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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 24 Meán Fómhair 2026

Thursday, 24 September 2026

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

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Cathaoirleach has received notice from the following Senators that they propose to raise the following matters:

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

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

Senator Mark Duffy - The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the reopening of the western rail corridor from Athenry to Claremorris, County Galway.

Senator Patricia Stephenson - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the development of St. Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and they will be taken now.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

School Meals Programme

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and thank him for coming this morning.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I love the saying that perfection is the enemy of the good. Nothing could be clearer when it comes to the hot school meals. The Minister of State and I both know that we are feeding 550,000 children

across 3,200 schools and the amount of money we spend on it is €300 million. The allocation in the budget to make sure that every child gets a chance of a hot school meal is absolutely crucial. It comes under criticism and it does need to change. However, this week we have made those changes happen with more changes to come. It leads me on to talking about the children during the summer, Christmas and Easter holidays.

Two weeks ago, I was in a school in my county, Meath. I had a conversation with the principal about different aspects of the school. He pointed out to me that many children in the school are absolutely starving. As Irish people, we recognise that our parents were feeders. People coming into a house got a cup of tea and a slice of cake. In my house there were plenty of potatoes on the plate; we were very lucky. As a nation, we are feeders. To think that in 2026 we have children starving in school is really sad.

The particular school I am talking about does not get the holiday hunger programme. The holiday hunger programme needs to be rolled out to more schools and more children. This programme provides nutritious meals to children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage during the summer holidays. The pilot was introduced in 2025 with €1.3 million in funding to provide meals to children during these holidays. The programme has supported over 42,000 children across 500 schools which is excellent. It has only been in place for the last two years. Last year, we only found out in June that this programme was going to be extended into the summer of last year. It was fantastic but we were quite late learning about it.

This scheme supports those with the most educational disadvantage with one in five children experiencing food poverty during the summer holidays. I do not think it is fair that we need to wait until June 2027 to hear if we have the programme. We need to know now. Families need to know now. Schools need to know now if we are doing the programme next summer. The budget should allocate more money to the programme so it can reach more schools and more children. Although schools do not open during the Christmas and Easter holidays, we need to do something. We need to come up with some way of feeding children. The children who are in school are the same children who are hungry during the Christmas and Easter holidays.

I regularly use the statistics from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, whose representatives have appeared before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth. Some 112,000 people came to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for food assistance. In our towns and villages, we know the number of Christmas hampers that people are donating. We see them in our supermarkets and local clubs are giving them to families who desperately need them. However, the Government needs to do its bit to help.

I strongly feel that in this budget, we need to put money aside to feed children who are hungry during all the school holiday times and to ensure the holiday hunger programme reaches more schools next summer.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Senator. Before I begin to give the reply on behalf of the Minister, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the Senator's work in this area and in particular the research she worked on so tirelessly over the last 12 months which has contributed hugely to the reforms and changes to the system of school meals that the Minister has introduced. I have no doubt that he would echo that if he was here today. It has been one of the most important

things undertaken by any Member of either Chamber in terms of influencing Government policy in this area. I again thank her very much.

In budget 2025 it was announced that a holiday hunger pilot project between the Department of Social Protection's school meals programme and the Department of Education and Youth's summer programme, formerly known as July provision, would be implemented during the summer of 2025. The pilot was part of a broader Government response to child poverty.

The objective of the school meals programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to support them in taking full advantage of the education provided to them. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement.

The summer programme is an educational programme which supports vulnerable children with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage. The interruption of the regular school routine, social interaction with friends and other school supports presents a risk of regression in the learning, social and emotional development and well-being of these children. The programme supports academic, social and emotional development, ensuring children do not lose vital skills during the long summer break.

An evaluation of the 2025 pilot project found that 90.79% of schools that participated in the summer programme indicated that providing school meals positively impacted the children who took part. In 2025 the programme supported over 42,700 of our most vulnerable children with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage. When looking ahead to 2026, 94% of schools surveyed indicated their intention to avail of the school meals during the summer programme in 2026. This pilot is a key initiative as part of the Government priority to combat holiday hunger.

In April this year, a one-year extension of the holiday hunger pilot project between the Department of Social Protection's school meals programme and the Department of Education and Youth's summer programme was announced.

Schools reported that the provision of meals supported attendance and engagement in programme activities, while also helping to reduce some of the pressures experienced by families during summer school holidays. The pilot has demonstrated the value of combining educational and nutritional supports, while ensuring that vulnerable children can continue to benefit from a structured environment that promotes their well-being, development and readiness to return to school.

The summer programme is an educational programme which is run during the summer months. It is a vital and targeted intervention that is specifically designed for children with complex educational needs or those at risk of educational disadvantage. The original intention and the continued emphasis of the summer programme is to mitigate the impact of learning loss on those children when schools are closed. The Department of Education and Youth has advised there are no plans at present to provide an in-school programme similar to the summer programme during the Christmas or Easter holiday.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Minister of State. This reply has said how great the programme is and has said absolutely nothing about what is going to happen in the budget and if there is going to be any money allocated for next year. I appreciate we are not going to

hear what will happen in the budget. We will obviously get to learn that in October. However, I would have liked some reference to the fact that we will hopefully see this programme expand next year or see it in the budget for next year. I also note that it refers to the Department of Education and Youth, whereas it was the Department of Social Protection that rolled out this programme into the schools. I know both Departments work on the hot school meals, and I have commended the Ministers, Deputies Calleary and Naughton, on this work a good few times this week. However, between the two Departments we need to make sure that we have money allocated in the budget to roll this out to more schools next year. I am determined for that to happen. If we are talking about one in five, as was mentioned, that is 110,000 children and not 42,000 so you can see they are already 50% undersubscribed. I thank the Minister of State for coming in and reading this out to me. I would appreciate if he would go back to the Ministers, Deputies Calleary and Naughton, and re-emphasise the point that children are hungry. We would like to see that programme enhanced for the summer and to look at a way of giving out meals during Christmas and Easter. I appreciate schools are closed, so it is harder because they can use the schools in the summer. Maybe we could put our heads together and think of how we can feed children during these times, because they are the same kids who are hungry. I also thank the Minister of State for his compliments at the start. I appreciate it.

Deputy Colm Brophy: The Senator is aware that I know she has a real passionate interest in this area. I hear what she is saying. Unfortunately, as any Minister or Minister of State standing here today would say to her, as much as the Senator, the media and everybody would like the budget given out in advance, it will obviously be coming up and the announcements will be made within that. I will relay her concerns and the issues she has raised directly with the Minister, as I have no doubt she will take the opportunity on an ongoing basis to raise those concerns. I re-emphasise that the Government is fully committed to expanding supports for children and families and building on the success of the initial programme.

Social Welfare Benefits

Senator Pauline Tully: Maidin mhaith. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an Ní i dTosach Suí seo a ghlacadh. I raise the cases of a number of people, where the same thing happened to them. There were two over the summer and one previous to that. There was a young woman who ended up hospitalised with quite a serious heart complaint. She was in receipt of jobseeker's allowance, and her payment was ceased because she was in hospital and therefore no longer in a position to seek work or make herself available for work, which is quite understandable. However, she was left without any payment. She still had rent to pay. She still had her electricity bill, and she still had children to feed at home, but she had no money. She is a proud person and did not want to be borrowing money from people. She was also worried because she has basically been told that she has limited time to live. She is worried and already stressed about this and what is going to happen to her family. All she wanted to do was make sure they were okay. She was afraid that if something happened to her within the next few weeks, her family would be left with a lot of bills to pay. Another man had a heart attack and his jobseeker's allowance was just cut off and he had rent accumulating while he was in hospital, and other bills to pay. Another woman, Brigid, fell and broke a bone. She suffered a stroke and ended up in hospital. Again, she was on jobseeker's. Her relative went in, as you are supposed to do, and informed social protection that she was in hospital. They

were told that all they had to do was take up a change of circumstances form, which they did. The first week came and there was no money. The second week came and there was no money. The third week came and there was no money. Again, her bills are accumulating. When her relation inquired again she was told that she should apply for illness benefit, but that is not the case. You can only apply for illness benefit if you have been working and have accumulated sufficient contributions. She contacted my office, and my assistant told her she needed to apply for supplementary welfare. All of that takes time.

I cannot understand why someone in receipt of jobseeker's allowance, which is a means-tested payment, and who is hospitalised and not in a position to work cannot just automatically transfer to supplementary welfare until they are out of hospital and well enough to sort out what payment they should be on, whether it should be to go back to jobseeker's or applying for disability. In several of these instances that was the case, but that takes time.

There is a lot of form filling when applying for supplementary welfare. You have to submit bank statements and other documentation. If you are in hospital, you are not able to access that information. You will not be able to get your bank statements and so forth. Another problem arises if a relative is doing it. Due to data issues, a relation cannot do it. As jobseeker's is a means-tested payment, the rates of pay are the same. Why can one not automatically cease the jobseeker's but go onto supplementary until such time as you are well enough to address the issues?

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank Senator Tully for raising this matter relating to supports for jobseeker's allowance customers who become ill or are hospitalised. It is a condition of the jobseeker's allowance scheme that a person must be capable of work, available for full-time work and genuinely seeking work. Where a person cannot meet these scheme conditions due to illness or because they are in hospital, they may be entitled to support under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. The supplementary welfare allowance scheme, which is administered by the Department through the local community welfare service, is considered the safety net within the overall social welfare system in that it provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants.

Supports provided under the scheme can consist of a basic weekly payment, a weekly or monthly supplement in respect of certain expenses, as well as additional needs payments. The basic supplementary welfare allowance provides immediate assistance for those in need who are awaiting the outcome of a claim or an appeal for a primary social welfare payment or do not qualify for a payment under other State schemes. A person who is temporarily ill or disabled and does not qualify for a payment under the Department's illness-related schemes may qualify for basic supplementary welfare allowance, subject to certain criteria. This assistance is subject to the person having the right to reside and satisfying the habitual residence condition. Furthermore, the person must satisfy a means test. "Sick no benefit" operates as a category under the basic supplementary welfare allowance scheme and is generally used for those who are medically unfit for work but do not qualify for any of the Department's illness-related schemes and have an income need. There are currently 3,085 customers in receipt of basic supplementary welfare allowance under the category of "sick no benefit". Basic supplementary welfare allowance is currently paid at a maximum personal rate of €252 per week. Where a person has an income need and wishes to be considered for a weekly payment

under the basic supplementary welfare allowance scheme, they are currently required to make an application specifically for this payment. The claim process involves the receipt of an application, the gathering and verifying of information, the assessment of that information and a decision on the claim. This ensures the applications are fairly decided in accordance with legislation and guidelines specific to the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, while also allowing the community welfare officers to provide a speedy delivery of service to customers.

All customers have the right to apply for supplementary welfare allowance and have their applications processed in an appropriate manner. As the means test for supplementary welfare allowance is different from that which applies to the jobseeker's allowance scheme, automatic transfer of customers between the two schemes is not possible or appropriate. Our community welfare officers have a great deal of experience in responding to all types of difficult situations and will be flexible in ensuring that a person is not left without the support they need.

Senator Pauline Tully: I thank the Minister of State. I am saying that the time it takes to make an application for supplementary welfare and submit the information required can be weeks or months. In each of these cases, community welfare officers did not act very quickly. All of these people were left weeks, sometimes going into months, without income and were left borrowing money from family members. Okay, they got it back and were able to pay it back, but it put a lot of stress and worry on the people and left them owing people money all around them.

What is the difference in criteria in the means tests for the two payments? They are both means-tested payments and are similar amounts. I am not sure exactly what the difference is. It is not the Minister of State's portfolio and I do not know if he can tell me or not but I would love to know. It is an issue that affects quite a lot of people. If I am aware of three people in my locality being affected by this within a very short space of time, I am sure there are a lot more. Our hospitals are full of people, many of whom may be on social welfare payments. I understand they have to cease jobseeker's because they are not in a position to work but they should be able to claim the supplementary allowance without any hassle.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I will convey the Senator's concerns directly to the Minister. I have no doubt she will engage with the Minister as well.

It is important to put on record and to assure the Senator that the supplementary welfare allowance scheme is always kept under review to ensure it continues to support those most in need of assistance. Any person who considers that they have an entitlement under the supplementary welfare allowance is encouraged to make contact with their local community welfare service.

Rail Network

Senator Mark Duffy: I welcome the Minister of State to Seanad Éireann. I thank him for being here for this important Commencement matter. I seek an update on the delivery of phase 1 of the western rail corridor from Claremorris to Athenry. As we both know, this has the potential to reignite connectivity across the western seaboard in a low-carbon fashion, connecting students with universities and colleges in both counties and connecting people with

work, tourism, medical appointments and otherwise. It is a track that has lain idle for many years. If we are to move to a sustainable mode of transport, reopening railway lines where the State has ownership is a no-brainer. I thank the Minister of State for his work to lead and drive this forward, supported by Oireachtas colleagues across the west. It is important that we demonstrate progress, expedite the project and move it forward as quickly as possible to keep momentum going and inspire other areas. I hope with the support and leadership of the Minister of State, we will hear some positive updates today.

In Mayo we have Pro Rail in Kiltimagh where Eamonn Maloney has received planning permission and is doing brilliant work with his expertise in the rail industry. We have a very active support group, West On Track, which has been an ardent supporter of the reopening of the line. There is a commitment in the national development plan to the delivery of the western rail corridor, which I welcome and support. I encourage and ask the Minister of State to use every possible bit of influence he has to help expedite and drive it on to make sure this project can be realised as soon as possible to deliver for the people of the west.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank Senator Duffy for affording me the opportunity to discuss the progress being made in relation to the reinstatement of the western rail corridor from Athenry to Claremorris or *vice versa*, whichever way you are sitting.

Improving public transport services and infrastructure is central to improving citizens' quality of life, addressing our climate action challenge and enhancing rural and regional connectivity. This Government is committed to a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland, as reflected by the investment we are making in the public transport system each year.

In July 2024, the Department published the all-island strategic rail review initiated by the former Minister for transport, Eamon Ryan, which I want to recognise. The review lays out a strategic vision for the future of rail on the island of Ireland and envisions the electrification of intercity lines, capacity enhancements to enable higher speeds and the delivery of new and reinstated lines to broaden access to the rail network.

Building on the recommendations of the review, the Department published the rail project prioritisation strategy in December last year, which sets out how to best sequence the recommendations of the rail review. The strategy recommended the delivery of a series of early interventions including new passing loops and platforms to boost rail network capacity, including on the Dublin to Galway line with second platforms at Clara and Woodlawn stations. Among these early interventions, Mayo rail users will benefit from a new passing loop west of Claremorris, while Sligo will see the recommissioning of platform 2 at Sligo station and a passing loop between Sligo and Boyle. These interventions will help to enhance frequency for services operating on these rail lines and increase the resilience of the rail network. These interventions are fully funded for delivery by 2030 through a €100 million allocation under the national development plan agreed by the Government last July.

The strategy also identifies major projects with longer lead-in and development times targeted for delivery between 2030 and 2040. Major projects include intercity electrification and significant capacity upgrades on the rail network. Among these major projects, I am pleased to report that the first to enter construction in the coming years will be the reinstatement

of the rail line between Athenry and Claremorris. Funding has been provided in the national development plan for construction to commence in 2028 and pre-construction activities are well under way. Early work is ongoing in the form of vegetation clearance and detailed structural surveys along the alignment of key structures such as bridges and embankments, including the reinstatement of the bridge at Ballyglunin. Iarnród Éireann has also appointed a multidisciplinary consultant to assist with the preparation of the project appraisal documents required under the infrastructure guidelines. Taken alongside other projects in the region, including the refurbishment of Galway Ceannt Station and the provision of a passing loop and second platform at Oranmore, the reinstatement of this line will greatly increase rail connectivity in the west of Ireland, bringing sustainability benefits for both passengers and freight.

The Senator mentioned students. The existing line, phase 1 had passenger numbers of about 132,000 when it opened. Last year, the number of passengers on that line was 750,000. That demonstrates that if you invest in the infrastructure, it will be used.

Our biggest challenge at the moment is providing additional carriageways, so that we can cater for the increased demand that is there. It is also part of the strategy that we try to improve the freight we are carrying by rail, which at the moment is 1% of our freight. With this additional investment in rail, we will see that happening as well.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for the update. Is he able to provide additional clarification on some of the technical design or is it too premature to talk about that? I have raised things previously about the three different rail crossings at Ballindine, for example. A point that I have made previously, and I want to reiterate here, is that investment in public transport in one mode should not negatively impact road users. Underpasses or overpasses or realignment in certain areas to make sure that we are not negatively impacting other transport users would be most welcome. It should be a design that is smartly done and future-proofed in terms of the investment while we have this window of opportunity to deliver this key infrastructure. As the Minister of State said, there have been previous projections on different rail lines that were not so optimistic. The figures that the Minister of State outlined, whereby year 1 was 132,000 and on the phase 1 in the-----

Deputy Seán Canney: That was connecting Galway to Limerick.

Senator Mark Duffy: The year 1 projection was 132,000 and now there are 750,000 passengers on it. The figures are phenomenal. We need to measure success on this next stage and use those numbers to compare and justify any future investment in rail reopening. I have had many people contact me in Charlestown, Kiltimagh and Swinford. They are enthusiastic for the reigniting of the railways in their towns in east Mayo. I would love to see that too. The first phase can help to inspire that if it can be done on time, expedited within budget and keep momentum going for the west.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Senator mentioned the co-ordination between crossings on our major routes. We will have a crossing on the N17 twice, I think. I convened a meeting earlier this year of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, Galway County Council, Mayo County Council, the National Transport Authority, NTA, and Irish Rail, so that we will end up doing a

co-ordinated approach to this and that any of the blockages that are there or any of the issues that arise will be dealt with in the pre-planning stage. That is ongoing at the moment. I am confident that we are planning ahead rather than ignoring things and that the stakeholders are working together to make sure we will have - when we are finished - a rail line that is operable and also that the roads are operable as well.

The recommendation to open the line between Claremorris and Athenry will be the first major infrastructural project to be delivered under the strategy. That is important. It underscores the importance of the line for enhancing regional connectivity. When opened, it will link Ballina, Westport, Castlebar, Claremorris and Tuam down to Athenry, Ennis and Limerick, and into Foynes, Galway, Cork and Waterford ports. That will relieve the congestion for freight, which is apparent at the moment on the line going directly up to Dublin. It is important that we continue to develop that. The opening of the line from Limerick to Foynes Port gives us an extra outlet for importing, exporting and using freight as our means of transport.

In relation to the whole concept of transport within Europe and within the Presidency, and looking at what we will be doing in terms of the Connecting Europe Facility for the next five years, we have included ports as a very important part of that infrastructure funding, as well as the hinterlands to ports. Ports need to have direct access to rail or a road to get their goods and services out. That is very positive news for the future development and sustainability of our rail network.

Hospital Staff

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Murnane O'Connor. There was a bit of a delay, but I am delighted to see her here because it is great to have a Minister of State from the Department. I am very happy that we waited to have the correct Minister of State in place. I thank the Minister of State so much.

I raised the issue of low staffing levels at St. Luke's Hospital in February in the Chamber alongside Senator Noonan. I do not think it was a Minister or Minister of State from the Department who answered our question. We heard at that stage that there was a commitment to the progressive development of St. Luke's. It is an area that the Minister knows plenty about. We had news over the summer that St. Luke's in Kilkenny has the highest staffing deficit in the Dublin and South East HSE region with 148 vacancies recorded in August. This comprises approximately 67.5 whole-time equivalent nurses. These are vacancies in nursing. We heard about these vacancies at the start of the year as well, so they are still in place. This has a direct impact on patient and staff safety. Staff are under significant pressure, including huge trolley pressures daily with no relief because of massive overspending by some hospitals, but not in this case by St. Luke's.

As the Minister of State knows, St. Luke's serves a very large catchment area as there are few hospitals located in the centre of the country. It has done incredibly well in the past in managing budgets, but in many ways, it seems that the hospital is being penalised for working within its limits. Ongoing staffing shortages include two emergency department consultants which had been promised. I have written several times to the Dublin and South East HSE team and I have never really received a satisfactory response. It took a long time to get any response

and even when I got one it was not up to scratch. St. Luke's has the third lowest ratio of emergency department consultants per patient attending in the country.

Despite it being an incredibly busy model 3 hospital, it is simply not safe enough for patients.

Another question I have, which the Minister of State will, I am sure, be able to answer, is around the Carlow injury unit and when it will be fully staffed. I am a little concerned that when the Carlow injury unit opens, it will poach staff from the emergency department in St. Luke's where the staffing levels are already so low. Clarification on how those human resourcing systems will be put in place would be helpful. People in Carlow-Kilkenny are being let down by this. We are being punished for St. Luke's being a very effective hospital and for doing such a good job. The inequity is frustrating and it is having a direct impact on staff morale as well.

We heard recently that several health regions are having their spending powers removed. I am wondering how this will affect the staffing constraints already facing St. Luke's. I recognise that the HSE has been over budget but prior to 2020 there was significant underspending in the health service and it was hugely affected by austerity years combined with changing demographics and an ageing population. Our hospitals and healthcare centres must be staffed to safe levels for both patients and the staff themselves and we need budgets that reflect the reality on the ground.

There is a critical need for these clinical posts. Instead, we have seen the hospital over relying on highly costly agency staff which is not good value for money and there is a serious perception that St. Luke's is being treated differently to other model 3 status hospitals in the country. It would be helpful for us to understand where the staffing plans are and what was being made to ensure that we have safe staffing at St. Luke's and also, of course the Carlow injury unit when it will open.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Senator for raising this important question. The Senator and the Acting Chairperson, Senator Noonan, have constantly be raising these issues, and rightly so. I thank the Senator for this opportunity to address the House on this matter. I am taking this Commencement matter, as the Senator will be aware, on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

The Government is committed to the development of services in St. Luke's General Hospital. As the Senator will be aware, we visited there recently - it is a few months ago the way the months are flying - with the Minister. St. Luke's General Hospital provides a range of important services to the people of Carlow-Kilkenny as well as counties Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford, Kildare and Laois. To meet the increase in demand for services, considerable additional resources have been provided in St. Luke's. Staffing at the hospital grew from 1,185 to 1,505 between the end of December 2020 to July 2026. It has grown quite considerably. This represents a significant increase of 27%. The HSE has advised it continues to actively progress and approve vacancies and implement workforce planning measures to support service delivery - they are constantly onto that - while staffing levels, patient activity and service requirements are also monitored on an ongoing basis. The budget for St. Luke's hospital increased by 62% between 2020 and 2026 and important capital projects are being progressed. These projects include the refurbishment of existing wards to accommodate acute beds, including space for a paediatric day unit which was completed this year.

I would also like to respond to the Senator's question on the update of the staffing of the new Carlow injury unit, which is important for us all. Enabling works have started on this unit. The work has commenced. While the work is progressing well and we hope to have it open as soon as possible, all efforts are being made to operationalise the injury unit prior to the planned opening in 2027. To put it simply, the contractors are in, it is being worked on, but my priority, like that of the Senators, is to have it up and running as soon as possible. This represents a key step forward in delivering this important service for the people of Carlow and surrounding areas. Recruitment for the Carlow injury unit will follow the national model for injury units. It includes: advanced nursing practitioners, emergency medicine medical staff, radiography, administrative support, and operation and governance roles. The HSE will ensure that staffing is phased in line with the construction process, commissioning requirements and service readiness. Even though Kilkenny will lead this now and it will be working in conjunction with Kilkenny hospital, they will have their own separately. Their staff will be different while they all work together, to clarify that.

I am also happy to inform that Senator the HSE has confirmed that the staffing, as I have said, in the injury unit will not impact the posts committed in St. Luke's hospital. The posts remain part of the hospital work plan and they are separate from the staffing model of the injury unit, because there were - the Senator is correct - huge concerns about that. Most of them are nearly hired now. Work has started. The main thing is we get it open as soon as possible.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I thank the Minister of State. I am glad to hear that the staffing will remain separate to St. Luke's and it will not draw from it, because, as the Minister of State mentioned, there were concerns around that. It is good to have that confirmation that it will not be drawn from the same pool.

I am delighted that work is progressing. I hope that we open the unit as soon as possible because the key thing is it will also alleviate a lot of pressure on St. Luke's accident and emergency department as well as a consequence of Carlow having its own injury unit.

On the question of the two outstanding emergency department consultants, I recognise the Minister of State is saying staffing and spending have increased but our whole metric around staffing has to be around safe staff levels. The HSE faced underspending powers in 2020 during austerity. I recognise a huge amount of money has gone into it but the challenge is that we still have two outstanding positions in accident and emergency - the third lowest ratio in the country despite the catchment area being so huge. That is a risk for patients who are coming in and it is a risk for staff. Those posts have been promised and they have still not been delivered. I cannot understand. When will they be delivered? I suppose we need clarity on that because it is dangerous for people.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Malcolm Noonan): We do not have a written response for the Senator but we will get that provided for her.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Apologies, I will get that for the Senator.

I will get clarification about those particular posts because it is important. I will be in contact with the Department today.

What I can say, as the Senator said earlier, is that Kilkenny hospital is outstanding. It is a model 3 hospital. The staff do great work there.

It is important, as she said. Working through the HSE and with the Department, there has been an increase in staffing but on those two particular posts, I certainly will come back to her.

On the injury clinic, we are moving as quickly as we can. When you give a time, there are always delays. We hope to have some of it ready or operational by the end of this year and then, in early 2027, it will be fully operational. It is great to see this. It adheres to Sláintecare. For the people of Carlow and the surround areas, it will be good to have this operating.

I thank Senators Stephenson and Noonan for their commitment. They are constantly highlighting the importance of this too.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.18 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.30 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.18 a.m. and resumed at 10.30 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: The Order of Business is No. 67(5), Private Members' business, motion regarding reports under Seanad Standing Order 87(1)(b) - report of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media entitled "Report on Inclusion in Sport", to be taken at 11.45 a.m. and to conclude at 1.30 p.m., if not previously concluded; and No. 1, statements on the Irish naturalisation and citizenship system, to be taken at 1.30 p.m. and to conclude at 2.45 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed eight minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, and the Minister to be given no less than seven minutes to reply to the debate; and time may be shared.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Over the recess we saw five young lives ended on the motorway. We have seen adolescents charged with murder, assault and very serious levels of antisocial behaviour and crime. I would like the Deputy Leader to arrange a debate in the House with the Minister for education on the provision of a national adolescent primary prevention system. We need to better understand what is going on with our teenagers and adolescents. I believe the Minister for education is ideally positioned to implement on a nationwide basis an adolescent primary prevention system.

I welcome the Government's approval for the MetroLink. It has moved to detailed tender and design and this is an excellent development. I want to specifically ask that in parallel to this process the Minister for housing and the Minister for Transport work with the Land Development Agency to develop and masterplan the Carlton site, where we will have a metro station on O'Connell Street, to also deliver affordable homes. This is unique regeneration opportunity and a unique opportunity to provide affordable homes on O'Connell Street in the heart of our city centre. The site is enormous and has the capacity to deliver the MetroLink, affordable homes and cultural and commercial space. I ask the Deputy Leader to engage with the Ministers with responsibility for housing and transport and ask them to task the LDA to masterplan the Carlton site for affordable homes.

We have had a lot of talk about the upcoming budget. I support the appeal of my colleague, the Fianna Fáil housing spokesperson, Deputy Séamus McGrath, to help first-time buyers. He has asked that the Government would waive stamp duty on the purchase of homes by first-time buyers. This is an eminent proposal that backs first-time buyers to own their own home. Budget 2027 should back first-time buyers. It should remove stamp duty, as Deputy Séamus McGrath has suggested, and help more first-time buyers to achieve home ownership.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I want to raise the serious issue of respite in west Cork. It is a matter I have spoken about in the House previously. Members know I do not mince my words when I speak on matters, and to say the respite service in west Cork is a disgrace at the moment is nothing short of the truth. The front page of today's *Southern Star* notes that 20 parents of families with disabilities have sent a solicitor's letter to CoAction and the Minister in terms of respite provision in west Cork. As we all know, to send a solicitor's letter must mean a situation is very serious, and such is the nature of the reason they have had to send this letter.

We have a system of respite in this country that I do not think is fit for purpose. Whether we are in government or out of government, I do not think it is fit for purpose. We have a service provider in west Cork. I hate to have to go on the record with this but it is well known and the dogs on the streets in west Cork know that there is more than €5 million in a bank account yet we have a severe shortage of respite. I hear in these Houses calls on the HSE to provide extra funding for this organisation. That is fair because organisations have funding and should be providing and developing systems and places for residential and overnight respite. The HSE does have a role here to investigate these organisations to see where the funding is going and what it is going to be used for. I know the board members of CoAction in west Cork have tried and are trying. They are listening to the parents in west Cork but we need to see action.

I know from having raised this matter here previously that the HSE has audited these providers. I am aware an audit has taken place but we need to see the findings of the audit. We need to see properties built. Properties and land are owned across west Cork. I am speaking here for the families. I have thought long and hard about what I should say this morning. People know that I work behind the scenes to try to find solutions but I have a duty to speak here this morning and ask where this money is going to be spent. When will these 20 families, and there are countless more across west Cork who could come together to write a letter, see respite?

We see the Before We Die campaign throughout the country. What we are looking for here is respite. Families have not received respite in years. We should be doing better as a State. The funding is there. The money has been raised from the good people across west Cork and it is not State funding. There is €5 million in a bank account. We need to do better. I call for a debate with the Minister for disability urgently on this matter so we can see the reviews of the audit and we can see increased respite.

Senator Tom Clonan: I welcome my intern, Sophia Mulvany, the inestimable Sophia. She will be with me until Christmas. I am delighted to welcome her to the Chamber.

It is my first time to speak on the Order of Business since we resumed the Houses and I want to express my sincere sympathies and condolences to Senator Craughwell. Gerard is a

big man with a big heart and, at the end of the day, all we have are our relationships with each other. Having lost his wife after 49 years of marriage it is very hard to see Gerard heartbroken and I wish him very well in the journey forward. We express our solidarity with him.

I want to raise a question on the Order of Business today regarding the debate on citizenship and the new rules. The speaking time has been reduced to 120 seconds for Members and I ask the Deputy Leader whether we can have an extension to this debate today.

I want to raise a couple of issues this morning. Exactly 15 months ago, on 25 June 2025, I introduced my Disability (Personalised Budgets) Bill in the House. It was time delayed by the Minister, Deputy Foley, for 18 months without any consideration of the Bill. I got *pro bono* advice from one of the large legal firms. It was the first time in the history of the State that an international firm worked with the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers. We took every piece of Government policy and consultation the Government had and drafted this legislation. I had a legal team from that legal firm for two years and the Minister just guillotined it with a delay of 18 months until Christmas Day 2026. I believe it is listed to be re-read on Christmas Day this year. This is a cynical abuse of the House. The Minister, Deputy Foley, said on the day that "Collaboration and co-operation will be the hallmark of how this Government approaches the disability sector". She called it a "sector". It is not a cost centre; these are people like my son. She then said, "Therefore, I look forward to working with everyone, including the Members of this House, to achieve tangible change for people with disabilities." She referred to "people with disabilities" but I think she means disabled citizens.

In the 15 months since then, I have written repeatedly to the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins. This week, I received an email from the Minister's PA, which outlined that the Minister was not in a position to meet me. The Minister is not going to meet me on this and disabled citizens all over this country are going to be left disempowered in this way, including members of staff in this House, who are well-known to all Senators and are struggling. I know one member of staff whose wife has to go with their disabled adult son every day to a resource centre in Tallaght. That is inhumane and wrong. The Disability (Personalised Budgets) Bill would solve those problems. In the absence of willingness on the part of the Minister or Minister of State to meet me, I ask for a debate in this House on disability personalised budgets.

I apologise to the Leas-Chathaoirleach for going over time, given the matters I had to raise earlier. The Disability (Amendment) Bill listed in the programme for Government is a catastrophic move. For the past four years, I have been saying that the only legal right disabled citizens in Ireland have is the right to an assessment of need. The Disability (Amendment) Bill that is being proposed will dilute and remove that right. We will have no rights. I am asking my colleagues to please not do this. This is like the referendum on care and the Green Paper on disability reform. It is a catastrophic step for disabled citizens dressed up as progress. It is not progress; it is a catastrophic step backwards.

Senator Pauline Tully: I raise the case of a 78-year-old man who lives in my area. He contacted me approximately six months ago. He is the sole carer for his 45-year-old daughter, who has a diagnosis of Down's syndrome. Three years previously, he applied for residential care for her because he felt that, as he is getting older, he will not be able to care for her and he wishes to see her settled in case anything happens to him. I contacted the HSE in February in

this regard and received a response one month later. The HSE outlined that it had carried out assessments on his daughter, prepared a business case proposal and reached out to providers. I thought there was movement at last. The HSE said it had spoken with the father, and I confirmed that with him. We thought there was finally movement after over three years.

This week, however, he contacted me again to say that nothing has happened since - not a word. He is under the impression that a provider has been identified but there could be budgetary issues. We are not absolutely clear in this regard. This man has been unwell recently. He was in hospital a few weeks ago for tests and he has to return in another two weeks for more tests. He does not know how serious it is but his medical team are quite worried. He is concerned now more than ever about the care of his daughter. The HSE's initial response to this case was to ask why his other daughters could not look after her. They do not live in the area and it is not their responsibility. This woman is entitled to have a setting prepared for her.

I think this man contacted me because he heard me speaking about the Before We Die campaign. His is just one example, however. There are many others in similar situations. We need to look at this issue again. I would love a debate in this Chamber with the Minister on providing residential care for adults with intellectual disabilities who are still living with elderly parents. This should be planned for. It should not be left until the parent is too old to look after that person, causing them to be stressed and worried because they do not know what is going to happen to their child after they die.

In the time remaining, I wish to commend Nikita Hand on her interview on "Prime Time" last night. She was excellent. She is a very brave woman. She has to be commended on standing up as she did, taking the civil action and then giving the interview. She has also written her memoir. She is a great example to others who find themselves in this situation. Sexual violence and abuse is far too prevalent. Often, victim-blaming is still very much at large. I commend her.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I add my voice of support to Nikita Hand. She has shown the most incredible resiliency throughout the past several years. It is amazing to see someone put themselves forward so vulnerably and push progress along when it comes to what people understand about sexual violence and what it does to an individual.

This week, new research from the National Youth Council of Ireland found that nearly seven out of ten young people are considering moving abroad for a better quality of life. While these figures are not necessarily surprising, they are an indictment of the Government. Young people in Ireland have been continuously failed by the State. They have been hung out to dry by the failed housing policies of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments. They have been ripped off by record rent prices, which are among the highest in Europe. They are priced out of affording their own home by foreign investment and vulture funds, leaving record numbers still stuck in their childhood bedrooms having to put independence on hold.

It is not an entire surprise that people leave. We have had generations of young people leave. People left after the 2008 crisis and during the eighties. However, we are now a wealthy country doing well and the fact that another generation of people feel forced to leave because they cannot have a good quality of life is horrific. The Government needs to wake up to this reality. The social contract is broken for many young people, many of whom missed out on

key milestones and experiences, particularly during the pandemic. They do not have proper university life any more when they are commuting several hours to their college.

Year on year, housing and affordability are the main concerns that come out of the research by the National Youth Council of Ireland. This year, there were also rising concerns about employment. Nine out of ten young adults said it is harder to find secure, well-paid work. We are seeing a shift in the labour market, with the proliferation of AI disrupting traditional entry routes and early career roles in the job market. It is young people who are at the coalface of this challenge because decent entry-level jobs are dwindling, which makes it even more difficult to afford rent and move out of home. Instead of increasing public transport opportunities and having progressive policy, we are increasing public transport fares. We are removing protections for renters and we are failing to support young people with the crippling cost of living.

We have all these record tax receipts, which is fantastic, but we cannot provide basic public services and a decent standard of living for our young people. People need affordable housing and decent paying jobs. It is hardly a lot to ask for when we consider how wealthy our society apparently is. We are failing the next generation. They feel they have no future here. We must treat this like the crisis it is.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I will speak today about school escorts. We can all agree that the service they provide is outstanding. Having spoken to many parents whose children use the service of a school escort, they say they could not cope without it. They are grateful for school transport being provided in the first instance, but many of these children would be unable to go to school without the school escort. There are around 22,000 children being looked after by approximately 4,000 escorts. The day's pay for escorts does not start until the first child is picked up. Many of the school escorts are picked up by the bus driver or taxi driver in their homes, but they may have to travel half an hour or an hour to pick up the first child. Their day's pay should start when they are picked up. Obviously, when they are driving along with the driver, they are talking about the children and their minds are on what is coming up next, etc. That is the start of their day's work. I would like the Minister to come in to discuss the pay and conditions of these fantastic escorts.

They are also not paid for the summer holidays, even though they start again in September or late August. They do not get paid during the summer. They are often undervalued and are certainly undervalued pay- and respect-wise. I would like the Minister to come in to acknowledge the great work of these escorts and discuss their pay and conditions.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome guests of Deputy Sean Fleming from the Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, LOETB, Portlaoise. They are all very welcome. I hope they enjoy their visit today.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: The Deputy Leader will be aware that I am the chair of the south western regional drug and alcohol task force, otherwise known as SURF. An issue has arisen with a project we have in Newbridge, which is in the Deputy Leader's constituency, concerning the Peter McVerry Trust. It is running a front-line addiction service. It has gone to landlord after landlord looking for new premises, but no one will take it. The town badly needs

this service. After more than one year, the service still sits upstairs in an industrial estate between Naas and Newbridge.

As the Deputy Leader can imagine, being located upstairs is not good for people with mobility problems. It is in the old industrial estate, Toughers, so while it is meant to be a drop-in service, it is not very easy to drop in. Nobody is defending the location. The trust certainly is not. However, it seems like the doors are shut.

People have complained to me that pharmacies in Kildare town will not dispense methadone. We know of one case where methadone was prescribed by a vet for a dog in the area. It seems that, in Kildare town, a dog can get methadone but the people who need it badly cannot. It is blatant discrimination. The HSE fully knows about this. We had a recovery event in the audiovisual room yesterday and we were all championing recovery. The room was full. It is Recovery Month. We were all saying that recovery is possible but, while we are saying that, the very people we are talking about are being pushed further from the help they absolutely need. The Deputy Leader will know that I have worked in this area for over 20 years. In 2026, vulnerable people in our own area cannot get basic medication in their own town. That shows a stigma that is built into the whole system. These are private pharmacies. I know the HSE is limited in its reach but I ask the Deputy Leader to bring the Minister of State with responsibility for drugs policy, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, before the House to answer questions such as whether the primary care centre in Kildare town can dispense methadone and which State building can host the addiction service in Newbridge. I believe recovery is possible but only if the doors are open.

Senator Maria McCormack: I also welcome the visitors from Laois. It is great to have them in the Chamber. I am going to speak about Laois once again. I will raise the issue of a deeply concerning report that landed on my desk this morning. It related to a HSE internal audit of doctor recruitment. The audit examined the files of 20 doctors employed across the HSE Dublin and Midlands region, which includes Portlaoise hospital. According to the report, only 14 files contained evidence of Garda vetting, 15 contained overseas police clearance and 13 contained the required evidence of English language competence. To be clear, a missing document does not mean that a doctor has a criminal record or cannot speak English but the HSE must be able to show that these checks were completed before a doctor begins treating patients. This raises serious questions. People in Laois depend on Portlaoise hospital every day. They deserve to know whether any of the files examined relate to the Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise, whether the missing evidence has now been found and verified, and whether this problem extends beyond the small number of files that were audited.

I also want a debate in the House to allow the Minister to address concerns about doctors regularly being moved from Portlaoise hospital to Tullamore. How many doctors have been reassigned from Portlaoise and for how long? What assessments were made as to the effect on staffing and patient care in Portlaoise? Portlaoise hospital is on its knees as regards staffing levels. The maternity ward especially is absolutely bursting at the seams. The nurses there are run off their feet. I commend the nurses on the job they do but news of doctors being moved while there is a HSE embargo on staff recruitment is very concerning. I want to do everything I can to protect staffing levels in Portlaoise hospital.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I sympathise with my colleague, Senator Craughwell, on the loss of his wife, Helen. It has been a tough few months for the Galway man.

Ahead of budget 2027, I will raise the challenges being faced by pubs across the country and the need for these to be addressed as part of the budget. Other countries are also facing these issues and have taken some action. I have spoken in the House before about the significant measures France has taken. Even closer to home, Prime Minister Andy Burnham has pledged a further 20% cut in business rates next April in addition to the 15% cut provided last April. He has also spoken about how this is only the first step as regards the measures his Government will take to support the bar business. We have to see similar action in Ireland to support thousands of family businesses across the country that provide tens of thousands of jobs, often in small rural towns and villages where jobs are not easily replaced. The Vintners Federation of Ireland is pressing for the Government to introduce a system of tax credits for the sale of draught beer. The tax credit would be valued at €20 per 50 litre keg of beer, with pubs eligible to claim a maximum of €20,000. This would have a significant impact for smaller pubs across the country.

The extremely high level of alcohol taxation in Ireland in comparison to the rest of Europe is actively harming the sector. Recent research from Dublin City University found that people in Ireland pay the second highest rate of excise duty on a pint of beer in the EU. Frankly, it is past time for the Government to take action on this. Budget 2027 must finally deliver an excise cut. I would be grateful if the Deputy Leader of the House would raise this with the relevant Ministers.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: This morning, I rise to fulfil the second part of a promise I made to Helen. At the beginning of May, having been diagnosed with cancer of the stomach and pancreas, Helen was sitting in the conservatory on a Sunday morning. When I walked into the room, she said "It is time we put plans in place." The first thing she dealt with was music for her funeral. Helen knows, or knew, that I am a deeply emotional person when it comes to music. She picked a piece by Massenet for the church and the piece "Song to the Moon" for when she would leave the church to go to her grave. She said she knew I would cry when I heard "Ave Maria" and "Pie Jesu" and, in order to save my dignity as I left the church with tears running down my face, she chose "Song to the Moon" so that everybody else would be crying with me.

Helen was a State-registered children's nurse. She had qualifications in neurosurgery and had worked with the elderly and so she told me "There are other things we need to do and we are going to do them today." One of these things was something I spoke about yesterday, namely, enduring power of attorney. I know my colleague Senator McDowell fully understands the difficulties relating to enduring power of attorney but she wanted it and, even if hell were to freeze over, she would get it done. The second thing she wanted was an advance healthcare declaration form. For me, this involved sitting with someone I had lived with for 49 years and hearing her express her final wishes as to how she would be treated. You can list specific treatments you do not want and the circumstances in which they are not to be accepted. One of the things you can specify is that you want this decision to apply even if your life is at risk as the result of refusal. Helen went through the various things she did not want under any circumstances. In all cases, she could only be given medical treatment if it was to improve her quality of life and her engagement with her children and grandchildren. As I typed this up for

her, the two of us cried quite a lot. It was the most harrowing experience of my life but we did it.

The first time I knew how important the advance healthcare declaration was when she was in St. Vincent's hospital and the consultant oncologist told me that they had advanced healthcare declaration and knew what they could and could not do. When she entered palliative care in the hospital, exactly the same thing happened. When we went to the hospice, it was exactly the same thing. I remember that, at one stage, Helen was getting slightly better and we were debating whether she would be coming home. She said she wondered if she would be discharged. I said this to one of the nurses and the following morning the consultant came in, sat on Helen's bed and said that she had heard that Helen was concerned she might be discharged. She went on to say that the room and the bed were hers for as long as she needed it.

11 o'clock

Helen, in her humorous way, looked at her and said, "You mean until I die." That was the truth of it. Helen made me promise that I would deal with these documents, the enduring power of attorney and the advanced health declaration. In completing this advanced health declaration, Helen removed from me and my two children the burden of having to make decisions for her, should we find ourselves in a situation where decisions had to be made.

On the morning before she died - she died at 2 o'clock in the morning - there was a serious problem with respect to the blockage in her bowel. The consultant said to her that they could insert a gastronasal tube to relieve the pressure. Helen looked at her, smiled and said, "I think you have the form that deals with that." There was no gastronasal tube.

In tribute to the bravest, strongest and most caring person I have ever known in my life, I promised her I would mention both of these. We should all have an advanced health declaration form. We should take the burden off those we love in order that decisions would be made by us - by myself, not by somebody else. It is the same with the enduring power of attorney. I know Senator McDowell has spoken on that before. We need to simplify that document without losing the protections. We need to reduce the costs involved in it. I am sorry that I have gone way over time, but may Helen rest in peace. Her strength, courage and determination to do things right should be a benchmark for all of us as we go forward.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I compliment Senator Craughwell on that particular point. One of the beauties of this House is our ability to raise a particular topic and raise awareness of it. When it comes from lived experience, Helen's legacy could be simplifying that process to future people who experience it. It is an important thing to raise in this House. I compliment the Senator on that.

Last week, I met with an individual who is a recipient of disability allowance. They are supported by our disability services and were talking to me about the cost of living, but they were also talking to me about a number of the supports that they are availing of and the limitations of those supports. While they are receiving the support within one of the national agencies, it requires them, through their medical card, to get regular blood tests. The support service was saying that this was to help them regulate the medication that they were getting on a month-by-month basis. With the medical card that this individual had, they were having to

pay €30 regularly every month to get the blood tests. I know the definition is routine and not routine for patients' conditions, but we should look at the individuals themselves and the services that they are availing of. There is a potential saving to the State with the regulation of the medication that this individual was availing of that would offset that. I would love for that to be looked at. The same individual also spoke to me about their regular need to change their glasses prescription. Due to their mobility issues, they are regularly breaking or losing their glasses. This was something that was not covered under any scheme for them either. It was an ongoing concern.

They also mentioned to me how long they had been waiting to access a dentist. We all know that dental health has a long recognised impact on overall health. The dental treatment services scheme in Ireland is not going very well at the moment. We know that we do not have capacity in the system. In 2020, 13,554 dentists were on that scheme. As of June 2026, 866 dentists were on that scheme. In my home county of Roscommon, back in 2020, 15 dentists had signed up to the scheme. As of now, six dentists are signed up to that scheme. There has been a 60% reduction in the dentists open to that. These figures do not factor in the dentists who are accepting new customers or patients onto that particular scheme. I have mentioned it before. There is a serious capacity issue in the system and there is something we need to do.

When I mention the public scheme, I also have to mention the HSE public community dental service for school-going kids. In Roscommon, they prioritise sixth class students. They are trying to get through that. I think the target was to have all the sixth class cohort completed by July 2026, but when asked for recent information, no data was available. We have an onus to look after second and third class students as well. We are trying to focus solely on the older ones. We might have a discussion on that, if possible.

Senator Michael McDowell: First, the issues raised by Senator Craughwell are important. The enduring power of attorney system that we have is very complex. Many solicitors do not want to become involved in it because of its complexity. What we have done, in good faith, collectively as a Legislature, to improve the lot of vulnerable people and to make provision for their own lack of capacity, is, in fact, an expensive and difficult process. We should have a debate on that subject.

Second, on Wednesday, I made reference to the RTÉ programme on protected disclosures. I said two things which I want to clarify. The first is that I mentioned the improper use of entertainment, including a brothel, in Italy. It happened in Switzerland, according to the protected disclosure of the individual concerned. The second is that I mentioned €500,000 of ammunition, when, in fact, it was approximately 500,000 rounds of ammunition. I mentioned a destruction cost, which, for some reason, Ireland paid for this defective ammunition in the region of €120,000. In fact, I think €160,000 was actually expended on it. I want to clarify those things because these are important matters. I do not want to leave loose threads on these important matters. I will not elaborate further at this stage, but I will have more to say about it at a later stage.

Senator Shane Curley: I raise the continued closure of Dunguaire Castle in Kinvara, south Galway. Dunguaire is one of the most recognisable castles in Ireland. It is an iconic landmark on the Wild Atlantic Way. It has enormous cultural and historical significance, as well as huge economic importance to Kinvara and south Galway, yet it has now been closed since 2023.

What makes that situation particularly frustrating is that the tour buses still come. The tourists still fly over to Ireland to see Dunguaire Castle, but now they can only look in through the gates. It is a sorry sight to drive through the town and to see the people standing out, observing from the gates. It is frustrating. The absurdity of the situation has now attracted international attention, with *The New York Times* recently reporting on the castle's continued closure and the campaign to have it reopened. We spend millions of euro every year promoting Ireland internationally as a tourist destination. We rightly encourage visitors to come to the west of Ireland, to travel the Wild Atlantic Way and to experience our history and heritage, but what is needed now is a resolution. I am asking the Leader to arrange an urgent debate with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the future of Dunguaire Castle.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I want to raise the conversation here and approach the Minister to look at independent radio and the funding of independent broadcasting. I met with representatives of Ocean FM, Shannonside FM and Midwest Radio. The service they provide, particularly in rural areas, is second to none. They are providing a public service, particularly regarding deaths, political coverage, current affairs, school closures and sport. They promote Irish music all the time, particularly local music.

11 o'clock

They have been hit with a 39% increase in their levy this year. It is unfair that they are paying a disproportionate levy to compensate other areas of broadcasting. It is not okay. We need to change the Broadcasting Act to look at this. It may be different in bigger cities but where we live in the north west, Ocean FM is the public service. I would not have got elected to politics if it was not for Ocean FM featuring people that are new to politics and relevant current affairs stories. The Minister needs to step up, intervene and look at the levy being charged. There has been a 39% increase, which is crippling independent radio. They go above and beyond their duty in covering current affairs and news but the new funding models mean they have to keep producing additional programmes. It is making it difficult for them to operate the current affairs programmes they do at the moment. Funding streams need to be looked at. Of course, I agree with having a public broadcaster like RTÉ but there is a disproportionate emphasis. Others are providing a service in rural areas in particular and the Minister needs to step up. They provide local jobs and are accessible to TY students. They get a lot of people on placements. They provide a wraparound service to communities. The Minister needs to get real about it.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I agree with the comments by Senator Craughwell on the need to reform the enduring power of attorney system. I have said in this Chamber before that the system is not working. It needs legislative change and, ultimately, the goal has to be to make it accessible, user-friendly and fully available throughout the country, which, at the moment, it is not.

I want to raise the lack of early morning commuter trains from Wexford to Dublin. If you live in Gorey, you can get on a train at 5.45 a.m. that will have you in Dublin Connolly at 7.47 a.m., which is time enough to make your way to work. If you live further south in County Wexford, it is not possible to get an early commuter train. If you live in Rosslare, Wexford town or Enniscorthy, the earliest train service does not arrive in Dublin until 8.48 a.m., a full hour after the service from Gorey.

Iarnród Éireann, given the amount of Government investment in rail services, needs to offer that service to people who live in Rosslare, Wexford town or Enniscorthy. They told me at the Oireachtas infrastructure committee that we could be waiting up to two years for this service to be available. All that needs to happen is for extra carriages to be added to the early morning train from Gorey and for it to start further south on the track. I would like the Minister for Transport to come into this Chamber and have an honest discussion about where things are going with early morning commuter train services.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I want to bring up the issue of our young people leaving the country. Some 68%, or over two thirds, of 18- to 24-year-olds are considering emigrating. We have bright, educated, talented young people who have no hope for their future here. It was sad to listen to them on the news on Tuesday evening, talking of finishing their degrees and emigrating. I understand why. They see their siblings and friends earning nowhere near enough to buy a house at, say €400,000; or even rent; or, unless they work 24-7, to cover their basic expenses. They are looking at years of saving to get a deposit together and then a mortgage takes a huge chunk of that money. In Cavan you need to be earning €63,000 per year and in Monaghan it is €64,000 per year to get an average mortgage. They are looking at Australia, Canada and America and leaving does not seem like such a big decision.

I see echoes of 2008. I have personal experience of that. We are losing a whole generation from our communities and it feels like Government does not care. GAA clubs are struggling for members and young people are leaving our towns and local groups. These are the young people who would have become coaches, teachers and committee members and whose kids would have gone to our local schools.

It cannot be denied demographics in Ireland are shifting. Almost one in four people living here were born somewhere else. In areas like Ballyjamesduff, Cavan town and Carrickmacross, over 30% - that is a third - of people were not born in Ireland. Why would we put so much money into the Irish language, sport, music and culture if there will not be a generation here to carry it on? We cannot build a thriving country on a transient workforce. Ireland should not just be a pit stop where people come for a few years to earn what they can and move on while our own people are forced to move abroad.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I am jealous of Senator Byrne talking about extra trains to commute to Dublin. I will talk about commuting but we do not even have one train. I would appreciate a debate with the Minister for Transport on people from commuter counties coming into Dublin. For people travelling from Navan to Dublin the NX bus route is a vital service but for far too many commuters, getting to work or college can feel like a lottery every day. People are dealing with overcrowding at peak times, cancelled services, buses arriving late and journey times that vary enormously from one day to the next. The NTA has acknowledged that capacity is insufficient at peak times, particularly on morning services from Navan to Johnstown. Although this may sound critical, the NX route is a brilliant service. It runs every 20 minutes and when you get it at a later time, it is a great way of getting into Dublin and of coming home. We just need extra buses and extra drivers at peak times. There is congestion on the M3 and through Dublin, and it is causing significant delays.

These are not just statistics. People are leaving home much earlier than they should have to. We all know family time is great for our mental and physical health. It is great for us to

have that time but people are having to leave early to make sure they get a seat and arrive at work or college on time. Some passengers report journeys taking two hours or more. At other times, you can get to Dublin from Navan in 45 or 50 minutes. Recent Bus Éireann service notices show the NX service has been cancelled on a number of occasions. Navan is growing, passenger numbers are growing and demand is clearly there. People need a bus service they can rely on, one that has enough capacity, is on time and gets them from Navan to Dublin without daily uncertainty.

I appreciate the Minister is putting a lot of work into getting the Navan rail service. I commend him on that. He was at the launch of it, which is fantastic, but it will be quite a while before we have the train. The people of Navan should not have to leave an hour early simply because they do not know whether the bus will turn up or not. If we could get a debate on that, I would appreciate it.

Senator Victor Boyhan: As Members are dealing with the Order of Business for today at present, I wish to address some concerns. I listened to my colleague, Senator Clonan, who expressed concern about an additional few minutes for statements on citizenship, a really important aspect of our work. I thank the Minister of State for making himself available. I know it is the Minister of State who is due here this afternoon, not the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, as were that the case, we might have a different scenario. However, we have to deal with the mechanisms open to us in this House.

As leader of the Seanad Independent Group, I respectfully ask the Deputy Leader and the Leader to consider an additional few moments. Alternatively, we will have to consider exercising a vote on the adjournment of the House today to make our point, and we will engage further on that. I suggest "Pragmatism with a big P". All politicians are familiar with pragmatism. The Order of Business can be amended or changed. Let us crystallise this. We are talking about statements. This is not legislation; these are statements on citizenship in our country. I propose we facilitate a minimum, between anyone, of five or ten minutes. I do not think that is an unreasonable request.

I want to put on the record of the House something I will pursue next week with the relevant sections, including the Seanad Office. The speakers list is a guide for the Cathaoirleach, Leas-Chathaoirleach or Acting Chair. It does not set the agenda of who is speaking. Many parties would have had people on a speaking list yesterday who did not actually come to speak because they had other things going on. It is to assist the Chair, but to suggest that somebody is looking at a speakers list to ascertain the level of interest or the amount of people coming from any particular group to speak is a dangerous precedent which we must not allow.

I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that. I am just saying the matter of who speaks in each group is a matter for the parties, their Whips and their individuals. I respect that, but that goes every way. As regards the suggestion that not too many people have expressed an interest today, they may change their minds in two hours. This is our House. It is open to us to operate within the Standing Orders. I know the Deputy Leader and she knows me. I want to be constructive. If we can facilitate a little flexibility, possibly five to ten minutes, I think we can all get our work done and can look at the system, the mechanisms and the concerns at another time. I would appreciate it if the Deputy Leader would consider that. I know her hands may be tied at this moment, but she might do so between now and when we come back to the next

session. I am trying to be helpful. I also want to put a marker down to the Seanad Office on the speakers list and who circulates it. I do not know who gets it, but by close of business today I will know who gets that list every day. It is a guide to the Chair. It is not a guide to the Minister or anybody else as to how we conduct our business under Seanad Éireann's Standing Orders.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: May I check with you, Senator Boyhan, are you proposing an amendment?

Senator Victor Boyhan: No. I suggest pragmatism and that the Deputy Leader reflect as to what is appropriate and have a chat with the Leader's office. I understand the dynamics. I am not 100% sure about the Minister's availability, but we are talking about five or ten minutes, not 30 minutes.

Senator Mark Duffy: Tomorrow in Ballina will be a very momentous occasion. The official opening of the sensory park in Ballina by the Minister, Dara Calleary, will be the culmination of many years of hard work. This project has been community led and grassroots led from day one. It began during Covid times, when many parents locally and activists within the community felt passionate about responding to the need for sensory spaces and making our town more inclusive and friendlier for young and old who have sensory needs. Following a number of years of work, including incredible volunteer work by volunteers from Ballina Community Clean Up and the FLOW group, the park will officially be opened. The people of Ballina and the north Mayo area have raised a huge amount of money to make it happen. It has been supported by local councillors, council staff and local businesses. It is a real success story and something I believe can be replicated in other places.

It would not have happened without the determination of a working group - I acknowledge them on the record here - of Martin Devaney, David O'Malley, Ryan Cawley and Pdraig O'Hora, who will be known to many for his footballing and mountaineering exploits, along with Kevin Loftus and his team at ACT. If I mention some names, I am conscious that I will leave out so many others who have been a driving force every evening in maintaining, planting, weeding and preparing. It is a great example of a public-private partnership where the volunteers have delivered a sensory park within the town. I acknowledge the late Paddy O'Hora, a friend of us all and an incredible force for good within the Ballina community, who passed earlier this year and who was passionate about delivering this park. I also acknowledge his late daughter Linda and his nephew Jack. I thank everyone for getting the project to this stage and look forward to joining its official opening tomorrow.

Senator Martin Conway: I too acknowledge the very powerful contribution made by Senator Craughwell and the issue of power of attorney, which Senator McDowell and others have commented on. The complexity of that needs to be addressed. Anything that can be done in these Houses in good faith to make this process more transparent, simpler, more straightforward and more understandable, we should not be found wanting on. Perhaps we could have a debate at some stage with the Minister on this issue, where the challenges and the complexities could be outlined and a discussion could start. That would be fitting and appropriate.

We have all been approached by the INTO, spoken to INTO reps in our constituency and attended the organisation's Oireachtas briefing in Buswells a couple of months ago. Its ask is very simple and it is one ask: that the budget fund an extra 1,000 teachers. That is a cost of in or around €50 million. Normally, the INTO has two, three or four key requests but this year it has one because, unfortunately, we are an outlier when it comes to the pupil-teacher ratio in this country compared with our European colleagues. I propose that the Deputy Leader write to the Minister for Finance and the Minister for education stating that this House would support the request of the INTO to fund 1,000 teachers. We all know the benefit of education. Many of us have benefited from education and we do not want to see standards being compromised in any way due to overcrowding in classrooms. Unfortunately, that is a very big risk in certain areas of this country. The request is reasonable. It is an investment in our future. While there are many pressing, difficult and challenging issues that have to be addressed in this year's budget, particularly around fuel, home heating oil and so on, we cannot forget the importance of education. That is my request.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: We started with Senator Fitzpatrick, who spoke about the horrific tragedy of five young people being killed over the summer in a horrific car accident in which four innocent people were caught up. She spoke also about the need for provision of a national prevention strategy and said the Minister for education should take that on board. During the summer, I was at a presentation by a collective group of people about caring for communities. It sought to address some of these issues. It was a pilot study really because it was the first time it was done in Ireland. Four secondary schools had been surveyed, comprising students in first year, second year and fifth year. The study excluded exam students. There were, from memory, about 188 questions. It was about how those young people felt valued by the school community and family. It showed some important insights. I agree that we need to dig deep. Those five young men must have cared very little for their own lives to go on a journey like that, not to mention caring for other people's lives. As a society, we absolutely have to grapple with this. Education is the key and it starts at primary school. We will look for that.

Senator Fitzpatrick also spoke about the approval for MetroLink and requested that we ask the Ministers for housing and transport to work with the LDA on the Carlton site to see what type of housing can be put there in the city centre. We will action that. The Senator also supported the suggestion from Deputy Séamus McGrath that we ask the Government to waive stamp duty for first-time buyers as an added financial incentive. We agree with and will support that.

Senator O'Donovan spoke about respite services in west Cork and the shocking situation there whereby 20 families have had to send legal letters. He mentioned a service provider there that apparently has a lot of funding, €5 million, in a bank account. There does not seem to be any action in relation to that.

The Senator also referred to the Before We Die campaign. I know it is something we all support. Senator Tully spoke about something similar. We will ask the Minister with responsibility for disability and the Minister for Health to look at that situation. It sounds shocking.

Senator Clonan welcomed Sophia, who I had a chance to say hello to, his intern until Christmas. Sophia is very welcome. Senator Clonan extended his sympathies to Senator Craughwell. A number of us had the opportunity to do that during the week. Senator Clonan spoke on the debate on citizenship, as did Senator Boyhan, and the extension of time. While we have been here, I have reached out to see if the Minister can give extra time because we would certainly facilitate that. There is no problem with that at this end but the response from the Minister's office is that he cannot facilitate it due to being in the Dáil and some other commitments. We can engage further but at this point that is the response.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I appreciate that.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Senator Clonan also spoke about the personalised budget Private Member's Bill he has introduced and which has been time delayed. I know the Minister with responsibility for disability is working on personalised budgets. There was an issue with the pilot project. It was very much undersubscribed which was a shame for the efforts to try to assess responses. We are looking for debate on a number of issues which were raised today which are related to disability. We have reached out and are looking for a debate next week or the week after with the Minister on the issues that have been raised.

Senator Tully spoke about a 78-year-old gentleman with a daughter with Down's syndrome and the lack of residential care. The Senator has helped to prepare a business case with this family and reached out to providers. It is a shame if a provider has been identified, as the dad feels, but nothing has been done in relation to it. That is something we will cover in the debate with the Minister in the next few weeks.

Senator Tully also commended Nikita Hand on "Prime Time" last night. I did not see it but fair play, she has really shone a light. It takes an awful lot of courage to stand up and be as vocal as she has. I have heard her on the radio a number of times. We have to support victims in terms of trying to make it easier for other victims down the line.

Senators Stephenson and O'Reilly spoke about the new research from the National Youth Council on how young people feel about the country that we live in. One of the things that struck me when I saw it was that 71% of young people felt they would have a better life outside of Ireland. I have to say it upset me and concerned me but I took the opportunity to look to Mark Henry who, as an independent individual, has a really interesting Twitter or X feed in relation to fact-finding and research. We can end up in a doomscroll about our country, which we are so proud to represent. All of us work to try to make life better for everyone. I say the Senators are adding to that doom and gloom in respect of what they are saying. If they believe it they should be actively working to try to make it better in a pragmatic way. I took the opportunity to look at some of the statistics that Mark Henry had in the last few days. Ireland has one of the highest rates of youth employment in the EU. It is the seventh most competitive country in the world. It is very well ranked because of a strong economy, good government efficiency and positive business practices. Senator O'Reilly spoke about young people going to Australia but it is a fact - and in Ireland we absolutely have challenges, including a lot of challenges around housing - that in Ireland, the cost of a house in Dublin is five times the median household income. In Sydney it is 14 times the median income. People might feel that it is a better world out there but take some of the things that are provided. Look at the education we have in Ireland. Look at the employment opportunities. Irish people now have twice as

much income as they had 30 years ago. I think we all need to remind ourselves of that when we hear negativity. If we were to listen to one of the parties mentioned here, in particular, they do not want any data centres in Ireland. We are struggling with it in Kildare at the moment. There is a concern about energy use, absolutely, but we got an independent briefing because data centres are being proposed for Kildare. There is only one plugged into the grid at the moment. It and every future data centre has to be able to provide 80% of its own energy. Data centres are really important to the economy in terms of attracting investment. If we were to go down the line of saying we are not going to progress with any of this as the Senator's party wants, there would not be good jobs for our youth so we need to be really mindful of the message that we are giving to our young people. We want to empower them to have good, positive lives here in our country. If, by choice, they wish to travel abroad for a few years, as I did myself, that is wonderful but we will welcome them home with open arms. Last year, the statistics showed that 35,000 people emigrated but 30,000 people came back. The level of emigration is not as high as would be suggested.

Senator Murphy O'Mahony spoke about school escorts and that their pay only starts when the first child comes onto the bus - that is something that has to be looked at – and also that the bus escorts are not paid for summer holidays. They are doing a very valuable job. We will look for a debate with the Minister.

Senator McCarthy spoke as chair of the SURF task force. I want to thank him for the really important work that he does. He spoke about the situation where one of its services is now in an industrial estate because it is very difficult to find space in Newbridge. I am looking for a space at the moment for a Jigsaw service. Space is at a premium. Our developing towns do not have an awful lot of space for these services. We need to work collectively to make sure those services are there for those who need them. Also, pharmacies should be supporting people. We will look for a debate with the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor.

Senator McCormack spoke about the HSE audit of recruitment for Portlaoise hospital and her concern about staffing levels. We support her. Portlaoise hospital is a fine hospital and we need to do everything we can to make sure there is adequate and relevant staff.

Senator Crowe also offered his sympathies to Senator Craughwell and spoke about the challenges for local pubs. He spoke about what is happening with the UK. Fair play to the Prime Minister, Andy Burnham. He has really grasped that. It is important because, as we have spoken about here many times before, our rural pubs are far more than just a place to provide alcoholic drink. They are a place for people to meet, to congregate and to socialise and we should support them. We will give that message to the Minister.

Senator Craughwell spoke again very movingly about the loss of his wife and really difficult conversations they had to have prior to her passing. He spoke during the week about the power of attorney and spoke today about the advanced healthcare declaration form, which is something we should all encourage and support our families, friends and communities to take because none of us know either the day or the time. Again, I offer our very deepest sympathies to Senator Craughwell. We can see that sometimes out of the deepest, darkest moments there are learning points for all of us that we can try to make the path a little bit easier for others.

Senator Scahill spoke about the disability allowance and the cost of living and limitation of support to an individual he was speaking to during the week, particularly about the need to have regular blood tests needed to help alleviate a condition.

Even with a medical card, €30 is a lot of money and I agree that needs to be looked at. It just happens to be the same individual but it could be anyone else. There is a regular need to change glasses subscription which is not covered, and to access to dentists. These are all basics: our sight, our teeth and the ability to be able to manage and monitor a condition any one of us could have. The Senator spoke about the 60% reduction in dentists in Roscommon and about the capacity issue. We will look for debate with the Minister for Health on that.

Senator McDowell continued the conversation that Senator Craughwell started about the enduring power of attorney and about how complex it is. It is so complex that many solicitors will not touch it. We absolutely need to have a debate. I have heard it a few times from different people, both inside and outside the Chamber. We should ask the justice committee to examine it, so maybe we can ask some Senators here to put it on the work programme. It is not going to be done easily. Senator McDowell also referred to the "Prime Time" debate and protected disclosures. He clarified two elements of his own contribution. I ask that the record shows the two distinctions that the Senator has made today to reflect that.

Senator Curley spoke about Dunguaire Castle in Kinvara, which closed in 2023. I am not sure whether that is an OPW issue or not. The Senator wants a debate. I ask him to table a Commencement matter about that.

Senator Cosgrove spoke about independent radio stations. They provide a really important public service, particularly in rural Ireland. She spoke about the levy increase. The funding system needs to be looked at. We will have the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill here in October, so we will have an opportunity to raise our voices about it.

Senator Byrne also spoke about the power of attorney and the need to reform it. He spoke about the lack of early morning commuter train from Wexford. Gorey has one early, but Enniscorthy, Wexford and Rosslare have the first train at 8.48 a.m. That is simply not good enough. We will ask the Minister about it. To be fair, Iarnród Éireann is good with its engagement with Members. My car broke down in west Cork three weeks ago and I have not had a car since because we are waiting for parts from the UK and it is still in Cork, so I have had to rely on public transport ever since. I feel so lucky every time I go to the train station that I am able to get that early train. It is a huge issue and it would make such a difference to people.

I addressed the points that Senator O'Reilly raised.

Senator Nelson Murray spoke about the need for reliable bus and train services for Meath. We know the train is coming slowly but there are concerns about the reliability of the bus service. Meath as a commuter county absolutely deserves it.

Senator Boyhan asked for extra time and I have addressed that. He also spoke about the speaker's guide. I do not know whether there was some comment in the past two days that I missed. Maybe the Senator and I will speak privately about that afterwards. He is right that it is up to each party group to be able to provide it. It is a guide, but it is flexible. Any time I

have been here and I have needed the Chair, the Cathaoirleach, or the Leas-Chathaoirleach to show flexibility, they did, but the Senator and I can have a conversation later.

Senator Duffy spoke about Ballina and the official opening of the sensory park, which will be tomorrow. It has been community-led and grassroots-led. It is fantastic. I know the Senator acknowledges the working group, particularly the late Paddy O'Hora, who have worked there along with Accelerating Change Together, ACT. The first time I ever went to a sensory park was the Delta Centre in Carlow. It was a centre for people with intellectual disability. It inspired me when I saw young people with severe intellectual disabilities who found it difficult to communicate responded to the sensory park. That was probably 30 years ago. It is wonderful to see them in other places. The work that goes into the maintaining and the planting is huge.

Senator Conway spoke again, supporting the power of attorney reform that is needed. He spoke about the INTO, its briefings, and the fact that it is requesting 1,000 extra teachers in the budget. I think we would all support that request. We will write to the Minister about it. We have the best educated young people in the world nearly and we do that by having great teachers and school communities that support them.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I put the question on the Order of Business, I welcome the working party on general affairs from the Joint Committee on European Affairs. I know they are the first of two groups. They are very welcome. I hope they enjoy your visit to the Houses of the Oireachtas and especially to the Seanad. Is the Order of Business agreed?

Senator Michael McDowell: It is not agreed on the basis that we do not have leaders and Whips meetings in advance anymore. I want the message to get through that that has to be reinstated. We cannot have a situation where a piece of paper appears and that is the consultation that takes place in the House. Of course there will be limited numbers of speakers if they are told that they have two minutes to speak on citizenship. Who is going to sit here for hours on end and say they have something important to say in two minutes? Nobody is going to do that. I fully appreciate that the Deputy Leader is saying to us today that there is a ministerial difficulty, but that could have been avoided if there had been a discussion. We could have had it on a different day rather than just giving people 120 seconds to comment on this matter. It is not acceptable. I say that in an amicable way. There was a system of leaders and Whips meetings every week where these things were discussed in advance and it has evaporated for some reason since Senator Kyne became Deputy Kyne. We have to do something about it.

Question, "That the Order of Business be agreed to.", put and declared carried.

Report of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media: Motion

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The combined speeches of the proposer and seconder shall not exceed 16 minutes, and all other Senators have six minutes.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: I move:

That, under Standing Order 87(1)(b), Seanad Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media entitled 'Report on Inclusion in Sport', and progress on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report, copies of which were laid before Seanad Éireann on 9th April, 2024.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I second the motion.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Ní Chuilinn I welcome the working party on general affairs and their committee guests. I understand they are guests of the European affairs committee, and they are all welcome today. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House. I would also like to acknowledge Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan in the Gallery, who has with him Finbar and Carl Harrington. They are welcome and I hope they also enjoy their visit to Leinster House, especially Seanad Éireann.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: I am sharing time with Senator Nelson Murray at 12 minutes and four minutes.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta McConalogue, as ucht a bheith anseo. We have an important report to discuss. This was from the previous iteration of the Dáil and Seanad. It is a 2024 report on inclusion in sport by the sport committee. There were 17 recommendations. I am sure colleagues will speak to many of the recommendations. I will speak to approximately five of them. Inclusion in sport has never been more important, whether we are talking about women, disability, the LGBTQI+ community and ethnic minorities. It has never been a more important conversation, so it is important we revisit this report and look at where we are with the recommendations. I understand the report was published shortly before the most recent general election, so I am sure it has been difficult one to get back up and running with the recommendations. We will see where we are.

I first mention recommendation 15 about how "national governing bodies and Sport Ireland should support the growth of LGBTQIA+ orientated ... clubs." I will raise something on behalf of Senator Harmon who cannot be here. Before the summer recess, we raised a joint Commencement matter where we asked that this report be discussed. This is being raised on her behalf. I refer to the situation facing the women's team at Na Laochra Aeracha, Cork's LGBTQ+ inclusive GAA club. The women want to play Gaelic football and compete in the league, but they have been unable to properly establish the team because of the way the 2010 boundary is being applied. I am sure lots of Senators are aware of the 2010 boundary and the rules in Gaelic football. Some of the women who want to play for Na Laochra Aeracha live outside of that boundary, and as a result the club has been unable to get the numbers it needs to properly establish the women's team and play in the league. This is particularly difficult to understand when the LGBTQ+ inclusive clubs in Dublin and Belfast are able to participate in their respective competitions. There needs to be a consistent and transparent approach to how these rules are applied. Na Laochra Aeracha exists for an important reason. It provides an inclusive space for LGBTQ+ people and allies to participate in Gaelic games. For some

members, including women returning to sport after many years away, that particular environment is what has enabled them to come back to Gaelic football in the first place. We know that retaining women and people from marginalised communities in sport is already a challenge. Rules should facilitate participation wherever possible rather than create unnecessary barriers to it. Senator Harmon is once again asking that the application of the 2010 boundary be reviewed and that the LGFA engage with Na Laochra Aeracha to find a practical solution that allows these women to register with their club and play competitive football. If inclusive clubs can operate and compete in Dublin and Belfast, we need to establish a clear and transparent route that allows the women of Na Laochra Aeracha in Cork to do the same. These women simply want to play football with their club. We should be doing everything reasonably possible to facilitate that. That is really reflected in recommendation 15 of this report.

A related matter is recommendation 16, which states that "The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and Sport Ireland should support the hosting of a major international LGBTQIA+ multi sport tournament." I know that is probably a big ask and would probably take years of planning, but we have proven that we are really good at sport tourism here. We have had the college football and the NFL. We will obviously have the Ryder Cup. We know how to put on a show and sell tickets, and go to games and events. I think the Department and Sport Ireland could maybe look at a festival of football or something for the LGBTQIA+ community. It certainly should be explored.

Recommendation 13 states:

Visibility is critical to removing barriers to inclusion in sport. Public service media should commit to broadcasting women's sport on an equal basis to men's sport.

An interesting line is that "Broadcasting of disability sports should not be limited to the Paralympic Games." That is one I feel strongly about. Paralympic sport is elite sport. It is sport for people with an impairment or disability, but these are elite athletes. We talk about Orla Comerford, Ellen Keane and Róisín Ní Ríain. These women are winning medals at world level and sometimes, in the case of Orla Comerford, competing in able-bodied races and winning even though she is T13 class vision impairment in the Paralympic Games. It is a conversation that should be had between the Department, Sport Ireland and the national broadcaster. There is absolutely no reason we should have to wait four years to see paralympic and disability sport, and particularly elite level para sport, on our airwaves.

Recommendation 11 states:

There should be a consistency of messaging across sports regarding acceptable behaviour. National governing bodies should ... [encourage] ... best practice ... on a multisports basis.

This is something I raised in the Seanad previously and it is about integrity in sport. It is something I will raise again. I think we need to look at a sport integrity unit. As the Minister of State knows, the next sport policy will be written next year and perhaps the integrity of sport is something that could be explored, whether that is safeguarding, anti-doping, corruption or match fixing. These are all things that were probably not spoken about when the most recent sport policy was written in 2014 or 2015. It is something that could be looked at.

I will talk about recommendation 12:

There is a need for accountability mechanisms for sporting organisations in receipt of public funds that do not meet high standards of inclusion. Such organisations must adopt robust procedures as part of their governance codes regarding discriminatory or abusive conduct.

There is one thing I want to home in on in that recommendation. It is about equality and inclusion. Again, we have had a lot of conversations about creating equal spaces and spaces that are inclusive for all. One of the most recent is the debate about integration of the GAA. Obviously, we have seen in the past couple of weeks that the process has reached a roadblock. It will be interesting to hear the Minister of State's thoughts about where that is, and whether the steering group is back up and running with a new chair. I will read into the record a statement I thought was powerful from the Mayo Ladies Gaelic Football Association, LGFA. I will not read the full statement because it is very long, but I think it gives a flavour of what has transpired and how people are feeling about it on the ground:

On the eighth of September, Dr Mary McAleese resigned as independent chair of the Steering Group on Integration, after the GAA told the group it could not commit to the 2027 timeline that all three associations voted for in 2022 and confirmed in 2024. She said she was “absolutely devastated”. She said the commitment to integration had “evaporated”.

The GAA's response was that it is “just not ready”, that the deadline was “too ambitious”, and that its commitment remains “firm and absolute”. Its president has since explained that money was the sticking point before pivoting back to practicality.

[...]

In November 2025 every county in Ireland was instructed by the Steering Group to set up a County Integration Committee: two people from each association, an independent chair, monthly meetings with minutes returned to Croke Park. The terms of reference were broad, covering fixtures, facilities, finance and governance.

In Mayo, no such meeting has taken place in 2026. Not one. No minutes have been returned. As far as we can establish, that is true across this entire province and most of the country.

That is how this was done. Not with a decision. With inaction, without a word.

12 o'clock

The statement continues:

Tradition dictates that everything defaults to the GAA and always has. The facilities, the funding, the first pick of dates, the coaches, the supporters, the media routine, the sponsorship, the volunteers, the status. The advantage of a 90-year head start, reinforced by hundreds of millions of euros of public investment, cannot be overcome through goodwill alone.

Institutions built around men develop structures that suit men. These structures are now held up as insurmountable practical constraints. Only two dressing rooms, only one good pitch, the standard of the toilets. We understand entirely how that happened.

But you cannot build something for one half of a community and then point to the state of the building as the reason that the other half must wait to come inside.

[...]

Dr Mary McAleese gave four years to integration and was called offensive for describing what she found. Mary turned on the big light. She did the hard part. The disparity can no longer be treated as something people simply did not know about.

[...]

We're already well into extra time.

Equality is always impractical until it is inevitable. The GAA can lead this change and take pride in it. That means turning its commitment into a timetable people can trust, shared decisions and access that women and girls can rely on.

We love the GAA, and you cannot love something honestly and lie about it at the same time.

These extracts from the statement by Mayo LGFA fit well into this discussion on inclusion in sport and they are something we should probably reflect on. I would be interested in the Minister of State's thoughts on the integration process given that we are talking about inclusion in sport.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome students from Blessington Educate Together National School who are guests of Deputy Jennifer Whitmore. I hope they enjoy their visit.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to discuss this today. I want to talk about something very simple with regard to inclusion in sport. Sometimes we talk about inclusion in terms of strategies, policies, targets and funding programmes. Inclusion is also something as basic as being able to go to the toilet. The joint committee's report on inclusion in sport, published in 2024, made it very clear that facilities are a fundamental part of inclusion. The evidence in the report is quite stark. The FAI told the committee that more than 30% of grassroots clubs do not have toilets or changing facilities designated for female players. The Camogie Association told the committee that female players do not always receive the same recognition and access to facilities as their male counterparts.

When we talk about encouraging girls and women into sport, we have to ask ourselves the very basic question of whether we are actually providing the facilities that tell them they are welcome. Recently I shared a photograph on social media of a helmet and hurl outside a toilet which got something like 150,000 views. In April I attended a division 2 camogie match between Meath and Kerry. Unfortunately Meath lost by a point. On my way in I asked for the toilets and saw a female player run out of the public toilets and onto the field. This was someone at the top of their game. I was advised to go to the referee's toilets as they would be less busy. That toilet is where I saw the helmet and the hurl. I could not believe that another player was in that toilet but, as sure as anything, a Kerry player ran out, picked up her hurl and helmet and ran out onto the field. This might seem like a small thing but I do not think it is. Imagine being a young girl seeing this, as my two children did that day. My children are aged ten and 11. People present to play a sport, ready, for example, to participate in a county final, but when nature calls the facilities available are simply not adequate. This sends a message.

We need to be very careful about the messages we send to young girls because the evidence shows they are already participating in physical activities at lower levels than boys. The committee's report highlighted Sport Ireland's evidence, which shows that just 13% of primary school girls meet the WHO physical activity guidelines compared to 23% of boys. At post-primary level it is 7% compared to 14% of boys. If girls want to stay involved in sport, we have to remove the barriers and not add to them. These barriers are not just about facilities. They include safety, access to training times, a lack of female coaches and leaders, sexist behaviour and language, the impact of caring responsibilities and whether girls see people like themselves represented and valued in sport. I was very blessed to go to the Katie Taylor fight a couple of weeks ago and I was proud to bring my girls. We only have to go and look at something like this to see how men and women can have somebody they can look up to. It was incredible and I do not think I will ever witness an atmosphere like it again.

The report made 17 recommendations, including investment in accessible and fit-for-purpose facilities. There is an important principle here. We cannot call a sporting facility inclusive if the basic facilities are not inclusive. It is no good having a fantastic pitch if there is no appropriate changing room. It is no good encouraging girls into sport if there is no adequate toilet. It is no good telling women they are welcome if the infrastructure tells them otherwise. We have made enormous progress on women's sport in Ireland compared to when I was young and we should recognise this. My two girls play football in one club and camogie in another. They are two brilliant clubs and I have to say they have the very best coaches who give up their time voluntarily and are such amazing advocates for both sports. I love nothing more than watching GAA. Inclusion is not achieved simply because participation numbers improve or because more women are competing at elite level. It is achieved when a young girl can walk into her local club and know the facilities, coaching, environment and culture were designed with her in mind as well. We need to take the recommendations in this report seriously. When Government funding goes into supporting infrastructure, inclusion should not be an optional extra.

I want to point out that two students from my school, St. Joseph's Mercy Secondary School in Navan, County Meath, contributed to the menstruation part of the report and I commend them on this. Accessible facilities, appropriate toilets and changing rooms, safety, transport and equal access should be part of the very basic standard. Ultimately, inclusion in sport should be very simple because if we want every child to have the opportunity to participate, we have to make sure every child can actually participate.

Senator Alison Comyn: The Minister of State is very welcome to the Chamber and I thank him very much for coming in. I welcome the report. Fianna Fáil is committed to sport for all, ensuring that everyone, regardless of age, gender, background or ability, has the opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity of any kind. I acknowledge the work of the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy McConalogue, and the significant strides that have been made in participation and investment. We have seen record core funding through Sport Ireland alongside two major capital programmes, namely, the community sports facility fund and the large-scale sports infrastructure fund. Further opportunities are coming under these programmes, with details and application dates to be confirmed shortly. I know the Minister of State will outline some of the significant funding when he responds to the debate.

Sport for all cannot simply be measured by how much money we allocate. It has to be measured by who gets to use the facilities we build and whether the barriers identified in the joint committee's 2024 report are being removed. When I was driving here today I was thinking that a rugby ball does not know the gender of the person passing it, a basketball does not know whether the player bouncing it is standing on two feet or sitting in a wheelchair, and a running track does not care about the colour of someone's skin, how much money they have, who they love, where they were born or what their postcode is. Sport does not exclude people but people can exclude people as can systems. Traditions can even exclude people. This is why when we talk about inclusion in sport we should talk about removing these barriers which, let us be honest, should never have been there in the first place.

The report calls for stronger leadership and accountability on inclusion, better access to facilities and transport, appropriate training for coaches, greater representation of women in leadership and greater visibility for women's sports. These are all very necessary recommendations. There has been progress, with participation at record levels and the gender participation gap narrowing considerably, but participation is only one measure of inclusion. As we have heard today, we can let girl join a club and still give boys the best pitch, we can have a women's team at the highest level and still give them the worst training time or the worst facilities, and we can celebrate our female athletes when they bring home global medals while leaving women outside the rooms where important decisions are made.

This brings me to the recent resignation of former President, Mary McAleese, as independent chair of the steering group on integration of the GAA, the LGFA and Camogie Association, which has already been mentioned. These three associations had committed to full integration by 2027 but Dr. McAleese stepped down after the GAA said it could no longer commit to that definitive timeline. She raised serious concerns about the place of women in decision-making at the highest level of Gaelic games. This was at the committee I sit on with my colleague, Senator Ní Chuilinn. We got the impression quite early on that the GAA was not going to make that deadline. The GAA, of course, has strongly rejected accusations of misogyny and has pointed instead to organisational and financial difficulties but these different positions should be acknowledged. The timetable has slipped at a time when we should be accelerating progress. Equality has to mean something in practice. If we say a women's team is equal, this should be reflected in pitches, training times, funding and resources and, crucially, decision-making at the top table.

The 2024 report also addressed the visibility of women in sport. In 2025, just 18% of national sports news coverage devoted its time to women's sport. Yet, if anybody doubts the audience for women's sport, they should know that more than 80,000 people packed Croke Park only weeks ago for Katie Taylor's final fight, while the RTÉ televised audience peaked at 1.6 million. That is hardly niche at this stage. Of course, Katie Taylor does what Kate Taylor does and she won, ending an extraordinary career as a three times undisputed world champion. There is a huge lesson in that, namely, give women's sport the stage and the coverage and the people will come.

Inclusion cannot simply be shorthand for gender equality alone. Again, the report addresses the barriers experienced by people with disabilities and people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. In 2024, participation among people with disabilities stood at just 32%, with the socioeconomic participation gap at 19 percentage points. Membership fees,

equipment, transport and access to suitable facilities can all determine whether someone plays a sport. Disability inclusion has to mean more than putting a symbol or sticker on a clubhouse door; it needs a hell of a lot more. Can someone actually use the facilities, access appropriate coaching and get to the training? These are the practical tests of inclusion.

As has been outlined, we have made significant progress and invested hugely in Irish sport, something we will hear from the Minister of State in a few moments. The 2024 report gave us a clear set of recommendations. Our task now is to measure what has happened as a result, identify where the barriers remain and keep improving them. Ultimately, sport for all has to mean exactly what it says. As I said, the ball does not care who kicks it, the track does not care who runs on it and the basketball does not care who scores, and neither should we. Our job is to make sure that every single person who wants to play sport is included and allowed to play.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State and the officials from his Department and thank them for coming before the Seanad to discuss this important issue.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Cathaoirleach and Senators Ní Chuilinn and Harmon for raising this matter. I thank Senators Nelson Murray and Comyn for their contributions. I look forward to the remaining contributions and thank all for taking the time to be here to discuss what is an important topic. I acknowledge the time being given on the floor of the Seanad to ensuring that a report which had a lot of time put into it by a previous Oireachtas committee remains alive and actioned.

It is an opportune time to review the recommendations of the 2024 report on inclusion in sport published by the committee, particularly in light of the preparations under way for a new ten-year national sports policy to run from 2028. The current national sports policy sets out a vision for sport in the country that emphasises a sport for all ethos and which prioritises inclusion in sport and participation for under-represented cohorts. While more work is undoubtedly needed to remove any and all barriers to participation, I am pleased that substantial progress has been made since the inception of the national sports policy in 2017 on the inclusion of women, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, older people and those from disadvantaged communities.

With respect to the inclusion of women in sport, which is identified as a key issue in the report, the national sports policy set a target to eliminate the gender participation gap by the time of the strategy's conclusion in 2027. The Irish Sports Monitor report for 2025 found that active sport participation levels among women is at 46%, an increase of five percentage points from the 2017 baseline. This progress is significant and reflects the substantial work of the sector in this area.

However, it is regrettable that the 2025 monitor also revealed that the gender participation gap has widened slightly, from 3% to 4%. This highlights the continued need for targeted investment and programme design to meet the 2027 target which my Department and Sport Ireland remain committed to delivering. As evidence of that commitment, in July of this year we announced €4 million in funding for the women in sport programme for 2026, which is double the amount allocated in 2022.

Beyond funding, recommendations 13 and 14 of the report rightly point out that visibility is critical to removing barriers to underrepresented groups, including women. For this reason, visibility, alongside active participation and representation in leadership, is a key pillar of Sport Ireland's women in sport policy. On this front, Sport Ireland launched the first ever study of gender balance in sports media coverage in March of this year. The results of that study highlighted that women's sport remains significantly underrepresented in the media. I, therefore welcome, the Future of Media Commission's call for the development of a diversity and inclusion strategy for sports reporting and broadcasting, and I am glad Coimisiún na Meán is also currently in the process of developing a sports strategy in consultation with Sport Ireland.

Achieving genuine gender balance in sports media requires a system-wide approach where we challenge deeply ingrained and outdated perceptions. The lack of viewership of women's sports is often used to justify low coverage but studies have shown that promoted properly, they can attract significant audiences. Senator Comyn outlined the most clear recent example of that with the wonderful national attention and record audience we saw for Katie Taylor's career finale in Croke Park. It was a wonderful tribute to her career and an appropriate way for her to finish her career. She was a trailblazer once again for women in sport. We should all take encouragement from the viewership of 1.6 million the audience reached that night, greater than the peak viewership of the 2026 World Cup and the all-Ireland hurling finals. This highlights the eagerness of the Irish people to support their female athletes and the appetite that exists for appropriate and extensive media coverage of women's sport. As such, I would like to emphasise that a more balanced media landscape in sport represents an opportunity for broadcasters, not sacrifice.

Gender equality across sport is a Government priority and, while not directly involved in the process, we are very supportive of the integration of the three associations within a unified single structure for Gaelic games. While the precise roadmap for integration is a matter for the GAA, the LGFA and the Camogie Association and their memberships, I urge all parties to commit to a clear and defined process and timeframe for integration. In this regard, the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and I have written to the associations and have asked them to provide quarterly updates to Sport Ireland on progress. I understand they are working towards the appointment of a new chairperson on 5 October.

Disability inclusion in sport represents another key area of priority for my Department and is identified as a critical issue in the committee's report. It is worth noting that Sport Ireland launched its statement of commitment to and action on disability inclusion in sport in November 2024, after the report was published. In addition, I was pleased that increased funding provided to sport in budget 2025 enabled Sport Ireland to establish a dedicated disability in sport funding stream and to appoint a disability in sport lead. This role has the potential to be transformational, and we are already seeing the benefits of having a lead to co-ordinate with national governing bodies, local sports partnerships and other sporting bodies to develop and promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in sport.

The most recent Irish Sports Monitor revealed that participation among people with disabilities reached a record high of 34% in 2025 and the gap between people with and without disabilities narrowed to 19 percentage points, compared with 22 points in 2024. These findings point to the progress that has been made. However, it is very clear that the participation gap

remains too high. I would like to assure Senators that my Department and Sport Ireland remain committed to making this gap a thing of the past.

Likewise, with regard to visibility for people with disabilities in sport, which is highlighted in recommendation 14 of the report, it is worth noting that the first ever disability in sport week hosted by Sport Ireland took place in December 2025. The events over the week highlighted the achievements of athletes with disabilities and showcased inclusive programmes, local champions and inspiring athletes under the five pillars of the Sport Ireland disability in sport policy. The 2026 event of this kind will take place from 1 to 7 December, and it is envisaged that it will take place annually to coincide with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Events like these have the potential to serve as catalysts for making our sporting community more inclusive. They provide critical opportunities to strengthen partnerships and highlight best practice in order that every person with a disability can step into a club, a pool, a pitch or a gym and feel that it is a place for them.

Additionally, with respect to the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community, the report suggested a number of recommendations. Among these was the need for guidance regarding transgender and non-binary inclusion in sport and physical activity, expressed in key recommendation 17. Sport Ireland has since published a guidance document in this area following detailed stakeholder consultation. Sport Ireland has also delivered in-person and online workshops to enable the national governing bodies to research, design and publish their own policies on transgender and non-binary inclusion in their sports.

In line with recommendation 14 of the report on the visibility of sport for the LGBTQ+ community, Sport Ireland also conducts its Let's Get Visible campaign on an annual basis to coincide with Pride month. The campaign seeks to highlight the sporting achievements of LGBTQ+ people and acknowledge the importance of their visibility and representation in the sports sector. Under recommendation 15, the committee's report also advised that support be given to the growth of LGBTQ+ orientated sports clubs. On this front, I am pleased to report that in 2025, Sport Ireland supported Clare Sports Partnership and Sporting Pride to pilot and implement a bespoke LGBTQ+ advocates training programme for other local sports partnerships, national governing bodies and sports clubs. The programme provides direct support to existing clubs to become more inclusive towards the LGBTQ+ community or to develop their own dedicated LGBTQ+ sports club. While more work is needed to eliminate the participation gap between LGBTQ+ persons and heterosexual persons, which currently stands at 4%, I am nonetheless pleased that progress is being made in the sector.

In particular, I would like to report that in October last year, Sport Ireland published its Spotlight on Participation in Sport report, which showed sports participation by members of the LGBTQ+ community has increased by 9% since 2021 from 49% to 58%. This indicates a very positive momentum that I am keen to build on in order that members of the LGBTQ+ community have the same opportunity to enjoy the benefits of sport.

The committee's report also makes a couple of recommendations with regard to the hosting of major events. Recommendation 3 of the report notes that inclusion of sport dividends ought to be considered when assessing proposals for hosting such events. I acknowledge that a significant potential benefit of hosting major international sporting events is that they can

encourage active participation and inclusivity in the particular sport. For example, data from the United States revealed a record surge in soccer participation, including among women and ethnic minorities, before and during their hosting of the World Cup in the summer. As such, a key consideration in my Department's assessment and evaluation of events, as well as in determining which major international sporting events should be supported, is the social inclusion legacy that the event can deliver. This includes the extent to which the event can increase participation and ensure that people of all ages and backgrounds have opportunities to participate and engage in the sport.

Another key part of the assessment process is understanding the social benefits to the local community. Social inclusion will continue to be a key factor in determining which events the Government supports and will be an important consideration in the context of the further development of the major international sports events strategy framework. Therefore, I can say that any proposal to host a major international LGBTQ+ event as recommended in the report under recommendation 16 would be considered in this context.

Beyond this, recommendations 7 through 9 of the report speak to the need for appropriate training to be delivered throughout the sports sector in the area of inclusion. As I am sure Senators will agree, volunteers and coaches are the backbone of the sports sector in Ireland and as such, an inclusive environment depends on supporting them with the necessary training and resources. To this point, in 2024 Sport Ireland made equality, diversity and inclusion, EDI, and anti-racism workshops available to over 60 national governing bodies of sport, 29 local sports partnerships and a number of other recognised bodies in the sector. In addition to this provision, in 2025, €2 million was awarded to national governing bodies and local sports partnerships as part of dormant accounts funding via the equality, diversity and inclusion fund. This supports projects, including relevant training, to remove barriers to participation in sport for individuals from diverse and under-represented communities.

Likewise, the need to deliver training for the coaching of women and girls in sport, which was identified in recommendation 8 of the report, is something that Sport Ireland remains committed to. Sport Ireland coaching provides workshops on coaching teenage girls and has equipped more than 1,000 coaches across the country with the tools to build confidence and encourage the long-term involvement of women in sport. My Department will continue to support our volunteers and coaches to facilitate inclusive sport, and I welcome the work that Sport Ireland is doing in this regard.

As I conclude my statement, I reiterate my Department's commitment to promoting an inclusive sporting environment where everyone has the opportunity to reap the benefits of sport. Notwithstanding the continual need for improvement, I trust Senators will agree that the landscape of sport is in a much more inclusive place today than it was when the national sports policy was launched in 2017. Our investment in the women in sport programme, the establishment of a dedicated disability in sport lead and disability in sport funding stream, as well as the equality, diversity, and inclusion fund via dormant accounts funding, to name but a few, are contributing to the growth in participation for under-represented groups and the erosion of long-established participation gaps. More broadly, the increased funding allocated to sport in budget 2026, which was more than double the amount allocated in 2018, points to the Government's continued commitment to investing in sport. The return on that investment in

terms of community participation, inclusion, and physical and mental well-being is, I believe and I think we would all agree, substantial.

I remain steadfast in my work to remove barriers to participation and any recommendations of the committee's report that have not yet received direct engagement can and will be considered during the consultation process for the new national sports policy. It is absolutely essential we utilise that new policy to set the direction to build on the continued progress we have seen over the last ten years. Much has been achieved but there is still a long, substantial and important road to travel. We need to make sure the next ten years sees as much progress and, indeed, more progress as we have seen over the last ten years.

The work of the Oireachtas committee in 2024 deserves our significant thanks. It is no small undertaking for a committee to put time and effort into putting a report like this together. It is a significant commitment of their time and their resources, which are limited. I think it emphasises the importance the committee gives to this particular issue. I think the decision and motion here today to bring it back to the floor of the Seanad for this discussion reflect the importance of that time and effort that was put in and the fact that we need to make sure it delivers results and contributes significantly to the journey we are all travelling.

Senator Maria McCormack: I commend the joint committee on all the work that went into this report. It really was extensive and is very well done. I especially commend my colleagues, Senators Ní Chuilinn and Harmon, for their fantastic work. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the report, Inclusion in Sport. I love its central message that being told you are welcome means very little if you cannot get a facility, afford to take part, find a coach who understands your needs or secure a place to play. That is where a lot of the barriers come from.

The report has 17 recommendations but I particularly welcome its call for accessible, fit-for-purpose facilities, with funding that looks at the whole project. As the report points out, there is little sense in funding accessible sports equipment while refusing funding for accessible toilets needed at the same venue. It also calls for better transport, support for volunteers and coaches and greater visibility for women's and disability sport. The recommendations deserve the action now and I welcome the Minister of State's comments that this report will form part of the new sport policy. It is so important that this does not end up as another report that draws dust on the shelf.

In Laois, we can see what happens when people are given a genuine chance to participate. This summer, the first Laois Inclusion Games brought together more than 330 athletes and participants across 15 sports.

The games grew from the work of the vision impaired and physical disability hub and the Laois Sports Partnership, with families, clubs and volunteers all playing their part. It was fantastic. It is something that our county is so proud of. It shows that the demand is there when we create the opportunity. However, a successful weekend must lead to lasting opportunities for these people. Athletes need somewhere accessible to train and that is something that we do not have. They need to be able to compete throughout the year like other athletes.

This leads me onto my next point. The next recommendation is of particular importance in Laois, namely, the recommendation on facilities. I will speak about our young soccer players. The Old Fort Celtic club in Portlaoise has grown from one senior team to five teams at present.

Its people want to give more to young players, including young girls and give them a place in club, but the lack of a reliable pitch is holding them back year in, year out. The club uses facilities in Portlaoise leisure centre when it can but bookings are limited and cannot always be guaranteed. Its volunteers should be spending their energy developing the club instead of constantly trying to find somewhere to play. There is a grass soccer pitch at the leisure centre that has been out of use for more than six years. A proposal has now been raised locally for a suitable perimeter fence in order that the pitch can be brought back into use. It just seems that there is one block after another. Meanwhile, Portlaoise clubs are travelling outside of the town for home games. I want to see that pitch restored. I want clubs like the Old Fort Celtic to have proper dependable places to play as they grow. This is why the next community sport facilities fund round is so important.

Laois has a growing population and clubs with real ambition. Previous local applications have always been unsuccessful. We need sports facilities. We have a growing population. We have St. Mary's Hall; a hall that is absolutely on its knees. We have no big sports facility for the number of youngsters and all-inclusion sports there at all. The pitches need regeneration. We are going to be putting in applications when the applications open on Monday. I ask the Minister of State to ensure that Laois gets its fair share and that applications are judged with the needs of growing communities and the barriers to participation firmly in mind. Clubs are being encouraged to prepare for the next round now. They need to have fair opportunities to turn those plans into pitches and facilities that people can use.

I will leave the best to last. I wish to speak about girls and women in sport. It is great to see so much of that in there. It is so important. It clearly records the stereotypes that girls face and recommends better training for coaches and physical educators on issues affecting women's participation in sport. I really hope the Minister of State will pay particular attention to all these issues. It calls for women's sports to be broadcast on an equal basis with men's sport, which is so important. These issues shape whether a girl feels sport is for her or whether she stays involved. Last year in this Chamber, I brought Laois camogie players with me. We cannot forget that the camogie players had to protest last year for their fight to wear shorts instead of a skort. The rule was changed after the players made themselves heard. This may have seemed like a practical issue to a lot of people, but it said something much bigger. We must listen to the women and girls who play our sports. In fairness, in this report, it really does have the lived experiences and the voices of the women and girls. As the GAA, LGFA and Camogie Association work towards integration, equality has to be visible in everyday decisions from playing kits and pitches to leadership and resources. The people running our clubs, the volunteers behind the inclusion games and the players asking for change have already shown what is possible. Now, Government funding must back them with facilities, funding and decisions that allow everyone to take part. Inclusion should be simply how we do sport all the time.

We cannot talk about women in sport and forget the women who led the way in sport. I am talking about Katie Taylor. She did not just become Ireland's greatest sports person of all time; she changed how this country and people across the world look at women's sports. While Katie Taylor filled stadiums and inspired generations of young girls, Katie should not be the exception. Every young girl, whether she dreams of becoming a world champion or simply just wants to play with her local club, deserves the very same opportunities as the young boys.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): I thank the Senator. I gave her a bit of leniency there seeing as she was talking about a great Wicklow woman. Senator Ahearn has six minutes.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I thank Senators Ní Chuilinn and Harmon for bringing forward this opportunity to speak on the report that was done by the sports committee two years ago. A lot of people have mentioned that the committee did an incredible amount of work. It is important to remember that was also the committee that was dealing with other issues as well, such as RTÉ and other things, at the time. To find the time to do that report and do it with a lot of detail and work has to be commended.

Everyone is unified in this position in terms of inclusion and bringing more people into sport. I often think about it. When I was younger and I think of the female sports athlete that I looked up to at the time, Sonia O'Sullivan was the obvious one when I was young looking at the Olympics. She was an inspiration to the whole nation. If we are honest with ourselves and we look at who we look up to now in sport in Ireland and who are the people who can inspire a nation, the majority of them are female sports athletes. Everyone talks about Katie Taylor. That was a phenomenal event in Dublin that night for her farewell. The Irish soccer team next month has an incredible opportunity and massive match in Cork against Kazakhstan to qualify for another World Cup. I am sure that is going to be an absolute sell out in Páirc Uí Chaoimh. We all wish them well in that in a couple of weeks.

In athletics, we have Sharlene Mawdsley from Tipperary. We have Rhasidat Adeleke. In swimming, we have Mona McSharry. In GAA, I have been at the past couple of camogie finals, which is a brilliant day for the family. I think Senator Ní Chuilinn was there as well this year at the Cork versus Galway final. That was an incredible game. Last year was an incredible game as well. I was watching Sorchá McCartan and some of the points she got that day are better than any points I have ever seen in Croke Park or any other stadium. She is a phenomenal player and inspiration to people. That is all good and it is positive. It is so important that people have individuals like that who achieve great success and who they can look up to. However, what we need to do is for people to be able to see that on the ground as well at small clubs and local level where they can look up to people in their own community and own village. It is not necessarily the Sorchá McCartans, the Rachael Blackmores or people like that but people in their own community who achieve greatness, whether that is a county final or playing at intercounty levels.

Even though we have done an awful lot on inclusion, there is more we can do at that level. When I speak to friends at home and parents, there is such a want for their kids to be involved in sport because sport is good from a health perspective and fitness perspective, but there is a social element as well. Parents always naturally worry about their kids at certain ages and wonder if they will have friends, will they be included in a community or will they be part of a community of their own age group. Sport plays a leading role in that. It is so important, whether you are a boy or a girl, to have that opportunity to be in sports. The real important thing is that children at that age are treated similarly. If my two boys are playing sport in Tipperary, they should have the same facilities and the same treatment as Senator Scáhill's two girls in Roscommon. There should be no difference in how they are treated or in terms of facilities. If we are being honest with ourselves, that is not always the case in all sports. We need to improve on that. That is why it is welcomed that we have the announcement of the sports capital grant applications opening on Monday. In previous applications, there has been

a requirement in terms of inclusiveness and women's participation in sport. I hope that continues - I have no doubt that it will - but that it is even reinforced more and that it is not just a box-ticking exercise where a club can just say that it is doing something here or there, but that it is real inclusion and real equality in terms of treating people in sport.

There also is the critically element in respect of people with disabilities and people from the LGBT community.

An awful lot has been done there as well. Sport can play a big role in inclusiveness within communities. As I said at the start, we have seen the success of some of our athletes at international level in competitions right across the world. We need to build on that from the ground up. This report will play a key role in delivering that. We can be happy with some of the things we have achieved. I know the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, are committed to continuing that and to delivering on this report. I am sure that many Members will continue to support the Minister of State and the Minister to ensure the continued success of inclusion in sport.

Senator Gareth Scahill: The Minister of State is welcome. I too acknowledge Senators Ní Chuilinn and Harmon for bringing this motion before the House today. It is very timely. It is a very important issue to raise. All of the Oireachtas committees always do great work. The publication of reports with recommendations is really at the core of the work we do in this House. It is where we do not have the theatrics of the Chambers or the influence of social media. It is where people sit down to discuss the issues and see what recommendations they can collectively come up with that will improve facilities and the experience of the next generations. I acknowledge that.

At the same time, I will acknowledge how far we have come. I still do not consider myself that old but, when I am standing on the side of a soccer or GAA pitch with kids, I look at the facilities we have throughout this country and at the investment that has been made. The strides made in the past 20 years have been unbelievable. It is money well spent. Every penny that is spent in the area of sport, inclusion and accessibility saves a significant amount on the other side, the health spend in the country. We have to acknowledge that.

When I think of inclusion in sport, I am always brought back to Lisnamult community park in Roscommon. It is a community that finds a solution to any problem that is put in front of it. When the new sports hub was opened there, it was one of the first to include a fully wheelchair-accessible Changing Places toilet. If the Minister is ever down in Roscommon, something I will get to in a moment, he should go and see it because it is a blueprint all community facilities should follow as regards accessible toilets. It has a ceiling hoist, height-adjustable changing benches for adults and children, and the usual features to be found in accessible toilets.

Those involved foresaw the issues based on the needs presented by the people who were using the outdoor facilities. Funding was recently awarded for an outdoor basketball and hockey court. They realised that, since we live in Ireland, outdoor facilities are not always accessible for use by everybody on a regular basis. Given the Special Olympics teams that use the facilities, they realised an overhead cover for this outdoor court would be needed. While it is open on the sides and the fresh air is able to get through, it is a covered outdoor court. They are currently in the process of building an athletics track. It is hoped this will mean that the figure of nine members representing Roscommon in the Ireland summer games this year will

be doubled for the next games. It is worth pointing out that Roscommon represented Ireland in European swimming championships recently. There were four athletes from Roscommon. It was the only team in the country to participate in those European swimming championships. We are giving people opportunities to participate in sport that were never there before.

Previous speakers have mentioned issues of inclusion within the GAA. Last Saturday morning, I was in the centre of excellence in Began, just outside Knock and Ballyhaunis. There were 82 under-10s girls teams invited to participate in the final blitz of the year. Unfortunately, only 78 of them showed up but just imagine the logistics of trying to organise and facilitate a blitz of games for 78 teams from Galway, Roscommon, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim. What an experience and what a day it was. For those young girls, experiencing the world-class facilities at the Connacht centre of excellence in Began will have them enthused and excited to go back next year when the season starts again.

Members have mentioned Katie Taylor. We know that some 1.6 million people watched. I think it is the largest television audience Westlife has ever had. We were watching because we had a true Irish icon of sport, Katie Taylor, in her final fight in the GAA headquarters, Croke Park. What an experience it was. We will all remember where we were for it. That should be the benchmark for televising female sport, something the report mentions.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the European elite boxing championships taking place in Sofia at the moment. Two ladies from Castlerea, County Roscommon, Lisa and Aoife O'Rourke, are participating. Lisa is in the 85 kg final tonight and Aoife is in the 75kg final tomorrow. No matter what happens, those ladies will be welcomed back to Roscommon and Castlerea based on their performance and honesty in the ring. If they were to stop tomorrow morning, the number of young kids they have newly introduced to sport would still be something to be commended.

The only reason I have not mentioned the Castlerea swimming pool, which the Minister of State is very familiar with, until now is because I did not want to get people excited to know that he goes swimming there once in a while. Funding was recently accessed for water-pressure powered lifts to enable wheelchair access, allowing people to avail of those facilities.

If we are to take anything from this report, it is that we need to continue with such investment. We need to strive for better. We need to take best practice examples like the Changing Places toilet in the Lisnamult sports facility and ensure that every facility has the same. We must ensure that every little girl has access to every facility her male counterparts are entitled to access. Anybody who has a disability must also have access. Inclusion is a key criterion in the community sports facility fund that is to be opened. Let us consider that another element of enacting this report. I wish the Minister of State well with that.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Before I bring in Senator O'Donovan, I welcome our visitors from Kilmacud Men's Shed, who are guests of Deputy Shay Brennan. I hope they are enjoying their visit.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I will just take a couple of minutes, not the full six minutes. I am delighted for the Minister of State to be here and I am delighted to take part in this debate. On two Saturdays during the summer just gone, I visited Sailability Kinsale with local councillor,

Marie O'Sullivan. What an experience I had on those Saturdays. Sailability Kinsale is a volunteer-led organisation working in conjunction with Kinsale Yacht Club. It takes people with disabilities out on the water every Saturday morning for 20 weeks. It would do you good to go down there and see the smiles on people's faces on those Saturday mornings and the positivity it brings to people's lives. Seán from Clonakilty was involved in a very serious road traffic collision, which had horrible effects. His mobility, speech and much more were affected. When he spoke to us last Saturday, he told us that this gives him a reason to get up in the morning. There is also the Cork Sports Partnership in Kinsale and the yacht club I have mentioned. Donal and Bernadette are the volunteers who lead the programme. Sport Ireland is involved. This is a template that can be rolled out across the country as to how an volunteer-led organisation can be put in place. It comes down to funding, however.

I have heard Members here mention funding. We have the sports funding that is to be announced in the coming weeks but there is potential for a separate pot of funding for disability inclusion within sport. A specific funding stream is needed at Department level.

There is a ten-year policy being developed for sport but there is a real need for a specific level of funding for the things that we take for granted, such as changing rooms and facilities that people need, that can be the barriers to inclusion in sport. It comes down to funding, as we well know. I am thinking of the smiles on the faces of the people who are taking part in these events. We have a duty of care and a need within these Houses to ensure the policy and correct supports are in place for the sporting organisations as well as, ultimately, the funding.

I thank the volunteers. I cannot remember the name of the lady who spoke from Sport Ireland last Saturday, but she had reason to meet former President Robinson last week. On the volunteer-led ethos of these organisations, there is a sense of good when you volunteer within your community, but we have a duty to volunteer. Those were the clear, straight words from former President Robinson.

I thank the Minister of State for being here. It is an important debate. I look forward to policies with more inclusion but, ultimately, funding and separate funding streams.

Senator Pat Casey: Before Senator Kelleher speaks, I welcome a guest of Senator Tom Clonan, Sophia Mulvany.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún seo. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Seanadóirí Ní Chuilinn agus Harmon as ucht é a thabhairt isteach ós rud é gur ábhar thar a bheith tábhachtach é.

As a lifelong sports fan and participant, sport has given me an awful lot throughout the course of my life. It teaches a lot of life skills, regardless of whether those who enter into sport participate at an elite or high performance level or at a level where participation is more important.

The focus on increasing participation and inclusion in sport is vital and I very much welcome the motion before us today. As a father of four children, two boys and two girls, who are young and participate in sport, I would like to see the opportunities afforded all four of my children and to everybody else's children afforded equally regardless of gender.

Without doubt, and not dissimilar to the political arena, sport has been too male-dominated historically, and the more progress we can see towards change and equality in that regard has to be welcomed, be it in politics, sport or other areas of interest that are dominated by one gender over another.

I wrote my thesis on the participation of women in elections in Ireland, comparing success rates of men versus women across five general elections. The progress we have seen, particularly since the introduction of gender quotas in politics from the 2016 general election onwards, is to be welcomed. I am proud that the Seanad sits in this Chamber with 34 men and 25 women - we have a vacancy at present. We have not quite reached equality yet.

One of the key points in the report, point 6, concerning the emphasis that needs to be put on including women in leadership positions at organisational level in sport, is very important. As a man, I have to stand up here and say that, in sport, politics and other areas of society, there has been an element of misogyny over the years. As long as that fact is accepted and addressed, we are certainly moving in the right direction. If I can single out my colleague, Senator Ní Chuilinn, in particular, since she has got involved in politics and become a representative, her voice in the Seanad Chamber has been loud in regard to the area of equality, going beyond sport but especially focusing on sports and how we can improve sports at an organisational level.

Visibility, which is point 13 in the report, is a key one that needs to be addressed in order that there is an aspiration to have public service media broadcasting women's sport and men's sport on a par with each other and that there would be an emphasis on disability sports not being restricted to the Paralympic Games. I was fortunate to have attended the International Mixed Ability Rugby Tournament, IMART, in Cork in 2022 that was hosted by the Sunday's Well club in Cork. I commend the Sunday's Well club on the massive achievement in the organisation that went into that and hosting teams from a number of different countries. The participation of people with various disabilities in a sport, that being the centre of attention of a community and their getting to play in Musgrave Park was something that will stay with them for the rest of their lives, but we should not be over-reliant on volunteers progressing initiatives in that regard. That is something we, as political representatives and leaders in our communities, should look to help and encourage wherever possible.

On point 14, regarding athletes from marginalised communities, the push to have greater promotion, inclusion and participation is key. We all remember, a little over 30 years ago at this stage, when the boxer, Francie Barrett, was the flag-bearer for the Irish Olympic team at the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996, but we need something beyond tokenism. We need to see a genuine commitment to including those from marginalised backgrounds. The phrase "can't see, can't be" is used frequently when we refer to promoting women's sport. In my community in Ballincollig, we had a two-time world champion rower, Sanita Pušpure, who in my view did not get the credit or recognition she deserved, but the work she put in to dedicating herself to her chosen sport and reaching the elite level at the top of the world is something we need to encourage. As I said at the outset, however, the encouragement of participation of women, girls and people from marginalised backgrounds in communities at all levels is something that needs to be at forefront of our minds.

I commend Senators Ní Chuilinn and Harmon on bringing the motion to the House.

Senator Mark Duffy: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and thank him for being here for this important topic. I thank Senators Ní Chuilinn and Harmon for leading this Private Members' motion.

The more inclusive we make sport, the better it is for society, for community, for mental health, and for each and every one of us. From my point of view and my experience as a public representative, I have seen the power of sport and how it can bring people together and unite communities, families and people from different backgrounds, and while we have come some way, we have a long way to go.

Investment in capital infrastructure to help those less able who require specialised facilities to participate in sport is an important issue that needs attention and consideration, specifically proper changing facilities. These offer incredible dignity to children who are wheelchair users and their families, and to any person who is a wheelchair user. I single out a football club in Mayo that has the only changing facilities in the county so far, Manulla FC. They have done brilliant work in making their football club and using the grounds and the assets they have benefit all of their community. They have autism-friendly initiatives, they have a "Cubbie" sensory space but, practically and most importantly, they have a changing places unit. I have met many parents of children and young people who are wheelchair users and the changing places offers them life-changing opportunities in being able to have dignity while enjoying activity and sport in their local community.

I o'clock

There is a map of changing places facilities across the UK. The map of changing places facilities we have in Ireland is embarrassing in certain parts. Across all Government Departments, there should be some initiative to try to realise them and do more to incentivise community groups because it is such a vital thing.

When it comes to women in sport, great strides have been made in certain ways. However, increased emphasis is needed to support women in sport. The work of both Senators who have brought forward this motion needs to be supported by us all.

There is also the multigenerational approach to sport. Sport is not just for one age demographic. Walking football, for example, has become more popular recently. It engages a less active community and helps them to maintain a level of activity. Padel is also becoming a multigenerational sport. It is popping up in every town and village. Such initiatives, which are accessible and inclusive for all ages and abilities, are powerful. As I said at the outset, they can lead to a marked improvement in our physical and mental health, community-building and the development and growth of friendships.

I compliment the work of the Government and multiple Departments. We can always continue to do more. An emphasis on changing places facilities for those who are most vulnerable and most in need of help and dignity can be powerful in ensuring we are inclusive for all abilities and ages.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): I call Senator Ní Chuilinn to reply. She has five minutes.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: I will not need five minutes. I do not think I have ever stood here before and said that I echo every single word that every Senator has said during the course of a debate, so I thank them all very much. I appreciate the effort everyone made to be here. Senator Harmon and I were clear that we did not want this report to sit on a shelf. We were not on the sport committee when this report was completed. I commend the previous committee on sport on the work it put into this because there was a lot of stakeholder engagement and it is an important issue.

I have learned two encouraging things from listening today. First, we are all on the same page. Everyone here, along with every community and county, has a story about what is working well and where we are seeing the dividends of investment where people are getting greater access to sport and physical activity, whether that is people from the LGBTQI+ community, people with disabilities or women. Women are still in the minority in the sport world, and we must acknowledge that. We have made enormous strides, however. As someone who has spent 25-odd years in the sport sector as a professional, I can tell the House that it is utterly different from what it was 20 or 25 years ago. That is positive and it is down to a lot of the investment the Minister of State mentioned regarding women in sport.

I am encouraged to hear about the disability in sport lead appointed in Sport Ireland and Sport Disability Week that took place last December. We look forward to the 2026 week. I am sure many Senators will be able to visit some of the events happening during that week.

Senator Mark Duffy mentioned how inclusion in sport encourages social inclusion, which really rings true. It encourages people to feel welcome. That is what this report is all about. All 17 recommendations are trying to get to the point where people see themselves reflected in policy and see a place that is welcoming for them to take part in sport.

The Minister of State mentioned the next national sport policy. Obviously, it is going to be an important document. The first national sport policy is coming to its end. It was the first policy of its kind, and it was transformative for the industry. It put funding on a solid footing and brought about greater investment in infrastructure. There is a lot of planning in that regard. All but five of the 47 actions in that national sport policy have had progress, so it is important. It means the next iteration is going to be even more important because the sporting landscape is completely different compared to 2016 before the 2017 sport policy was put in place. I welcome the engagement on the next national sport policy. It would be useful to have many of these recommendations looked at ahead of the consultation process for the next national sport policy, which I am sure the Minister of State's Department will engage in.

The Minister of State also mentioned sporting volunteers. Volunteers were not mentioned much today because we were talking about inclusion, but volunteers are everywhere, be it in inclusion sport or equality. Every sport in this country would grind to a halt without the volunteers on the ground. There is a need for continued and increased support for volunteers, such as training around autism or the LGBTQI+ community, in order to ensure volunteers feel supported in their roles. Basically, without volunteers, sport in this country would fall apart. I acknowledge those volunteers.

I thank all those who have contributed to this debate today. I thank the Minister of State for giving so much of his time. It is much appreciated. I wish to keep this issue on the agenda.

The best way to achieve that is to have another discussion in a few months' time about the next national sport policy. Gabhaim buíochas le gach duine ar fad.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.06 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.32 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.06 p.m. and resumed at 1.32 p.m.

Naturalisation and Citizenship: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on Irish naturalisation and citizenship. Ireland has been transformed by migration over recent decades. People from every corner of the world have chosen to live, work, study and raise families here. They have contributed enormously to our economy, our public services, our communities and our culture, and they will continue to do so in the years ahead. Migration has strengthened Ireland and enriched our society in countless ways.

It is important for me to say clearly that this Government recognises the value of those contributions. We remain fully committed to maintaining a migration system that is welcoming to those who come here legally and contribute to Irish society. At the same time, the Government has been clear that our migration system must be firm, fair and effective. That is essential to maintaining public confidence in our immigration framework.

The programme for Government contains a commitment to continue implementing a firmer migration system that protects the integrity of our immigration framework. Last year, the Government approved a broad package of policy and legislative reforms aimed at ensuring Ireland's migration system remains efficient, sustainable and aligned with international best practice. As part of that wider programme of reform, we are now reviewing aspects of our citizenship legislation.

Irish citizenship is a significant status. It is an earned privilege. It is one of the most important legal relationships that can exist between an individual and the State. Irish citizenship brings with it important rights, opportunities and protections; it also carries responsibilities. It represents far more than residence in Ireland. It reflects a lasting and enduring bond with this country, its people and our shared future.

As citizenship represents the fullest expression of membership of Irish society, it is important that the legislative framework governing access to citizenship is robust, fair and sustainable. As legislators, it is entirely appropriate that we periodically review the legal framework governing citizenship. Our laws must continue to meet current needs, reflect international developments and support a modern and effective migration system. The Government has a responsibility to review citizenship policy and adapt its frameworks in light of changing migration patterns, demographic developments and evolving public policy objectives.

The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and I recently secured Government approval for priority drafting of legislation to strengthen Ireland's naturalisation framework. The reforms being

considered are intended to ensure that the pathway to citizenship by naturalisation reflects a genuine, sustained and meaningful connection to Ireland. The general scheme of the Bill approved by the Government contains several key proposals, and I would like to outline some of them.

First, the scheme proposes increasing the standard residence requirement for naturalisation applicants from five to eight years. Under the proposed model, an applicant would generally be required to demonstrate two years of continuous residence immediately before applying, together with six additional years of residence accumulated over the previous ten-year period. The rationale is straightforward. Citizenship is an enduring status. It is therefore reasonable that applicants demonstrate a stronger and more established connection to the State before that status is granted.

Second, the scheme proposes the introduction of a power to require applicants to demonstrate language proficiency. Importantly, applicants would be able to demonstrate competence in English, Irish or Irish Sign Language. That objective is there not to create barriers but to support integration and ensure that citizens can participate fully in public life, access services, understand their rights and responsibilities and engage confidently in civic and democratic processes. Importantly, the legislation would provide flexibility regarding the standard required, the method of assessment and the circumstances in which exemptions or waivers may be appropriate.

Third, the scheme proposes the introduction of a civics, society and politics requirement. This reflects the principle that citizenship involves active participation in the life of the State. Understanding how our institutions operate, the rights we enjoy and the responsibilities we share helps to strengthen social cohesion and encourage active citizenship. We will ensure that any testing regime is proportionate, fair, accessible and transparent, and supports meaningful participation in Irish civic life without creating unnecessary barriers to naturalisation. The objective is not to reward educational achievement; rather, it is to ensure that individuals can navigate daily life, communicate effectively in their communities, participate fully in the workplace and perform the important duties of citizens, including voting and, where called upon, jury service.

The scheme proposes measures relating to self-sufficiency. The objective is to promote independence and support positive integration. It is important to note that detailed operation of these provisions would be determined through regulations following consultation with relevant Departments and stakeholders.

In addition, the scheme proposes amendments relating to reckonable residence. These changes would provide greater clarity regarding the categories of residence that may be counted towards naturalisation and would provide that certain temporary permissions and schemes, including residence under the temporary protection directive, would not be reckonable for citizenship purposes.

These proposals should be considered in the broader European context. Some commentary has suggested that Ireland would become an outlier if these reforms were enacted. That is simply not the case. Citizenship policy is ultimately a matter for each sovereign State. Across Europe, countries have adopted different pathways to naturalisation, but almost all require

applicants to demonstrate a substantial period of lawful residence and, in many cases, some degree of language competence and civic understanding.

Fourteen EU member states require eight years or more of residence before naturalisation. Ireland is currently the only EU member state that does not require some form of language competence for citizenship by naturalisation. Civic integration requirements are also common across Europe, with 22 member states having some form of civic knowledge, civics or citizenship requirement. Taken together, these proposals would bring Ireland more closely into line with established European practice while maintaining a fair, balanced and accessible pathway to citizenship.

While we are discussing changes to citizenship policy, it is equally important to acknowledge the significant work undertaken in recent years to improve the operation of the naturalisation system. The number of citizenship applications received in recent years has increased substantially. Despite this growth in demand, considerable progress has been made in improving processing arrangements, modernising systems and reducing decision times. Improvements in digital processes, enhanced operational capacity and ongoing reforms have enabled the Department to process applications more efficiently while maintaining the integrity of the system.

Citizenship ceremonies play an important role in marking the transition from lawful residence to full membership of the Irish community. Only last week I had the privilege of attending a citizenship ceremony for our newest citizens. It is always a powerful reminder of what citizenship means to people to be present at the ceremony when it is granted. The pride, commitment and sense of belonging demonstrated by people taking the declaration of loyalty and fidelity to the State remind us that Irish citizenship remains highly valued at home and around the world.

That pride is important. It reflects the enduring value of Irish citizenship and the strength of the connection people feel to the country. The purpose of these reforms is not to diminish the attractiveness of Irish citizenship but rather to protect and reinforce its value for future generations. We want a system that is fair, transparent and sustainable, one that supports integration, strengthens public confidence and reflects the significance of the bond created when a person becomes an Irish citizen. That is the objective of these proposals.

I look forward to engaging constructively with all stakeholders as the proposals are considered in the months ahead and to hearing the views of Senators here today.

Senator Cathal Byrne: The Minister of State is most welcome to the Seanad Chamber today. I commend him and his officials in the Department of justice on bringing forward some changes to how the citizenship procedures, processes and laws work. I think these are changes for the better, and I commend the Minister of State and the work he has done in the whole area of temporary protection, the closing down of IPAS centres, the establishment of deportation flights and the speeding up of the processing of applications for asylum.

It is very important the core idea underpinning that system is the same as what underpins this system, which is that we must have a firm, fair and effective immigration system. Part of that is ensuring the value of Irish citizenship is protected into the next generation. That speaks to a lot of the reforms the Minister of State is looking to bring in here which, in my view, are

about ensuring that citizenship, while not being difficult to obtain, is something that is cherished and comes with a set of criteria clearly laid out for anybody to see in order that were he or she to want to become an Irish citizen, the rules are there.

It is a good thing to extend the length of time an individual has to have lived in Ireland from five years to eight years to apply for citizenship. It is fair and reasonable to expect anybody who applies for Irish citizenship to have proficiency in the language of this country. It is important there are clear provisions and clarifications brought to the citizenship rules in respect of how an individual can have his or her citizenship revoked. It is important legal certainty exists in that area. While it is a rare occasion on which a person's citizenship is revoked, the institutions of the State must retain the ability to revoke citizenship in those areas. In the provisions the Minister of State has put forward and the legislation coming before us, I note it would only be revoked when it is considered necessary in the interest of public policy, public order or national security. It is important we have that certainty about what criteria can be used to revoke citizenship.

Perhaps, when looking at this legislation, there also needs to be greater certainty around long-term residence and the rules for people who have lived here for 20 or 30 years on long-term residency visas and their ability to apply for citizenship. It is important to have clear certainty on that in the new scheme of rules and regulations to be brought before us shortly.

I commend the Minister of State to make reforms in this area. The people I speak to want certainty about citizenship and the process around it. The changes the Minister of State is bringing forward are a move in the right direction.

Senator Michael McDowell: I welcome the Minister of State here today. I wish to make a few comments about what he has told us today is his view of this legislation.

First, as the Minister of State said, citizenship is not the right to carry an Irish passport. Citizenship is not the right to move from Ireland to other countries in the EU and to reside there under EU freedom of movement provisions. Citizenship is not a purely transactional matter which arises from the fact you have been physically located on Irish territory for a certain period. It is not some form of ATM transaction in which "I have been here for five years and I demand to be regarded as an Irish citizen". That is a complete misunderstanding of citizenship.

When we look at the Constitution, and sometimes people do not, Article 9 states the fundamental political duty of citizenship is fidelity to the Irish nation and loyalty to the State. These are the most fundamental duties of citizens but there are a whole series of other duties, such as the obligation to serve on a jury, as the Minister of State mentioned, or the obligation to serve in the Defence Forces if an emergency arose. These are things that are attributes of citizenship.

Citizenship also is nationality. You are joining not merely a concept or construct such as the State and achieving certain rights in that sense but you are also saying, "I want to be part of the Irish nation and I am going to be faithful to the Irish nation. I want to be regarded as a citizen of the Irish State and I am going to be loyal to that State. It is now a state to which I am pledging my loyalty." Therefore, the idea of saying, "I have been here five years. Give me citizenship", is completely misconceived. The fact you live in Ireland for any particular period may or may not entitle you to citizenship but at the very least, if you become a citizen you have

the right under Irish law to participate - if you reside in Ireland - in referendums and elections, to stand for public office and to decide on issues of fundamental importance to the Irish people and their future, submitted by way of constitutional amendment to the people. You have these rights. However, the correlative obligations are that you acknowledge that this is your state and this is your nationality.

Nationality means something. You cannot just simply be an isolated person who cannot speak the language and who stays in a remote community which has nothing to do with Ireland, its traditions, values or whatever. People have to understand this. While I fully understand you may want to have a travel document on the same basis as everybody else who is an Irish citizen, by the same token, that is not the same as saying you are signing on for all the complex obligations to your fellow citizens that being an Irish citizen entails. The heads of the Bill the Minister of State has mentioned have been drafted and the Bill is going to the justice committee for pre-legislative scrutiny. I look forward to it being examined in detail there and I will participate in that examination as a member of the joint committee on justice.

I will say this: I do not accept the proposition that anybody who is in Ireland automatically qualifies for an expectation of citizenship simply by virtue of the fact the law is as it is at the moment and cannot change. I do not accept that proposition. The Minister of State is entitled to bring in legislation that will affect some people's rights and will extend the period for some people on residence grounds to remain in Ireland. However, I ask the Minister of State to consider - and we can tease it out at the justice committee - the position of individuals who are married to Irish citizens and who are bringing up a family in Ireland with an Irish citizen.

I ask him to consider whether an exception could be made in their case such that the existing residence requirements would suffice, in addition to the language and civic educational requirements he is introducing. In other words, if somebody has been here for some time and they have made all their plans as a family based on one of the members of the family, the parent, being an Irish citizen, there could be injustice in saying, "Sorry, but your plans are going to have to change" because we are going to demand that in addition to membership of this family and co-parenting with an Irish citizen, they will have to wait for another three years, or whatever it is, to become a citizen on top of satisfying the language qualification, etc.

I make the point that whereas I do not accept the proposition that the existing time periods are cast in stone and create a legitimate expectation for anybody in Ireland that they will not be changed contrary to their wishes, there could be injustices and problems for families where, for instance, one of the spouses is denied Irish citizenship unnecessarily on the basis of this change. I ask the Minister of State to bear that in mind as something we should look at carefully when we come to pre-legislative scrutiny.

I have one last thing to say. The Irish people are not unreasonable on these matters. In 2004, I remember people said the referendum was racist when it brought Irish law into line with the rest of Europe, and closed a loophole whereby a person expelled from the United Kingdom could, by going to Northern Ireland, have a child there, then go back to England and say they were an EU citizen and could not be got rid of under the Chen and Zambrano case law and all the EU jurisprudence that followed. It was not racist; it was sensible. It has done no wrong to anybody and has done a lot of good to maintain people's confidence that citizenship was not going to be made into a totally artificial status being exploited by people with no

interest in this country at all and who never actually stepped into the jurisdiction of the Twenty-six Counties at any stage, but were, in fact, foreign nationals living in Britain.

I welcome this proposed Bill. I think it is sensible. Nobody can claim to be part of the Irish nation if they cannot understand the languages in which we operate. You cannot be a citizen and participate in an election if you do not know what the election is about. You cannot be a juror if you cannot speak the languages. These things are so obvious when you think about it. We have been lax in the past but there is nothing racist or retrogressive about making a sensible law. In that light, I ask the Minister of State to bear in mind the one exception of which I have spoken. There should be some flexibility for those people who are in a family situation, co-parenting with an Irish citizen, and who should be in a position not to have to wait a further three years if they can satisfy the other criteria proposed to be brought into law.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I acknowledge Deputy Daniel Ennis and his guests in the Gallery, as well as Deputy Paul Gogarty and his guest. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House today.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I too welcome the Minister of State to the House. My comments follow on from the theme of the two previous speakers. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. It is important to recognise what citizenship represents. Irish citizenship is one of the most important legal statuses the State can confer, and the Minister of State made comments in this regard in his contribution too. It provides a person with a permanent legal connection to this country and with the rights and responsibilities that come with being an Irish citizen. For someone who has moved to Ireland, built a life here, worked here, raised a family and become part of the local community, naturalisation can be an incredibly significant moment.

The Government's proposed reforms are about strengthening the integrity and value of Irish citizenship. The general scheme of the Bill proposes a number of significant changes, which the Minister of State has outlined. These include increasing the qualifying period of reckonable residence for most applicants from five years to eight years, including language and civic testing and requiring applicants to demonstrate self-sufficiency. Contraventions of immigration law would be clearly identified as a bar to naturalisation. These are important changes and I suggest that most reasonable people would not have an issue with them. They seek to ensure that citizenship reflects a genuine and durable connection with Ireland, an understanding of our society and a willingness to participate in the life of the State.

It is important that Ireland's system is considered in a wider European context. As the Minister of State also outlined, a number of European countries have residency requirements of between seven and ten years already in place. Indeed, our closest neighbour, the UK, has a period of six years in total to get citizenship through the standard naturalisation route. Language and civic requirements are common across most EU countries. Requirements around self-sufficiency and financial stability are also features of citizenship systems in a number of member states and throughout the world.

I also welcome the proposed strengthening of provisions dealing with immigration law compliance and the protection of the integrity of the naturalisation process. I note changes relating to the revocation of citizenship on public order and national security grounds, together

with a streamlined revocation process. Nobody should have a problem with that either. Given the importance of citizenship, any revocation mechanism must be subject to strong safeguards, due process and appropriate legal oversight.

In particular, I note the proposed provisions relating to people who have been living here under temporary protection. This proposal would clarify that the time spent in the State under temporary protection, including protection provided to people fleeing the war in Ukraine, will not be reckonable for naturalisation purposes, as their country, no doubt, would welcome them back with open arms to rebuild it and its economy.

I understand that the proposed legislation will now proceed to pre-legislative scrutiny by the Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. Like Senator McDowell, I am a member of that committee. We look forward to debating the proposals during that process. No doubt, as Senator McDowell outlined in his contribution, situations will arise that will need full debate and to be looked at in a sympathetic manner.

As far as I am concerned, ultimately, Irish citizenship should remain a valued and meaningful status. These reforms should strengthen confidence in our naturalisation system, while supporting positive integration and ensuring that those who become Irish citizens have a genuine and lasting connection to the country they now call home.

Senator Pauline Tully: Irish citizenship is something to be valued. It represents membership of our nation, it carries rights and responsibilities and it should reflect a genuine and lasting commitment to Ireland. Sinn Féin believes migration must be managed in the best interests of people across Ireland, while recognising our need for workers in key sectors, the pressures on housing and public services and our humanitarian obligations to those fleeing war and persecution. It is a priority to ensure that those who legally make Ireland their long-term home are fully integrated into our society and communities. We recognise that migrants make an enormous contribution to Ireland, including in our public services, economy and communities. Any reforms must recognise and respect that contribution.

International evidence shows that the best way to achieve integration is through a clear, transparent and fair pathway to citizenship that encourages civic participation, community involvement and a genuine connection to the country.

2 o'clock

Sinn Féin recognises that any changes to decision rules can create uncertainty for those seeking to acquire Irish citizenship and this needs to be considered. We are also conscious that delays in residence permit renewals have caused unnecessary anxiety and uncertainty for many people who have made their lives here and those delays must be addressed as a matter of urgency. I regularly encounter people whose residence permits are about to expire. They apply in good time for renewal but are often left with a gap where their residence permit has not been renewed and they cannot continue to work. Their employer has to let them go for a period of time until that residence permit is renewed. That delay in the system needs to be addressed.

For many applicants, delays in renewing residence permits and the absence of a long-term residency option are major reasons why they feel pressure to pursue citizenship as quickly as possible. As the number of citizenship applications has grown, it is right to examine whether the current system remains fit for purpose and whether it properly reflects the significance of

Irish citizenship. For too long, successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments have failed to develop a coherent citizenship policy. The current system relies heavily on length of residence, broad ministerial discretion and rules that are often unclear to applicants. The time spent in Ireland matters but on its own it does not demonstrate integration, contribution, good character or indeed a commitment to Irish society. We believe citizenship should be acquired through a structured and transparent pathway that reflects both the privileges and the responsibilities that come with it.

We support stronger clearer more consistent citizenship rules. Citizenship must not be reduced to a passport acquired simply through the passage of time and equally it must not be a privilege available only to the wealthy. Greater emphasis should be placed on integration, civic participation, community contribution and understanding of Irish society as well as language, be that Irish, English or Irish Sign Language. Work, education, caring responsibilities, volunteering, tax compliance and participation in community life should all be recognised as evidence of contribution and integration.

We want to see a pathway to Irish citizenship for people in the North who have legally moved to the North, including those married to Irish citizens and who meet the same conditions as apply in the South.

We also believe that people who have lawfully built their lives in Ireland should have access to a secure long-term residence status. Citizenship should not be the only route to certainty and stability. The question of whether transitional arrangements should be put in place for people who have established their lives in Ireland under the existing rules with expectations around when they could apply for citizenship based on reckonable residency must be examined.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I thank the Minister of State for coming here for the debate. I recognise that in his opening statement he talked about the need to periodically review the legal framework around citizenship and it is important that we have space for this discussion. It is great to have space for this debate without the context of the legislation. However, my concern is that how it was announced has created a huge amount of concern among our migrant community, many of whom are on the pathway or believed they were on the pathway to citizenship, specifically security and stability in the knowledge they could stay here and build lives here permanently.

My concern is that the way this legislation was announced and these massive changes were announced seems to be in the context of an urgent problem that we have to fix. However, I do not know what the problem is and maybe the Minister of State can outline what it is. What emergency are we responding to with this legislation? A lot of people feel that they are having the rug pulled out from underneath them. They have been living here and have been contributing. In some instances, they might have married Irish people but even if they have not married Irish people, their kids might be in school and they want to build lives here. They are contributing to our economy and to our communities.

Some applicants may have been here for four years and six months. They had a pathway, a plan for their lives and suddenly that is about to change. In many ways, it actually directly impacts integration. The Minister of State spoke a lot about the importance of integration as all of the contributors have. Integration is important and I hope this will come into the pre-legislative scrutiny in the justice committee. There is a plethora of research showing that

having no pathway to citizenship or permanent residency and no pathway to stability of where they live for the future can have a direct impact on their ability to integrate. There is a huge amount of research into that. What is really frustrating about the context of this debate is that I am not getting the evidence on which we are making this change. All of our policy-making should be based on evidence and I am not seeing the evidence upon which this change was made.

The Minister of State mentioned about bringing us so that we are not an outlier in Europe. I do not accept that point because 11 other countries have a five-year requirement. My major concern is that we are not considering alternative pathways for migrants to apply for permanent residency. Citizenship is one thing, but creating stability so people can live here in the long term is another. Many countries do not permit dual citizenship. Some people may not want to give up the citizenship of their country of origin but they do want to build a life here. Therefore, having that alternative is really important.

I have concerns from the scant information that we have so far on the plans. One of them relates to the requirements around work. Obviously, we want people to be in our society contributing actively; that is really positive. However, what if someone becomes sick or is made redundant? Are they excluded from applying for citizenship because they have taken statutory sick pay? Will someone who may have had cancer or some sort of chronic illness be excluded? They might be looking after a relative, possibly their partner, and in receipt of carer's benefit. Will they be excluded because they received that social welfare payment? In that case, we are sort of saying that the only pathway to citizenship is for people who have money and do not need to rely on support in the State even if they have been taxpaying citizens and actively contributing. If medical staff, nurses, doctors, people who come to look after our sick and our elderly, and people in the care space get statutory sick pay will they be excluded? That is a really important question that a lot of people want answered because there is not clarity on that. Will someone with a disability be denied because they receive disability payment or disability allowance?

We have already heard from one of the other Senators about the break in the Irish residence permit, IRP, renewal. There have been chronic delays in IRP renewals, as I am sure the Minister of State knows. I know there is a grace period. Will the grace period be included when it comes to totting up the months that someone has been in the country, for example? Many people have been way over. Let us say there are three months that they can apply for. They can apply on 1 March and they have three months to receive. Particularly during the Covid pandemic, there were massive delays. Again, anxiety is being created for people around that.

I am not inherently opposed to the language requirement. I agree with the other contributors on the need to be able to actively engage in society. To do so, people absolutely need to speak the language of that country, but we also need to ensure that there is State support for that because there is a cost to their getting language lessons. Again, we are saying that pathway to citizenship only exists if people have the money to pay for those lessons. There is a component around that too. The Minister of State is shaking his head. Maybe he will be able to outline if that will be part of the support programmes he plans within that.

We need to think about the long-term planning of this country. The government's own Project 2040 plan outlined the need for inward migration to meet the demographic changes that we are going to be seeing to fuel our economy. Administrative and support services rely on

having 45% non-Irish labour. For accommodation and food services, it is 45%. In the information and communication sectors, it is 41%. We need highly skilled people. There is a competitive market for highly skilled labour in Europe at the moment. In order to get people into the country, we need to be attractive and incentivise. There are lots of different ways we can offer those incentives. A really clear way is providing a pathway to permanent residency. However, we are making that more difficult and more challenging through these changes. It will create insecurity and they will choose to take their high skills elsewhere. I receive emails from people working in the tech sector who are saying this.

I worry that we are creating a double-edged sword with this and I hope that will be discussed in the pre-legislative scrutiny. We are actually disincentivising people whom we need in our economy and in our labour market and that is a concern.

I will pick up on the question of alternative pathways and alternative citizenship. As I mentioned, not everyone wants to give up their citizenship if their country does not allow dual citizenship. We are quite unusual that we do not have a permanent residency status. In addition, becoming a citizen obviously has a cost to it and some people cannot afford that because of other obligations, etc., in their lives. Permanent residency gives a migrant a sense of certainty and stability that actually supports adopting and integrating into a new culture. That stability and knowing they have a long-term future somewhere is a really core component of that.

We do know that reducing access to citizenship status or having no permanent residency will have a direct impact on integration. For example, if I moved to the US for a job and I had to apply every single year for my residency application to be approved and I had a child and my child starts school but I still have to keep making that application, it would not give me a sense of hope for a future there. It would not give me a sense of stability.

That is what we are looking at here. If social cohesion and integration are our end goal, then changing the goalposts and narrowing the criteria could have a negative knock-on consequence for that.

I am not opposed to this debate. I am not opposed to having new discussions about how people can live fruitful, stable, integrated and communal lives in Ireland. However, we have a glaring gap with not having a permanent residency status. It is a glaring gap in Ireland. If I am honest, my concern is that this debate is reactionary, that we are posturing and it is not based on policy and evidence. I feel we have relentless negativity from the Government when it comes to the question of migration and a feeding of a negative statement towards migrants is having a direct impact on people. We know there is a rise in racism and in hate crime. We have seen that over the past 12 months and it is absolutely awful. It is not what any of us in the two Houses wants. We need to be careful of how we conduct this debate and to be mindful of the people and the very real lives that are affected whenever discussions about who is and is not valuable to us as a State are put into the public realm. It has real knock-on consequences. I hope this debate will continue to be constructive, evidence-based and grounded in the lives of real people and what our country needs in the long term.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I welcome this debate today. I think it is great. I will start by saying that citizenship is not a right afforded to people and there is not an automatic entitlement to it. It should be earned. The proposed changes to citizenship rules have made people sit up

and realise that up until now we essentially put zero restrictions on acquiring citizenship, and that should not be. Irish citizenship should be valued. Our requirements are laughable compared with other countries. If you want to apply for citizenship in Sweden you must have eight years of residency. It is 12 years of residency in India and 15 years in Nigeria with no criminal record in that time. There has been criticism of the new proposals but they should be viewed through a positive lens both for the benefit of those applying and for integration. People need to have an interest in Ireland and not just in the value of an Irish passport. If you cannot speak the language of a country, if you know nothing about its culture or traditions and you cannot financially support yourself, you have no business applying for citizenship. One of the proposals is that people demonstrate they can support themselves and not become an unreasonable burden on the State. This is only right and reasonable. I would never expect to move to America or Australia and immediately expect access to social housing and welfare. Aontú has raised this issue and suggested language checks for citizenship. A few weeks later, the Government is running with the idea and I welcome that.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for being here and welcome him to the House. At the outset I wish to stipulate that every State has the right to set its own terms on citizenship. I fully appreciate that and I am not arguing for open borders. However, I am saying that citizenship matters and asking people to show real commitment is reasonable. When the scheme was initially approved, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, said that Ireland values the contributions that migrants make. I believe him, but that fairness has to cut both ways. I know outside the gate today there are many people who came here on critical skills visas and so on. They came here in their thousands under the rules we had already set. They are nurses, engineers and carers, etc. People were recruited under the critical skills permit because we needed them. I got many emails from them in the past couple of weeks. I will give the example of one who arrived in 2023 and planned their life around a five-year plan that would see a new life for them. They came here with good intentions. That has now moved to eight years. They are not looking for special treatment but are asking why the goalposts are being moved halfway through the match. My first ask is about transitional protection. Should people already on the path in Ireland be judged by the rules they came in under? Is there a grandfather scheme or what happens to them?

Second, the scheme speaks of citizenship as an earned privilege and aligning ourselves with Europe. I understand that but it does not say what specific problem each new condition that is being introduced is meant to fix. The conditions include the eight years, the income test, the language and the civic tests. I am practical and pragmatic. If you name the problem then you can measure the answer. That brings me to my third ask. I am thinking about a review of the Bill requiring that a report to both Houses be provided within two years of commencement on whether the changes do exactly what they set out to do. I think that is only fair in any law.

A friend of mine was recently in intensive care in St. James's Hospital. It was meant to be a simple procedure. He ended up staying there eight weeks and the majority of staff on that ward were nurses from Kerala, India. The people who staff our wards and build our homes deserve fair play when it comes to this. When I have spoken on the radio about migration, I have been accused of wanting open borders. Then I would be on another show and be accused of not wanting any migrants. It is a delicate topic and it is hard to play all sides, but I think

fairness is what is required. I also believe that changing the goalposts in the middle of the match is unfair.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I have closing remarks to hand but I am going to speak back to what people have said. The first thing I want to make absolutely clear from my perspective as a Minister of State, from the Government's perspective and that of the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, is that we believe in fairness. Absolutely, at the heart of the decisions we try to take day to day on any aspect concerning migration, fairness and how it will impact are always at the forefront of our consideration. What we have looked at in this area with the changes we are bringing forward, is what we believe is a fair system. We believe it is a fair system in how it will impact on people who are going through the process to achieve what is an incredible privilege, which is Irish citizenship, and how it will impact on the State by having a system in place that is fair and reflects the modern values of the State. Every Government, as Senator McDowell said, is entitled to bring in a review of legislation and make changes to put in place what it believes to be the correct approach. In this area, that is what we are attempting to do. We are not fundamentally trying to make it more difficult for people to achieve citizenship. We are trying to have a process that will result in more inclusive citizenship for somebody who has earned the privilege of citizenship.

A Senator who is unfortunately no longer present raised a number of things and asked what this or that will be. We have to be factual about these things. We are having an early set of statements on legislation that is going in for pre-legislative scrutiny. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot ask everything you want to cherry-pick and look for an answer today when you know, as a legislator, that all those questions you are asking are part of the process we are going to go through. It is important to recognise that I want that pre-legislative scrutiny to be deep and strong and to give people an opportunity to work through these questions. We are not trying to do anything suddenly.

I want to draw one or two small points. First, I appreciate people feel it is important to make mention here and there of other things but I do not want to conflate this discussion with things like IRP cards and how fast we are renewing them or whatever. To be clear, I recognise the problem that was in that area. I have committed extra resources and have asked my officials to commit extra resources to ensure we have a much better and more functioning process there. It does not have a particular impact in this area.

I want to challenge Senator McCarthy on one thing. I take his bona fides on it and he brought a smile to my face with the notion that he could be in favour of an open-door immigration policy one day and the next be accused of being anti-migrant. It is something as Minister of State with responsibility for migration that I experience almost daily. Sometimes it can happen within an hour and within the one debate.

Language is so important. I really value the work that is done by so many people who have come into this country, who work not just in the health system but in our tech industry and in construction. I want them to be here. I want them to participate fully in the country they have chosen to live in and to be able to work and to do all the other things. However, they do not come for citizenship. They come because they want to work, to live here, to participate and to base themselves here. The notion that somehow or other they think they have an automatic

right to Irish citizenship because they have come here to work is not an idea I support. Citizenship is a privilege. It is something people must value, and they must have that as part of a process that is fair to them and to the State. That does not mean we want them to leave or that we somehow or other do not value them as much. Many EU states have a residence period of ten years and many have one of eight or nine years. Yes, others have a shorter period. Until now, we have had a shorter period. That does not mean that those states value or devalue those people. It does not mean that we use the number of years to compete as to whether or not people come here to work. I would like to think that one of the reasons people come here to work is that they get an opportunity to be part of a vibrant, strong, modern Ireland, to choose to earn their living here and to get the benefits of the pay and conditions available here in the industry or job in which they have chosen to work. I would be disappointed if the idea was that they picked a country off a map because they thought they would get citizenship in five years. If they have a plan that wants them to be here for long, surely we can build those extra few years into it.

Issues were mentioned and thrown out about language support and that we must support people. To make it clear, we already do. We have integration funding and supports that help, through partnerships, people with language and language skills. It is critical that if someone wants to play a firm, developed role as a citizen in the country they have chosen to get citizenship in, their integration is based on the fact that they can use one of the main languages, whether the day-to-day language of English or the other official languages of Irish or Irish Sign Language. That is so important. I do not for one minute think that is an impediment to somebody getting citizenship. That is an enhancing process for someone to be able to use their citizenship to enjoy the full benefits of having it.

I thank the Senators for their remarks. I look forward particularly to engaging with those who are on the justice committee and who have indicated their involvement in this process. We have now a process that will take place. At its heart, I believe that at the end of it we will have a better, more effective system that is fair to all. That is what the Minister and I want to see in terms of this legislative change.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I ask the Acting Leader when it is proposed to sit again.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: At 1 p.m. next Tuesday.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 2.24 p.m. go dtí 1 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 29 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 2.24 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 29 September 2026.