireland. They are very welcome to this important debate on childcare. I am sure they appreciate the promise the Minister was just making.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I am sharing time with Senator Nessa Cosgrove. I will let my colleague go first.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I thank the Fianna Fáil Senators for bringing the motion forward. I know how committed the Minister is to this area and to education in general. We have to welcome all of the positive developments we have seen in the early years sector but we must not exaggerate the positives at the expense of reality. On the ground, providers, educators and parents are still facing problems with accessibility, affordability and sustainability. As outlined in the motion and as everyone has brought up here today, early childhood provides an opportunity to shape and develop young minds and to support young families through the provision of excellent early years education. To achieve its potential, we need the early years and school-age care sector to be located in the communities in which children are living so that parents are not driving huge distances each day, adding to expensive commutes. That is what we are trying to address here. Care needs to be accessible.

While addressing the cost to parents is needed, the answer is not to just keep increasing NCS subsidies to parents. While I admit that this reduces fees, it is also puts more and more of the State's money into the pockets of chains owned by multinational multimillion and multibillion euro corporations. I have to raise this issue because, unfortunately, there is money to be made in childcare. Care needs to be affordable but the outsourcing of some of the State's responsibility to the private sector has delivered a sector that could be on the brink of collapse. I know that is not what the Minister intends with the work she is putting in. While small independent providers, both community and private, struggle to make ends meet, vast corporate chains are making vast profits.

The sector still struggles to attract educators and will continue to do so unless their qualifications and potential are recognised. While the recent employment regulation order agreement, which will see minimum rates of pay for graduate centre managers rise to €21.55, is to be welcomed, it is still a long way off the €29.38 per hour paid to newly qualified primary school teachers. Early Childhood Ireland has been calling for pay parity between national school teachers and graduate early years educators for over a year. It is time for the Government to put a date on pay parity for educators. It is the only way to attract graduates into a workforce that has historically suffered from exploitation.

Care needs to be sustainable. Without stabilising the workforce, sustainability and accessibility will continue to be problems for families as small community-based providers,

both private and non-profit, are forced to close their doors. As a rural representative, I know this hits rural communities particularly hard. This is what I want to bring up. City and county childcare committees have played a crucial role in ensuring sustainability in the sector and are responsible for delivering Government policy. I have to ask the question: why are the CEOs of large corporate chains also sitting on the boards of certain childcare committees? That is not happening in my area. I want to make that very clear. However, they also sit on joint labour committee. Why should the CEOs of multimillion euro businesses owned by multimillion euro corporate funds be deciding the rates that low-paid early years educators are paid? We have to question this. I have to call it out. Who is delivering this Government policy and who is directing it? There is a clear conflict of interest at play in certain childcare committees in other parts of the country. The relevant authorities, including the Charities Regulator, need to examine this issue and the question of how long people can stay on boards. We need a trusted, functioning and State-delivered early years education sector. Like other branches of our education system, it should provide an excellent service that families can rely on. I know the Minister has looked into this but I urge her to look again. There is an influx of corporations within this sector. The governance of childcare committees should be looked at.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I thank the Fianna Fáil Senators for using their Private Members' time to bring forward this important motion. The motion recognises the distance we have come since 2020 under the Minister's predecessor, my colleague Deputy Roderic O'Gorman who did incredible work. We want to see that same trajectory continue. I recognise the comments made by my colleague here. We have gone some distance towards affordability, professional development and retention of staff but, as the Minister knows, significant challenges remain, particularly in a country that is at full employment, where many graduates are pulled into different areas of employment.

While core funding was welcomed at the time, it did not work for all providers. I refer to some of the small providers in particular. It is important that be recognised. How the Minister moves forward with the next phase of the plan will be really important. We also recognise the importance of the foundations for education and lifelong learning for children and young people and for their well-being. This is the most vital sector. Pay parity is the critical issue that Early Childhood Ireland has raised with us as it seeks public sector pay and conditions in line with teachers. That would mark a significant turning point in retention. The graduate premium should be doubled to allow providers to retain qualified staff. There has not been an increase there. That is another important issue.

I will also raise with the Minister the issue of funding for AIM support. This is vital for all settings. It currently stands at €18 per hour, €15 of which goes on pay, leaving €3 to cover PAYE and holidays. It therefore unfortunately does not cover the full cost. That needs be addressed as a matter of urgency.

My wife, Jennie, works in the sector. I will give a shout-out to First Steps Montessori in Kilkenny and to Leanne and all of the staff there. Jennie loves her work. She loves working with the children. Every year, a new intake comes in and she comes home so excited to speak about the children who are coming into her care. She is then sad at the end of the year when they are finishing up. I have been on the boards of voluntary community-based providers of different types in Kilkenny over the past 20 years. I have seen the changes. I have seen the lows and I have seen the hope that has come into the sector in recent years. I hope the Minister

can continue on this trajectory for the staff, the people who work in early childhood education, and also for the children, because it is the most vital start they will have in life.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I thank the Fianna Fáil Senators for bringing forward this topic. Like many others, we are navigating another start of term and all of the paperwork that goes with that. There is nothing more important than childcare, what it does and the foundation it provides for our children.

I want to highlight some of the choices we still have and the potential new models we could use. The Minister has said that the question is no longer whether the State should be playing a major role in supporting early learning and childcare but how it should do so. Within the motion, there are really concrete measures that look for that more active State involvement. One of the calls relates to co-location with our educational infrastructure, including our primary school infrastructure, and the building or purchasing of State-owned facilities. Publicly delivered and developed childcare where it is needed, particularly in areas of high-density and rural areas, is part of it. That is the kind of thing we mean when we talk about the role of the State in delivering the foundations for our children through early years education, which is also absolutely crucial social infrastructure.

While I am sure the Minister is well aware of them, I will highlight and draw the Minister's attention to some of the proposals put forward by SIPTU in its roadmap. I hosted a SIPTU event on its roadmap for early years affordability before the summer. As the Minister will be aware, it has put forward proposals that aim to address the fact that, even with the schemes we have, which are very welcome, there can be a little bit of a gap. Things can fall between the cracks. An administrative burden can also fall on families and facilities in managing these things. Like many of us, I have navigated this system myself, determining which hours fall under the ECCE scheme, which fall under the different other programmes, the number of hours for which the child is enrolled and at which times of the day. The State is effectively giving a massive subsidy to make childcare possible.

What SIPTU has put forward is the idea that it may take a different form. If we look at the actual breakdown of expenditure on provision of childcare, 69% is employee compensation. Rather than the plethora of schemes and subsidies that individual families have to navigate their access to and facilities, SIPTU put forward that we could look to the State taking on that part of the piece. SIPTU estimates that if the State was delivering and managing the employment payments in crèches, that would bring crèche fees down to €255 per week. We would be within reach of the goal of €200 that we have all heard about, which is referenced in the motion. While that would be an increase in what the State is currently spending, it would not necessarily be an insurmountable increase. They point to this scheme as an idea of almost both simplifying and delivering affordability, with affordability as the first goal or benefit, but with the secondary benefit of supporting the other agenda the Minister spoke out in terms of professionalisation and supporting consistency of employment and opportunities for progress in the sector.

If the State were to be effectively the payroll manager, it would move to a point in terms of retention, which we know is a massive issue. Anybody knows about the turnover of staff that is happening in many crèches, which is so difficult and often kind of distressing because the relationships that are formed are so fundamental with caregivers. It is kind of a 1:2 or 1:3

relationship at that point. We need to have a situation where anybody working in the childcare sector knows that they are going to be paid properly by the State, that there will be progression opportunities, that they will be paid the same whether they are working in an area of disadvantage or working in an area of comparative advantage and that there will be an equality of payment and a core payment of some sort. I appreciate the important work of the EROs and the attempts to raise the bar and raise the standards, but this may be an opportunity to have the State lead on that. I am just putting that out there. It is SIPTU's roadmap. It is an interesting proposal. It is great that we have all come to certain collective views in relation to the importance of a role for the State, the importance of this being an area of public investment, the importance of this idea being a foundation and the idea of affordability and decent pay and conditions being crucial to the delivery of that. SIPTU's model is something that contributes to those shared goals and should be considered. I urge the Minister to take it on board.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senators Comyn and Ryan are sharing time. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Alison Comyn: I thank the Minister for coming to address what is one of the most vital and urgent issues we have. I welcome the motion and support it wholeheartedly. As one of my colleagues said, childcare is not simply a service we provide to parents; it is what allows people to work. It allows people to build careers and gives children a strong start in life to flourish.

For generations of women in particular, it has often determined whether they could stay in the workplace. I know that because I was one of those women. When my two children were very small, I had to make a conscious decision to have two children because I knew if I had more, keeping the career I worked so hard to build would become almost impossible. The childcare bill I paid every month, like many others, was higher than my mortgage. I recall earning that salary and watching such a huge portion of it disappearing every month on childcare. Peter Pan Crèche in Drogheda was worth every penny. The staff were amazing, but I also know what that childcare gave me. It gave me the ability to keep working and progressing. It gave me so many opportunities and the ability to have a career while being a mother. Ultimately, it helped me to get where I am today, standing in the Chamber with the privilege and honour of using my voice to fight for other families who are trying to do exactly the same thing.

When we talk about childcare policy, we should not ever forget that there is human story behind every single place. I am thinking of some of the mums I have spoken to in Louth and whether they are going back to work. They are wondering whether they can go back to work and whether it makes financial sense, while the dads are rearranging shifts because the crèche cannot offer it the hours they need. There is also the lone parent who simply cannot afford to take a job in the first place without reliable childcare or even the parents who are currently working but whose children should have the opportunity to benefit from early learning, interaction and care. That is why childcare can only be seen as something that allows parents to go to work. It is part of the fabric of the infrastructure of a modern society.

Most importantly, it should be about choice. If a parent chooses to return to work, childcare should be available and affordable. If a parent is studying, retraining, or looking for work, or simply needs support, it should be available, if a family chooses not to use formal childcare,

that should be their choice as well. Our job is not to tell families how to raise their children. Our job, ultimately, is to make sure that a lack of affordable childcare does not make that decision for them.

We have made huge progress, as we have heard. Investment has increased substantially. Parents' costs have fallen and we are investing directly and heavily in additional capacity. As everyone in this Chamber knows, however, the job is certainly not finished. We all hear about families throughout the country desperately searching for places. Parents are still looking at childcare costs and wondering how the sums can simply add up. There are still excellent early years educators whom we need to recruit, retain and properly value. Let us be honest: we know that they are not just babysitters; they are skilled professionals who are caring for our children during some of the most formative years of their lives.

The ambition in this motion is really clear. We must continue reducing costs and increasing quality places and move toward a maximum childcare cost of €200 a month per child during the lifetime of the Government. I do not want another generation of women sitting at kitchen tables calculating whether they can afford to go back to work or deciding how many children they can afford to have, depending on childcare. It simply might not add up. I do not want any other parent locked out of work or education opportunities because there are no childcare spaces available for them. I was fortunate in that I had childcare. It was painfully expensive, but it allowed me to continue the career that I love. We hear about families desperately searching for places. We have to make sure, for generations of women to come, and now, that there is affordable, quality and available childcare for all. I wholeheartedly support this motion.

Senator Dee Ryan: I too would like to echo the comments of Senator Comyn and many of the comments made across the House during the debate. I wish to thank the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, for their time and all the work they are doing in this area. We have heard a comprehensive address this evening from the Minister of the ongoing investment into the sector and the significant and ongoing work in the Department. I wanted to acknowledge that work and to wish them well with the continued work.

I would like to report from Limerick that while parents are telling me that costs have fallen when I am on the doors every week, the challenge remains around capacity. While it is not the second mortgage that it may have been at the start of my childcare journey, it is a real and significant challenge to secure spaces. Many working mothers or parents who need that additional support in their homes are reporting that it has been multiple years that they may have to wait to secure a spot in Limerick and the mid-west area. I thank the Minister for her ongoing work in the area. I wish her well with this. I acknowledge the progress that has been made and the ambition within the Department.

Senator Joanne Collins: I cannot fault anything in the motion. It is good that we continue to speak about the issue.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I am shocked to hear that.

Senator Joanne Collins: Yes, I know - shock, horror. It is not like me to stand up and not give out about something, but there is a twist near the end. We need to keep talking about

childcare because there are still issues. We can keep working and working but there will always be. If it is not the affordable side, it will be the accessibility side. I can see it from all sides. I went through the childcare system with my own children. Fourteen years ago, I had to leave my job because I could no longer afford it. What I had to pay for my kids in childcare went above my salary. When I finally got to the point where they were old enough that the cost came down, I could not get a place.

There is always going to be an issue for a family out there anyway. Regardless of whether we can get the cost down to what we want it to be, some families still probably will not be able to afford it. There are always going to be issues. However, the issue that is most pressing is definitely the accessibility issue at the moment. I think it comes down to the recruiting and retention of childcare workers. You have a level 8 childcare worker who does four years in college and then they see primary school teachers who are getting way above their salary. I think a primary school teacher probably comes out with about €40 an hour for the hours they work and early years educators on a level 8 come out with €17.50 or €18. There is a huge disparity. We can see why childcare workers after their level 8 are going to go for another year, do their Hibernia year and go into primary school teaching.

We are losing childcare workers hand over fist. I am also the chairperson of a community-run crèche and the childcare workers in that crèche are paid over the minimum wage. They have their pensions. They have health insurance. They get their bonuses for not ringing in sick. They have all these little things. They get Christmas nights out. They get their end-of-summer party. That is all to keep the morale up. That is what is needed.

For too long they have been treated like babysitters when they are not babysitters. They do such amazing work. We could not be here without them. People could not go to work without them, and we know the kids are being taken care of because they are so well qualified at what they do. It is not like 20 years ago when there were no qualifications and you put your child into what was called "playschool", and they were being minded by somebody down the road. There are qualifications at play here. They do an awful lot of work, and they are forever upskilling. We need to look at their pay and pay scale for morale and retention. Primary school education is competing against early years educators and I do not think there is proper parity when it comes to it. Primary school teachers are getting their summer off, Christmas off and they are getting mid-term breaks while early years educators are on half the wage and do not get any of that. We do need to make it more competitive or more palatable for them to go into that. They go into it for the love of it. They do not go in because it is easy. When you see them doing four years at college there is a love behind it.

The only other critique I have is the national childcare scheme, NCS, hours. The way the NCS hours are done is penalising parents if they collect their children early because the childcare facility has to log their hours and if someone collects their child early, they do not get those NCS hours. The childcare facility is not going to take that hit. It is put on the parents. There are parents sitting outside crèches for an hour because they cannot go in yet because they are going to get charged if they go in and collect their child.

A parent hanging around for an hour outside could be collecting the child early. That childcare facility could close an hour earlier if the kids go home an hour earlier and give the staff an extra hour off. There is a ripple effect to it. That definitely needs to be looked at. I do not think anybody, whether it is the facility or the parent, should be penalised for a child going

home early. A child going home early is a really good thing. They get to spend more time with their parents. They get more time outside at home, playing XBOX or whatever it is they want to do. They are not being left there.

Senator Cathal Byrne: It is good to see the Minister of State in Seanad Éireann again. I want to commend our Fianna Fáil colleagues on putting a very important motion before us this evening. It is important to recognise that while there are obviously policy differences between different parties and different Members of the Seanad, there is no doubt in my mind that childcare, looking after and supporting young children, and making sure they are looked after is an issue that is above party politics. Really it is about ensuring that those children, who have to be at the heart of the conversation, have access in their local area to a childcare facility or childminder and that the families those children are part of are able to get out and get back into the workforce. It is really important that when we have these conversations, we keep that to the very forefront.

I am going to make a number of brief points because quite a lot of this issue has already been well covered. Specifically, it is important to recognise the contribution that childminders make right across the country. Perhaps it is more of a rural thing than urban thing. It is important that in the upcoming budget, we see additional supports to support childminders themselves. Quite a lot of the conversation tends to revolve around large crèche facilities, but there is a large cohort of people who look after children in their own homes. It is important that we support them to do that while not over-regulating them to the point that they decide it is not worth getting into it the following year.

My second point is around the whole area of the ECCE scheme and how the ECCE scheme is being rolled out. It is quite a good model, but it could probably be extended. There are quite a lot of children who are in the ECCE scheme for the two years but really are in a crèche early. In my area of Wexford, one of the biggest challenges people come to me with is access to a crèche for very young children. If their mother wants to go back to work after six months or a year, can they actually find a childcare space? There would be one when that child turns two or two and a half, but there is not one when they are six months old or up to two years old. Perhaps there is an opportunity in the ECCE scheme to try to address that if we want to support mothers in particular to get back to work. It is important to acknowledge it is mothers in this entire conversation. It tends to be the mother who takes time off work to look after the children. That is the lived reality of so many women up and down the country. If we want to support them, maybe the ECCE scheme is a good working model to do that.

The third and final point I want to make about this is that I have been a believer for quite a long time in the importance of a State-led model. We have had State-provided primary education for quite a long time and State-provided secondary education. I think we are ultimately going to have to make a giant leap forward beyond even what is envisaged in the programme for Government towards a State-provided model of childcare. Ultimately, that is where this entire thing is going. While there will always be a role for private providers, community providers and childminders, I think the State needs to take greater involvement in the sector as a whole.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I thank the Minister of State for coming in this evening. I acknowledge the great work done by her and the Minister, Deputy Foley. I am a

great believer in parental choice. I believe that if parents want to go out to work, they should be able to. If one of them wants to stay at home, they should be in a position to do that. If one of them wants to go onto further education, they should be in a position to do that. It is a sad state of affairs if childcare is preventing them from making a choice that suits them. I would like to thank everyone for their contributions here this evening. Everyone made very valid points and, going forward, there is a lot done, a lot more to do, to coin our own phrase.

Childcare is so important. These children are our future so it is important that in their formative years they are well looked after and they gain confidence and a zest for life and are given every opportunity. I ask the Minister of State to make sure that in the upcoming budget there will be big changes in our childcare system.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Gareth Scahill: At 9.30 a.m. tomorrow morning.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 6.59 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 24 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.59 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 24 September 2026.