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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 29 Meán Fómhair 2026

Tuesday, 29 September 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 1 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome Peter and Zoe who work with the US Embassy. They are both welcome to Seanad Éireann along with visitors from a school in Booterstown. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann today and I thank them for being here.

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

Senator Gareth Scahill - the need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the current status and expected timelines for the delivery of the new school building project for Scoil an Chroí Naofa, Ballinasloe, County Galway.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly - the need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to make a statement on a potential underground alternative to the overhead North-South interconnector.

Senator Anne Rabbitte - the need for the Minister of State with special responsibility for nature, heritage and biodiversity to make a statement on the policies in place to protect biodiversity and natural heritage in woodland areas, in particular at Merlin Park Woods, Galway.

Senator Victor Boyhan - the need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the increase in the minimum annual core funding level for family resource centres set out in budget 2026 and the establishment of ten additional centres across the country.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - the need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the provision of additional funding for roads in the Cavan and Monaghan area.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the provision of adequate respite services so that all family carers can receive regular and appropriate respite free of charge at point of use.

Senator Mike Kennelly - the need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the provision of emergency funding for the N69 from Tarbert to Listowel and the Kilflynn area in County Kerry.

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

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Schools Building Projects

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, to the Chamber. She is most welcome, and I thank her for being here.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I thank the Minister for coming into the House to speak about a project that I know she is very familiar with. I acknowledge the significant announcement last January that included Scoil an Chroí Naofa among the 105 school projects prioritised to progress to tender for construction during 2026-27 as part of an initial investment of more than €1.6 billion by the Minister and her Department. I welcomed that announcement then, and I welcome it again today. I thank the Minister for her involvement in progressing that undertaking and making that announcement in January.

I also acknowledge another important development for the school this year, which was the inclusion in the DEIS plus programme. I have seen and heard about the impact the additional supports have already had on the children in Scoil an Chroí Naofa. This is a school dealing every day with the reality of socio-economic disadvantage and DEIS plus recognises that some schools face particularly concentrated levels of disadvantage and need additional supports to respond to that situation. I thank the Minister for recognising that need in Ballinasloe and, importantly, for giving the principal, Christine Connor, and her staff additional resources to support the work they are already doing for the children.

It also reinforces the argument, however, that the physical infrastructure in Scoil an Chroí Naofa needs to catch up with the investment we are making inside the classrooms. Today, approximately 300 students attend this DEIS plus school in the heart of Ballinasloe. It is an incredibly diverse and inclusive school community. I know the Minister is familiar with it and that she has seen the benefit of the environment the teaching staff have created in Scoil an Chroí Naofa.

The school is currently educating 21 nationalities. The staff are dealing with children from the Traveller community and with students who have autism and developmental language delays. Unfortunately, the staff are trying to do this in a building not currently fit for purpose. The school operates from two separate sites on opposite sides of the road. Children and staff have to cross a road during the school day, which I know the Minister saw first hand when we visited the school recently. As we were waiting for the students, we saw a full classroom of them crossing that road and coming over to the assembly area.

One of the buildings the school is operating from was built in 1937, and the other is from 1972. It was originally intended as a temporary building. Its inadequate insulation and ageing infrastructure mean that the capital costs of running the school are putting it at a distinct disadvantage. The school has done what it has been asked to do. The planning permission is in place and the project is designed. A new 16-classroom primary school with additional special education classrooms has been at stage 2B for quite some time. I know the Minister's Department has it down as dating from March 2025 but the history of this project goes back much further than that.

I acknowledge the work of the previous Senator from Ballinasloe in this House, Aisling Dolan. I acknowledge all the public representatives who have made representations on behalf of the school. Once again, I also acknowledge the Minister for listening, delivering on the DEIS plus inclusion and moving this project to the next stage. More importantly, however, I acknowledge Christine Connor, the board of management, the parents and the staff for their patience in respect of this matter.

The announcement in January gave them something they had been waiting for for a very long time: the certainty that the school was finally being prioritised. The Minister gave them that reassurance. We are now eight months further along, so my purpose this morning is to seek to provide a little bit of clarity to the school. It has won the argument and does not need to convince the Minister of this need for the project to go ahead.

The Government recognises the need. The Minister recognises the need. Even the Taoiseach has visited the school and recognised the need. The DEIS plus status is recognition of that, but we now need the building. What has happened since the project was announced in January? What remains to be completed before it can proceed to tender? Is there anything outstanding from the school or its design team that is preventing progress? More important, when can the pupils, parents and staff of Scoil an Chroí Naofa Galway expect the project to go to tender?

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir as aird a tharraingt ar an ábhar seo. Tugann sé deis dom plé a dhéanamh ar stádas reatha an tionscadail seo.

I thank the Senator for raising this issue regarding Scoil an Chroí Naofa in Ballinasloe, County Galway. I recently visited the school with the Senator and other Oireachtas Members and elected representatives. I saw first hand the fantastic work happening there, through principal Christine Connor, her leadership team, the staff, the board of management and parents. A huge amount of work, dedication and commitment was on display to me and I want to commend them on the great work they are doing.

As the Senator knows, the building project for the school is a 16-classroom primary school with three classrooms for special education needs. The major building project is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, that is, stage 2B, detailed design. It includes an application for statutory approvals, which have been secured, and the preparation of tender documents. My Department received the stage 2B submission report from the design team in March 2025. A detailed review of the report by the multidisciplinary team commenced and comments subsequently issued to the design team requesting clarification. These comments have been addressed by the design team and the responses are currently undergoing a detailed review in my Department. Once the Department's due diligence and governance review has been

completed, the project can be authorised to progress to the next stage, that is, stage 3, tender action and reward.

As part of the NDP implementation plan for the education and youth sector, a first tranche of projects to progress to tender or construction during this year and next was published in January 2026. The school was included as one of those 105 projects to proceed to tender. All school building projects over €10 million must be submitted for approval to the Department of public expenditure and reform before proceeding to construction. This school is one of a number of projects that will shortly be under review by the Department.

Since 2020, my Department, as Senator knows, has invested over €7 billion in our schools throughout the country under the NDP. Over 1,600 school building projects have been completed, along with 4,300 small scale improvement works to meet priority maintenance needs and advance energy efficiency climate goals. A total capital allocation of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth has been confirmed for 2026 to 2030. As previously mentioned, the school is among the first tranche of 105 projects to progress to tender and construction in 2026 and 2027. As part of the NDP allocation, my Department will place a strong emphasis on provision for children with additional needs, with a particular focus on meeting annual school place needs. The project the Senator has raised caters for children with additional needs.

Since 2020, the Department has provided over €283 million in capital funding for schools in Galway. Over this period, a total of 98 schools have been upgraded through the provision of a new school building, extension, modular accommodation or a climate pathfinder. There were ten school projects included in the NDP implementation plan to progress to tender or construction, including this school. There are currently 17 large scale extension, modular or climate pathfinder projects under construction in Galway as well as other projects.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I thank the Minister. I have seen by her actions that she has prioritised this project. From working with her Government colleagues, we know they have prioritised this project.

We all know the need and this is a programme that the Government needs to deliver for Ballinasloe.

The Minister mentioned that the project is valued at over €10 million. Has the necessary approval from the Department of public expenditure been secured to allow the project to proceed to tender? If that approval has not yet been secured, what specifically needs to happen now to get the sign-off and move Scoil an Chroí Naofa to tender as quickly as possible so that Christine Connor, her staff and the students of Scoil an Chroí Naofa can see their new school realised as quickly as possible?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: As the Senator will be aware, all schools over €10 million must be submitted to the Department of public expenditure and reform and that is where it is at at present. There is an absolute commitment by me, as Minister for Education and Youth, to ensure that Scoil an Chroí Naofa can move to tender and I expect that will happen shortly. The engagement with the Department of public expenditure and reform has been positive. I absolutely recognise the need and the urgency around this going to tender. The Senator

mentioned the DEIS plus status, which is so important for schools such as Scoil an Chroí Naofa to complement and support the fantastic work that is happening by the school leadership and staff. This new state-of-the-art building is the next step in their journey. It is with the Department of public expenditure and reform, but I expect it will go to tender very shortly.

North-South Interconnector

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, here this morning and I thank him for coming. However, I am disappointed that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is not here. I thank the Minister of State for taking this important debate. I want to raise the North-South interconnector again because, for farmers and landowners, this has been ongoing for so long. This project affects communities across Meath, Cavan and Monaghan, and, in the North, Armagh and Tyrone. There are people who have had this hanging over their heads for the past 15 years and it has been a consistent and persistent stress to the people who are involved along the route.

Planning permission for pylons was granted almost ten years ago, but here is the problem: EirGrid never sought approval for the access routes it would need to get onto the land. Now, ten years later, they are trying to sort those access routes out. One of the conditions of the planning permission was that the local authorities would approve the access arrangements. The Government is now putting huge pressure on these local authorities to get the conditions dealt with.

The worst part is that the people who are directly affected, the landowners, still have no clue where the planned access routes are. ESB and EirGrid have now submitted their finalised routes to the local authorities but many farmers who could be directly affected have not been given that information. They have had to use freedom of information requests to try to find out what is being planned on their own land. That is an absolute scandal and it should not be.

I have to ask the Minister - he is not here but maybe the Minister of State can answer - why has he not met with the North-East Pylon Pressure campaign group. These people have been raising concerns for the people affected for the past 15 years. They represent these landowners and they deserve to sit across the table from the Minister to get their questions answered and their concerns heard. The Minister met with the chief executives of Cavan County Council and the Monaghan and Meath local authorities, but refused a meeting with the councillors of Monaghan County Council who represent the people who are affected. Is the plan of action to pretend these people do not matter or the issue that they need to be listened to does not exist? Their rights are completely steamrolled.

For years, we were told that undergrounding was simply too expensive but if the Government tries to push this through without discussion, it will end up spending years in legal disputes with landowners. That means more delay and more cost. We have already seen legal challenges from landowners in the Supreme Court ruling on compensation in the case with a family in Cavan.

The focus seems to be on whatever is the cheapest way to build the line, but real focus should now be put on whether this infrastructure can be built without creating another decade of conflict, delays and court proceedings. I believe the Minister has not properly considered the undergrounding, and before we hear it is too costly or impractical, I point him towards the

Kildare-Meath grid upgrade. EirGrid is proceeding with a 400 KW underground connection there. It is clear undergrounding is an option, but the Government expects farmers in Cavan and Monaghan to just put up and shut up.

I understand the Government's argument that the grid needs to be strengthened, which is reasonable and we all agree with that, including the landowners. However, I also know the people affected have been very badly treated and deserve a hearing, as well as to be across the table from the Minister and the organisation that represents its point of view.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank the Senator for raising this important topic. Unfortunately, as she is aware, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is currently chairing a European Council meeting of his own format. However, I am extremely familiar with this, not just as the son of a Cavan woman, but also as someone who has a considerable number of family members still farming across both Cavan and Monaghan who have been very active in this campaign for the entirety of its duration, even appearing in national newspapers at times. As the Senator can imagine, this has always made for interesting family dinners.

The North-South interconnector is one of the most important transmission projects we are currently undertaking as a State. Once complete, the project will provide a critical cross-Border connection point for our electricity system, further strengthening and integrating the electricity systems between the North and South. The project, once delivered, is estimated to deliver cost savings of €100 million per annum to households and businesses across the island.

As a transmission project, the North-South interconnector is being undertaken by EirGrid, which designs and operates the system. EirGrid is independent of the Government and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in the exercise of its functions. However, it is regulated by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, which in turn is accountable to a committee of the Oireachtas. In accordance with the 2012 Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure, "The Government does not seek to direct EirGrid and ESB Networks or other energy infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies". EirGrid, as the project developer, has determined that the project must be delivered as an overhead line, and the Government has accepted this expert opinion.

The notion of "undergrounding" the project has been comprehensively assessed on several occasions dating back to 2008, with corresponding independent reports published finding that an overhead line is the appropriate means of delivery. Most recently, in March 2023, the Government noted and published another independent report into the project which concluded that it would not be feasible to run the North-South interconnector underground, confirming that the findings of the 2018 report remained valid. However, public support is key to enabling delivery of the project and that is why it plays such a central role in EirGrid's plans.

EirGrid, as project developer, has been and continues to engage with affected landowners and communities along the route. This is in line with what the Government expects of it and aligns with the 2012 Government policy statement. As Minister, Deputy O'Brien must operate within the regulatory and policy framework regarding the delivery of electricity infrastructure and as such, community engagement is a matter for EirGrid. This is a key point; it is the organisation's responsibility. We often hear about how we need direct ministerial intervention, but sometimes Ministers have to have the ability to let a process go forward and get to

conclusion in a proper way and as agreed. We cannot just tear up the rules every time we want to. We agreed the framework and we now have to let it take its course.

That is why in March of this year, EirGrid wrote to affected landowners along the project route, updating them on the project and offering compensation to those who will host the infrastructure on their land. It is, of course, vital that landowners engage with EirGrid on this process, and the Minister has asked all those who have received such letters to seek that engagement. However, while community engagement is a matter for EirGrid, that does not take away from the concerns of the local community. Local representatives have raised the concerns of the community with the Minister through representations, parliamentary questions and other democratic processes such as this debate.

That is why I am very grateful that the Senator has highlighted these concerns here today. I can confirm they have been heard by the Minister. However, these concerns cannot take away from the independently assessed position that an overhead line is the most appropriate means of delivery. Construction of the project as an overhead line has already commenced in Northern Ireland, with several of the required pylons already built. The Northern Ireland minister for enterprise, Caoimhe Archibald, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, have committed to delivering this project as an overhead line and it is the hope of the Irish Government that construction in the South will commence imminently.

The issue of undergrounding the project has been debated, assessed and determined not to be possible. Now, we must continue to move ahead with delivering the project, the savings and the improvement to our energy infrastructure it allows for.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: The Minister of State said it was a necessary project. I do not think anybody disputes the importance of the infrastructure but it is about how it is delivered and how the landowners whose land it goes across are treated. Does the Minister of State accept that expert opinions differ? Doctors differ and patients die. There are expert opinions on both sides. Would the Minister of State agree it is unacceptable that farmers have to submit freedom of information, FOI, requests to find out where the access routes are on their land? That is not acceptable. I do not think any Minister could stand over that.

The organisation that represents the farmers and the people whose land this infrastructure goes over have not been sat down with or listened to. Nobody is listening to them. Everybody is talking to the councils, the councils talk to the Government, Ministers talk to EirGrid and EirGrid talks to ESB but nobody is speaking to the landowners this affects. The problem is the overgrounding. It can be undergrounded. Nobody is against the project. This is about how it is being delivered.

Deputy Neale Richmond: There are two or three critical issues to this. The Senator mentioned different expert opinions. If this was just a one-off, it was the first time we were discussing it, there were simply two different opinions and you would choose between the two, that would be one thing but this has been going on for 14 years. There has been repeated independent expert opinion, which has been accepted. That is the stage we are at.

When it comes to the level of engagement, community engagement is deliberately in place for EirGrid. It has written to all affected landowners and is happy to meet and engage with

them. That is its responsibility. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has tasked it with that and that is what the legislation allows for.

The solution to this discussion lies in that level of community engagement. It is not about reopening the debate, but making sure that the project is done properly and appropriately, answers the questions the Senator highlighted and makes sure that compensation is delivered. There are a couple of matters we are still waiting for in terms of discharge of agreement from the local authorities. I am happy to write to EirGrid to say that is where the level of engagement must happen.

Environmental Policy

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister of State for being in the House this afternoon to take this Commencement matter in relation to Merlin Woods in County Galway.

Merlin Woods is a place of sanctuary for many people, both physically and mentally. It is also the habitat of many animals. It is regrettable that, in the past few weeks, Galway City Council has commenced the felling of 3.5 acres of trees in Merlin Woods. We understand that a number of the trees fell during Storm Éowyn and the removal of those trees is essential but felling 3.5 acres is beyond belief. It is not going to stop at 3.5 acres - 8.5 acres of felling will take place. It is hard to believe those trees were planted in 1960 by Coillte. It was a commercial decision to plant them. It then fell under the remit of Galway County Council and afterwards the city council. When it came to the decision process and communication, it all fell to Galway City Council.

Councillors in the local area have no say whatsoever in relation to the felling of the trees. I understand about the fallen trees from a health and safety perspective. Coming from Portumna where there are 1,500 acres of forestry at my back door, I completely understand. However, I do not understand the idea of felling trees when any of us who know Merlin Woods know that it is a sanctuary for walkers, runners and those who just need a quiet space.

In that regard, it was disappointing that, when the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, was called upon to take responsibility and flex its muscles when it came to statutory powers, it had none because the response of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage was that the NPWS did not have any statutory responsibility in relation to the management of Merlin Woods. At the end of the day, if a farmer was cutting down trees or burning at the back of their field, the NPWS would not be long finding its statutory responsibility.

This has a lot to do with biodiversity as well. While I have talked about the humans, I will also talk about a lot of the nature that lives within Merlin Woods. There is the red squirrel, which is a protected species by any manner or means. A cricket cannot normally move when you cross the Shannon, but there was no problem here in tearing into taking down the trees, with no consideration whatsoever for the natural habitat. I find it a little bit irksome that the NPWS could not have worked with the local authority and supported the local community as well as listened to the elected representatives on the ground. The fact that the voice of local representatives was null and void in this whole transaction is very disingenuous.

This morning when I was coming up, I noticed that the traffic had gone beyond Bóthar na dTreabh. It has gone out to the N6 today. When the ring road is built, this will be people's only sanctuary. People have to realise that, in Galway, the sea is to our back. Galway is built up in the middle and there is only one green space. That is Merlin Woods. What we are doing today is just carving it down. Where are people going to find their sanctuary?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Senator Rabbitte for raising this important issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister of State with responsibility for nature, heritage and biodiversity, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

Ireland's National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030 provides the overarching framework for the protection and restoration of biodiversity. The national biodiversity action plan, NBAP, sets out Ireland's whole-of-government approach to halting and reversing biodiversity loss and fulfilling our national, European and international commitments on nature conservation. The plan includes a comprehensive suite of actions aimed at protecting, restoring and enhancing habitats and species across the country, including native woodland habitats and the biodiversity they support. Its implementation involves Departments, State agencies, local authorities and other stakeholders working together to improve biodiversity outcomes and strengthen the resilience of ecosystems.

Ireland is also progressing with the implementation of the EU nature restoration regulation, which establishes legally binding nature restoration targets across a range of ecosystems. A draft national nature restoration plan has recently been submitted to the European Commission. The nature restoration plan, developed on a whole-of-government basis under the co-ordination of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, sets out the measures through which Ireland intends to meet its restoration obligations and improve the condition and resilience of ecosystems. The draft nature restoration plan sets out proposed measures for the restoration of a range of terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems, including forests and woodlands. These measures are intended to contribute to the recovery of nature, improve ecosystem resilience, support climate adaptation and enhance the ecosystem services upon which society and the economy depend.

Ireland has an extensive network of protected areas designated under national and European legislation. Our network of terrestrial special areas of conservation, SACs, and special protection areas, SPAs, has been assessed as sufficient to fulfil Ireland's obligations under the EU habitats and birds directives and to contribute to the European Natura 2000 network. In addition to sites protected under EU legislation, Ireland has a range of national nature conservation designations under the Wildlife Acts, including natural heritage areas, NHAs. The designation of NHAs is guided by scientific assessment and established selection criteria, and these national designations complement Ireland's wider network of protected areas and broader biodiversity conservation measures.

The focus of nature conservation policy is therefore on maintaining and improving the condition of protected habitats and species and supporting wider biodiversity conservation and restoration measures across the landscape.

With specific regard to Merlin Woods, which the Senator referenced earlier and in the title of her Commencement matter, the site is owned and managed by Galway City Council, as the

Senator said. The council, therefore, has a key role in the stewardship and day-to-day management of the woodland, including the protection and enhancement of its biodiversity, natural heritage and amenity value. The local biodiversity action fund, LBAF, operated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of housing, provides support to local authorities in delivering projects that contribute to the objectives of the national biodiversity action plan. Through the LBAF, funding is provided to local authorities across the country, including Galway City Council, to develop and implement projects that protect, enhance and restore biodiversity at a local level.

I will bring the specific points the Senator raised to the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister of State. His closing lines summed it up. It is the role of the NPWS. Unfortunately, in its commentary and that of Galway City Council, no engagement seems to have been done by either of the two organisations locally. I appreciate the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, will bring it to the attention of Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, but I ask the latter to intervene and to talk to the NPWS and, in his role in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to the city council. I ask that communication and dialogue be immediately stood up.

At the end of the day, the Minister of State's reply is exactly the answer I hoped he would give today about biodiversity. He gave chapter and verse about why I am standing here talking about biodiversity because that is absolutely what I understood the role of the NPWS to be. I am grateful for the Minister of State's answer today and I absolutely applaud him for bringing back my concerns and looking for the intervention of the other Minister of State with the two authorities.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I thank Senator Rabbitte for bringing forward for discussion this issue, which I am taking on behalf of Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, the Minister of State with responsibility for nature, heritage and biodiversity. Conservation of biodiversity requires action in protected areas and across the wider landscape. Under the implementation of the national biodiversity action plan 2023-2030 and the forthcoming national nature restoration plan, the Government is pursuing a range of measures to protect, restore and enhance habitats and species throughout the State. These efforts are supported by partnership between national and local government, community groups, landowners and other stakeholders. The Department, through the NPWS, will continue to work with the relevant bodies to advance biodiversity conservation objectives and to support the long-term protection and restoration of Ireland's natural heritage. No doubt, the Department and the Minister of State will be keeping an eye on the debate today and on the particular matters the Senator raised. As I said, I will bring them to the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, and the Department.

Senator Chris Andrews: While we wait for the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, I welcome our guest, Mr. Chandy Oommen who is a member of the Kerala legislative assembly in India and a guest of Senator Joe O'Reilly. It is nice to meet him and I hope he enjoys his visit. It is good to see other public representatives visit our Parliament.

Family Resource Centres

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Cathaoirleach for selecting this Commencement matter and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, for coming to take it. It is an area she is passionate about and fiercely committed to.

I join in welcoming our guest from Kerala. It is great to have people from other jurisdictions and representative groups. That is very much part of the spirit of our Parliament, one that is diverse and inclusive, and that engages and welcomes. I therefore wish Mr. Oommen great Irish hospitality and welcome him to the Oireachtas.

Unlike many Members of the Oireachtas who raise stuff about the 2027 budget, I am raising this because it is important, fair and appropriate that we track promises made in the budget announcement for 2026.

Sometimes, we get lost in everything that is ahead of us and do not measure or check the deliverables that were promised in budget 2026. Last year, the Minister announced the establishment of ten new family resource centres, with one each for counties Kerry, Mayo, Wexford, Tipperary, Donegal, Leitrim, Limerick, Louth, Longford and Dublin. Those new centres are in addition to existing centres. This was made possible based on the funding that the Minister and her Department secured as part of the budget 2026 negotiations. It is important to acknowledge that, despite what the public or, sometimes, people in here think, all Ministers bat hard for their sectors and Departments.

Life is a long learning curve for all of us, and I am still learning. We do not all think the same and we do not all have the same hierarchy of priorities. Although we have priorities, there clearly are resource issues and implications. I want to acknowledge the very significant contribution that budget 2026 made to the Minister of State's Department, as it resulted in the number of family resource centres being increased from 126 to 136, which is a steady incremental improvement. As part of budget 2026, the Department also secured minimum funding for all family resource centres, with the amount increased from €160,000 to €180,000, which was welcomed by all of the family resource centres. The trajectory is going the right way. It is not going back or down. It is forward, and that is positive.

I will quote what the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley, said after she, the Minister of State and the Department had secured this deal in budget 2026. She said:

[Family Resource Centres] are of the community and for the community and by the community and they represent our ongoing investment in children, families, and communities across Ireland. I intend to continue via the Budgetary process the expansion of the network of Family Resource Centres over the lifetime of this government.

Clearly, budgetary matters are a matter for the Government and Departments, but the Minister clearly indicated that she would look favourably on this area. I hope that we will read something of that next week.

Supporting families with the appropriate services and supports they need, close to where their communities are, is very much central to the ethos and objectives of the family resource centre programme, so I welcome that. Each family resource centre brings its unique local strengths and a spirit of partnership, enabling support for local people and local communities.

Each one is different within the context of family resource centres. It is important that we continue to strengthen communities and see greater inclusion and integration and early intervention because all of those have massive long-term effects. More importantly, they bring cohesion and support to our communities, including for the children and the families who benefit from the family resource centres.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): Céad míle fáilte roimh and a huge welcome to our dignitaries, who join us from Kerala in India. My council area is that of South Dublin County Council. Its former mayor, who was elected for the Tallaght South electoral district, is from Kerala. I thank the dignitaries for being here.

I thank Senator Boyhan for raising this important issue and giving me the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Foley. I also thank him for acknowledging the process behind the budget negotiations and the amount of work that goes into that. I take this opportunity to thank the officials in my Department who are working as we speak on negotiations for the upcoming budget.

I agree with the Senator from both governance and performance perspectives that we measure the progress that is achieved year on year and measure the progress against the goals for which we sought and received funding. I am delighted to have the opportunity to do that here on the floor today.

The Minister greatly appreciates the advocacy of the Senator on behalf of the family resource centre programme. She knows that the Senator has done extensive work in this area.

As the Senator stated, last year's budget delivered the largest increase in funding for the family resource centre network in eight years. This additional investment enabled the Minister to deliver on the programme for Government commitment to strengthen the family resource centre programme by increasing funding and expanding both its capacity and network.

As the Senator said, funding was secured to provide an increase in the minimum core funding to a new base level of €180,000, up from the previous base level of €160,000. That benefited a significant number of family centre programme members. The Department allocates that core funding for the family resource centre programme through Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Tusla administers the programme, which supports members throughout the country. In addition to that increase in core funding, membership of the family resource centre programme in 2026 also grew. The Senator mentioned this in his own contribution. It has grown by ten members, from 126 programme members to 136. That followed the expansion the year previously from 121 members to 126 members. We doubled that growth trajectory from five new members in 2025 to ten in 2026.

Recent increases in the family resource centre programme membership have been very welcome developments for an additional 15 communities in need of this comprehensive range of services. As the Senator said, and as the Minister, Deputy Foley, said previously, these are for the community, these are of the community, and these are by the community. The Minister, Deputy Foley, understands that Tusla's national commissioning unit, along with the family resource centre national forum, have been working with the new family resource centres to integrate them. That growth has already been seen on the ground. This weekend, the Minister,

Deputy Foley, officially opened the Áiseanna na hÓige family resource centre which is in Dingle. That is one of the ten most recently announced programme members. Earlier this month, the Minister, Deputy Foley, announced €1.3 million in once-off capital investment in Ireland's network of 136 family resource centres. This will also provide each centre with a once-off capital allocation of €10,000 in 2026. That will support locally identified capital, premises, equipment, ICT and infrastructure priorities. It gives the family resource centres the flexibility to identify the investments that will make the greatest difference to the children, to the families and to the communities that they serve.

The benefit of community-based services such as family resource centres cannot be overstated. Many of us have seen first-hand the impacts that family resource centres have on the communities they serve. They engage with vulnerable families, they offer services to individuals across the whole life cycle, from early years to senior citizens, and crucially, they foster a positive and inclusive community spirit. That range of services can be extensive and can be determined by the needs of relevant communities. It is particularly important to note that many are delivered at no cost or low cost to families who may otherwise not be able to access these services.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister of State for that comprehensive response. It is important that we track but also that we tell the good news. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. I ask her to convey my thanks to the Minister, Deputy Foley. One thing I thought about as the Minister of State was speaking is that we have heard a lot about this budget in recent times, and Government policy's targeting approach, where we target the need most. Targeted services and development opportunities, as part of the family resource centre, also act as a focal point. That is important for onward referrals and mainstream services, because at that point, things are picked up at a local level, but they do not always have the capacity or the skill sets. This may not necessarily even be appropriate, but I suggest the Minister look at the interconnectivity in any future review of these family resource centres and how effectively they are integrating and linking in, in a holistic and a bigger way, with the national services.

I commend the family resource centre national forum, which prepared an impressive pre-budget submission for 2027. It is a collaborative document by all of the family resource centres across the country. I thank the Minister of State again. Well done to her officials. I join her in that too. This is a powerful, effective movement working on the ground, supporting local people and local communities. It is community, it is of our community and it is responding to our community. Well done.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Senator for raising this important issue. It is fantastic that the last two budgets have allowed for 15 new family resource centres to be established. I thank the Senator for pointing out the pre-budget submission that was worked on. I will ensure that is brought to the attention of the Minister, Deputy Foley, in the course of budgetary negotiations. As the Senator is aware, the programme for Government has a commitment to work to increase funding and expand the capacity and network of family resource centres. That will obviously be front of mind as we continue negotiations. To use the Senator's own words, they are a powerful, effective community movement, and our Department fully agrees, as does Tusla, which manages the project.

On a separate note, I know the Senator is organising an event for the Oireachtas to mark the 50th anniversary of Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind on Thursday.

I very much look forward to attending that event and recognising the remarkable work the organisation has carried out over the last 50 years.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.50 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.02 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.50 p.m. and resumed at 2.02 p.m.

2 o'clock

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Cathaoirleach: I have a request to mention Adam Coyle, a transition year, TY, student from Longford, who is in the Gallery. He is here on behalf of his grandfather, Michael from Belmullet in County Mayo. Mayo people are everywhere today, including the Acting Leader. Michael is celebrating his 80th birthday. We wish him and all in Belmullet a happy day today. We look forward to getting some of the cake. There are loads of events today to celebrate that.

Senator Mark Duffy: Before I begin, I also welcome Adam Coyle to the House. As a Mayo Senator, it is always great to welcome visitors with connections to the county. Those connections have grown over the past few months since the all-Ireland win.

The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the proposal for a Council decision on the conclusion of the agreement between the European Union and the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the return and readmission of persons who do not, or no longer, fulfil the conditions for entry, presence, or residence in the territory of either party, and No. 2, motion regarding proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the proposal for a Council decision on the signing of the agreement between the European Union and the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the return and readmission of persons who do not, or no longer, fulfil the conditions for entry, presence, or residence in the territory of either party, to be discussed together and to be taken at 3.30 p.m. and to conclude at 4.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed five minutes, all Senators not to exceed five minutes each, and the Minister to be given no less than five minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 70, motion 6, Private Members' business, motion regarding fuel and energy costs to be taken at 5 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Alison Comyn: I mention a moment of enormous pride for Drogheda, my home town. Five young people from the town have been recognised for the 2026 global undergraduate awards. Katelyn Sherry and Robert Finan of Trinity College Dublin are both from Drogheda and have been named global winners in, respectively, politics and international relations, and philosophy.

Kristaps Meiers is a regional winner in visual arts while Caolum Dyas and Czacarri Muli were highly commended in engineering and visual arts. Global winners represent the highest ranking submission in their category worldwide so five students from one town receiving this

level of international recognition really does put Drogheda on the cerebral map. They have done their families, their colleagues and our town enormously proud.

I seek an update from the Minister for Health on access to the shingles vaccination. My colleague Senator Robbie Gallagher raised this issue earlier this year. In May, we heard that the HSE was negotiating with the vaccine provider and that the Department was examining its introduction, initially for immunocompromised people. We are now at the end of September. I know of three women who are currently suffering terribly with shingles. We are talking about all age brackets here. An older friend of mine in Drogheda told me that she recently paid well over €300 for vaccinations. She is a senior citizen so that includes the assistance that is available to her. At the moment, the full vaccination costs €500 to €600. It is not a luxury. Shingles can cause debilitating and long-lasting pain. I ask the Leader to seek a debate or an update from the Minister on these negotiations and on plans to make vaccination more affordable and accessible.

I will return to an issue I have raised very recently, the proliferation of vape shops right across the country. We have a great many of them in my hometown of Drogheda and across Louth. We should examine whether local authorities need stronger planning tools to protect the diversity of our town centres. We already have precedent for public health considerations in planning, including restrictions on fast food outlets being placed close to schools. Could we examine similar measures for vape shops, including restrictions on their concentration and proximity to one another? More broadly, could councils be able to consider the excessive clustering of identical retail uses? This might include the likes of mobile phone shops, nail bars and barber shops. We are seeing far too many of these, particularly in some very small towns and villages. As I said last week, our town centres need variety. They need to attract a multitude of different types of retail. They need independent businesses, services and reasons for people to visit and to stay. I ask for a debate on our planning system, how we can achieve this and how we can help local authorities to achieve greater variety, thereby cutting down on the proliferation on the likes of vape shops.

Senator Joe Conway: Members of both Houses will have been taken aback at the recent re-emergence of the Garvaghy Road issue. After decades of relative quietude, all the old angst has erupted again. Many here are asking what the Parades Commission was thinking. With all the routine memes and tropes being rehearsed again, this issue underscores just how premature all of the recent talk about a united Ireland has been. Maybe that is what the Parades Commission was thinking. Who is to say? To an outside neutral like myself, it hardly seems proportionate that an urban distributor road in Portadown that has yet to reach a Department for Infrastructure classification can double as the touchstone of esteem in parts of Leath Cuinn i láthair na huaire ach is é mar atá sé. After nearly three decades of the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, is it not preposterous that we are looking at the same old farrago of obstinacy, bile and confrontation that were *de rigueur* in the last generation?

It is worth noting that one of the main objectives of the Parades Commission is "To promote and facilitate mediation as a means of resolving disputes concerning public processions." In that regard, the commission might usefully embark on a programme of one-for-one scrapping of contentious marches, that is, ending a troubling march by an entity in one community along with a similarly fraught march from an entity in the other community, all the while pointing out that the courage to do things in a new and progressive way yields tangible positive results.

Heaven knows there are plenty of candidate marches up in the North of Ireland to choose from. Ulster folk have been celebrated over the years as having a strong titter of wit about them. They might usefully employ this famous hard-headedness to assess starkly the folly of these parades.

Strutting along in serried rows is synonymous all over the world in all polities with muscle flexing and domination. I yearn to think that in Ireland, in our post-colonial 21st century, we are better and hopefully more enlightened than this. I respectfully request that the Treoraí Gníomhach convey to our Government my proposal here relating to the Parades Commission to assess if it has merits and may progress through the appropriate intergovernmental channels.

Senator Conor Murphy: I rise to speak on the same subject. Last week, I raised this when I was speaking during the Order of Business in the hope that the clear attempt to provoke a reaction and bring us back to an issue which had been resolved for decades would not be indulged by authorities in the North. Sadly, we are today in a situation where, on the back of completely foolish advice from the PSNI which disregarded all previous history, the Parades Commission took a reckless decision to allow an Orange march down Garvaghy Road. Both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have made similar public statements about it. Their sense of bewilderment is shared by everybody outside of that very small core within unionism - it does not extend to the entirety of unionism at all - who have tried to provoke this particular issue in an attempt to drag us all back to the past. The broad sense in the North is one of absolute bewilderment and shock. There is also frustration that people in authority could take decisions that have such far-reaching implications for the community. There is fear as well as to where all of this will lead. In particular, there is fear among the residents of Garvaghy Road.

As my colleague, John Finucane, said, this was not a problem to be resolved, this was actually a peace to be protected. The Orange Order can march from Drumcree Church to Portadown and back at any stage they want without any impediment. They have sufficient routes to do that. Yet, there is an insistence on coming down the Garvaghy Road with all of the history attached to that community's experience. That is not going back just 30 years but hundreds of years. The experience of the community in that area is completely outrageous.

I was on the road over the weekend and I was pleased that there was a number of Oireachtas Members from various parties there. Anyone from the Seanad would be very much welcome in the community. We are delighted to see people coming up to show support for them. There is a real trauma being reopened there about past experiences but there is also a very strong mood of resilience and a determination not to be dragged back to the past. The complete mishandling of this by the Parades Commission, the PSNI, the NIO and the Secretary of State has shown us how fragile all of the hard-gotten gains of the past 30 years can be. That includes peace, the Good Friday Agreement, policing itself and reconciliation.

There is an urgent need to remove the threat of this parade from the Garvaghy Road residents. That can be done by the Secretary of State and the Chief Constable. They need to take that action now. This ongoing situation, where there are people effectively camped out on that road, day and night, to try to prevent that, is revisiting a trauma on a community that has suffered enough trauma over the years. The Secretary of State should act now to lift that sense of trauma over the community. I ask the acting Leader to urgently request that of the Government. I know there has been intervention and I heard Ministers speak. I am aware of

discussions happening behind the scenes but they need urgent intervention from the Secretary of State to use the power he has to stop this now. We need to protect the peace and all of the gains we have made over the past 30 years and ensure that community can live in peace, as has been their strong desire for the last number of decades.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I also want to speak about the Garvaghy Road. I lived and worked up North and many of my friends lived and worked around the Garvaghy Road. They lived around Portadown and were traumatised back in the late 1990s, and are still traumatised by the horrific and brutal violence that surrounded the Orange marches around that time. The community of the Garvaghy Road has the right to live free from sectarian violence and domination. They do not want to be sucked back in to polarisation and division. It is a violation of their right to live peacefully. Like Senator Murphy said, over 90% of parades go unrestricted and the organisers of this Orange march know there are loads of other routes that have been identified which they could use.

The organisers of this march have used – it has to be called out – inflammatory language, such as “staging post”, “culture wars” and “unfinished business”. It looks like a deliberate act of provocation. Why is this happening? What is the end game? Is it because there has been some more talk about a united Ireland, or the fact that there are elections coming up in May? Communities have been dragged back into this. The Garvaghy Road Residents’ Coalition has called for international mediation and an international moderator.

I agree that it is up to the PSNI, and questions must also be asked about the Parades Commission. How was this allowed to happen in the first place? Maybe the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Bryant, needs to intervene and overturn the decision. No one wants to see the destabilisation of Stormont. People are still living and suffering through the cost-of-living and housing crises. This talk about institutions breaking down cannot be happening. It is a one-sided and very much uneven playing field here. That needs to be called out. I would welcome anything we can do in this House to ensure this is supported from us down here in the South.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: It will be no surprise to the Acting Leader to hear me mention public transport. It is a huge issue in north County Dublin, where I am based. There is a particular issue with the train stations in north County Dublin. They are at capacity very early in the morning. There has been an emerging, growing and particular issue around Rush and Lusk train station. I had a lot of contact this morning regarding the situation at that train station. The car park is at capacity very early in the morning, and neither town is within walking distance of the train station. There is no reliable bus link to the train station either, so people are forced to drive and park at the station. People who contacted me this morning were in tears describing how they left for the train station at half eight in the morning but not one spot was available. People are missing out on work, college and appointments in town as a result of this.

There has been a huge volume of building in Lusk and Rush in recent years, but there has been no supporting infrastructure increase in public transport provision in the area. The car park at Rush and Lusk train station is quite big compared with the other car parks, but it is impossible for people to get a parking spot, which makes the only reliable public transport

offering in north County Dublin unreliable. People cannot guarantee that they can get a spot at the train station to get into town for work or an appointment, as I said.

We need to look at what we are doing for commuters. North County Dublin is absorbing the housing needs of Dublin. I have said time and again in this House that we need to put the supporting infrastructure in place. While lovely houses are being built, it is not enough to give people the opportunity of buying houses; we need to provide the public services. People are moving into these areas. The glossy brochures detail that a train station is located nearby. That station, however, is practically unusable for the vast majority of people who want to access the train. I ask for a debate on our growing communities. I know Senator Comyn beside me raises similar issues. Growing communities on the outskirts of Dublin are suffering due to a lack of infrastructure. We need to have joined-up thinking in this House when it comes to the provision of infrastructure for these communities.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I raise the matter of the judicial council (amendment) Bill 2026. In particular, I urge the Minister to move this legislation forward as quickly as possible. The general scheme was published in January 2026, and it was welcomed as an important step in the Government's insurance reform agenda. It has a clear objective to make the process around personal injury guidelines more transparent, evidence-based and predictable. I wish to find out when we will see the legislation come through. Businesses across the country have been waiting for meaningful progress on insurance reform for years. The Government has made many strides in this space, and I do not think anyone can argue to the contrary. For many small businesses, however, insurance is still a thorn in their sides.

It is a significant operating cost and it can determine whether a business can expand, employ more people or even remain viable. We have already seen the importance of the personal injury guidelines in bringing greater consistency and predictability to the system. The Injuries Resolution Board has also demonstrated the value of resolving claims outside the courts with significant savings in legal costs. I reiterate that the average cost of bringing a claim through the Injuries Resolution Board is €961 - almost €1,000 - in legal fees with a payout of around €26,000. If people go through litigation it will cost them about €25,000 in legal fees with a €25,000 payout. We still see many cases go through litigation. Even though there has been an increase in cases going through the Injuries Resolution Board, we would like to see more.

The general scheme proposes some very important changes. It would require the personal injuries guidelines committee to consult the Injuries Resolution Board and other stakeholders. It would require research into awards made in Ireland and, more importantly, compare them with jurisdictions outside of the State. Importantly, this research would have to be published when new guidelines are brought forward. This is the type of transparency that we need.

The Government's action plan for insurance reform recognises that further reform is needed to improve affordability, transparency and competition. Will the Acting Leader ask the Minister where we are with the legislation and ask that it is put on the priority list so we can get it through the Houses as quickly as the legislative process allows? I thank the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, for all the work he has done on this. We have had the general scheme for the past nine months. Could we now have a timetable for delivering it?

Senator Victor Boyhan: It is good to see Senator Duffy in the role of Acting Leader. It is the first time he has been in this position for the Order of Business. Well done.

I want to raise the issue of horticulture and the amount of fruit and vegetables imported last year. A bulletin issued last night by *agriland.ie* had an article with a headline stating that the latest trade figures show that Ireland imported almost €2 billion worth of fruit and vegetables in 2025. This is in the context of the number of local horticultural producers continuing to decline, with virtually nobody growing simple horticultural produce such as cauliflower, cabbage, turnip, beetroot and carrot in a sustainable and profitable way. All of these are so simple to grow all year round in the right conditions in Ireland. In 2025, Ireland exported €492.5 million worth of fruit and vegetables and related produce compared with importing produce totalling €1.97 billion. This is at a time when Teagasc and horticultural agencies are trying to promote food. We have an issue and it hinges on productivity, profitability, energy for pumping water, energy for cooling down glasshouse production and soft fruit production and energy for horticultural and farm machinery. We will have a debate later so I do not intend to talk about it.

What is interesting is that the Climate Change Advisory Council is recommending that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine review the potential for Irish horticulture production and the challenges facing Irish food security. In fairness, I contacted the Leader's office this morning and I got a response. I appreciate the Minister is under a bit of pressure but I must say that we do have a designated Minister of State for horticulture and perhaps we could bring the issue there. I am happy to wait for an appropriate time. I am a member of the agriculture committee and this is regularly raised there. With regard to the Seanad, the Upper House, this issue is a national challenge and a national issue. It is about food security and being able to sustain Irish produce and Irish food. It is timely and worthy that we would have statements and a debate in the House on this particular subject.

Senator Joe Flaherty: We have heard many contributions in these Houses on the rapid escalation in the development of solar farms. Nowhere is this more evident than in County Longford, where we now have a wild west scenario and the beautiful county is beset by ravenous speculators and profiteers. Fuelling the pillaging is the planned ESB battery storage site at the former power station facility in Lanesborough, with plans for an 896 acre battery energy storage enclosure. This will be one of the largest such facilities in Europe.

The big cash cow now is trying to get planning permission for solar and wind energy projects as close as possible to this battery site. The latest application is for the 247-acre Carrowroe and Aghaloughan solar farm. Less than 15 km up the road from this location is the 321-acre Foigha solar farm. A stone's throw from that, we have the 275-acre Ballymahon solar farm. These are all within a radius of 10 km to 15 km of each other. People living in Lanesborough or its immediate hinterland risk the real prospect of being surrounded by what will be the largest single solar farm in the country, one totalling over 850 acres. This runs alongside Bord na Móna's plans for a massive 4,600-acre wind farm.

The Longford solar farm plans are 50% bigger than the largest current solar site in Ireland, which is Ballymacarney in County Meath. We understand that is on the market now for €250 million. In essence, then, we have two companies founded in the 1930s to drive development and industry in this country, Bord na Móna and the ESB, that will potentially be sitting on

assets worth €1.5 billion in a matter of years. Ultimately, they could sell these farms in time to come to a foreign entity, and, in doing so, sell on nearly 6,000 acres of County Longford.

None of these sites or planning applications should be viewed in isolation. Instead, they need to be seen for what they are: a massive underhanded effort to establish a major energy-generating operation in a small rural area. All these planning applications are piecemeal and individual, with the net aim of ultimately securing planning for a cumulative energy production proposal that is patently at odds with the community. Anybody familiar with rural Ireland will say that the pace of solar applications has been too much and the recklessness of it creates the possibility of landing an intolerable burden on a small community.

Obviously, I accept that I am a Government representative, but, simply, the scale of wind and solar energy applications in this country has been allowed to go unchecked. We are now facing an intolerable situation, as is borne out in County Longford. I appeal to the Taoiseach and the Government at large to take soundings and to say "Stop" at this juncture because we need to take stock of what is happening. The prospect of 6,000 acres of County Longford being sold in time to come to a foreign entity surely has to be enough for everybody in a position of power to stand up and say it is too much.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I direct the House's attention to a recent disturbing report published by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, on child trafficking in Ireland. This document exposes a hidden dark reality that our State apparatus is actively ignoring. The report reveals that child trafficking is significantly under-identified in this country. Our authorities are blind to the exploitation happening right in front of them, too often treating vulnerable child victims as simple child protection statistics rather than as victims.

The statistics are a mathematical indictment of this Government. In 2024, only ten child victims were identified in the entire State. In 2025, that number was just 18. Let us compare this with our nearest neighbour, the UK, where over 7,400 children were identified in a single year. Here, however, is the most shocking revelation. Of all the child trafficking victims identified in Ireland in 2024 and 2025, not a single one was an Irish national. This completely contradicts European and UK data, where around 80% of identified child victims are citizens exploited within their own borders. Gangs and predatory networks are actively grooming, sexually exploiting and using Irish children in residential State care for criminal activities. Yet the State is failing to identify them.

Meanwhile, our online spaces have become an unpoliced playground for groomers. The response to the technology facilitating this trafficking has completely failed to keep pace with organised crime. We have billions of euro floating around the Exchequer, yet the specialised unit tasked with investigating these horrific networks, the Garda human trafficking investigation and co-ordination Unit, is systematically starved of resources. I think we have 16 gardaí in that unit. Let us just think about that number. Can we imagine what goes undetected?

I call for an urgent debate on this report and I demand that the Minister immediately increase the number of gardaí assigned to this vital human trafficking unit before any more children are left to fall through the cracks.

Senator Chris Andrews: I congratulate Aoife and Lisa O'Rourke on delivering two golds for Ireland in the European elite championships. It was a great achievement. My colleague must be delighted. It must be like winning the all-Ireland again.

The FAI will come before the sports committee tomorrow. If the Ireland-Israel pre-match press conference is anything to go by, the FAI CEO is likely to have Heimir Hallgrímsson in answering any difficult questions for him. From first to last, FAI senior management has shown zero leadership. From the time the draw was made, the CEO of the FAI said the sanctions would be severe. It now transpires that the FAI does not actually know what the sanctions are; Paul Cooke said he did not know what the sanctions were. This is deliberate and misleading confusion. Irish football does not want the Irish team to play Israel. The FAI leadership has ignored Irish football to appease the Government. Any sort of leadership would have made sure that it was not on the players. Leadership is Gavin Bazunu, who was brave and outspoken. It is to his huge credit that he was not willing to play Israel. Others should follow. I do not know how the CEO and chairman can stay on in their positions. They facilitated sportswashing by genocidal Israel and threw the players under the bus.

The Government has also shown zero leadership. On Saturday, Barry Ward stated that the Government would have supported the FAI in respect of penalties if it had refused to play Israel. It would have been a good idea if the Government and Barry Ward had told the FAI that in advance of the match. That is another example of the confusion and lack of leadership. The Government was elected to lead. Shamefully, the Government and FAI put it on the 20-odd Irish players to decide whether to play. The FAI has presided over a shambles and its position is no longer tenable. The Minister for sport needs to come to the House and explain the consequences of not playing Israel next week. It is the least the Irish public deserve. The Irish football family deserve to know what the penalties were because nobody seems to know. It is a tightly kept secret. A debate would be helpful.

An Cathaoirleach: When Members raise matters in the public discussion and discourse, they need to be mindful of Standing Order 52 in relation to striking the balance.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: As the Cathaoirleach knows, coming from a rural part of Ireland, the rural pub is not just a building where alcohol is sold. It is much more than that. It is a meeting place and a social outlet. It is the heartbeat of many rural towns and villages the length and breadth of the country. Many pubs are just about surviving and no more. Something like over 2,200 pubs have disappeared in the past 20 years. When we lose them, we lose something from our rural towns and villages that cannot be replaced. That is why in the budget I would like something substantial for small pubs in rural Ireland, in particular those that do not sell food. They have received no assistance whatsoever. I call on the Government to seriously examine what the vintners have put forward as a potential package and hope it would be implemented. When we lose our local pub in a rural village town, we lose something that we cannot get back. We are trying to protect rural Ireland as best as we possibly can.

I would like smuggling to be addressed in the budget. We need additional resources to tackle it. It is estimated that up to 40% of cigarettes circulating in the country are illegal, which is a serious issue.

It could be a loss to the Exchequer of something in the region of €650 million, which is a huge amount of money. Many of our small shops depend on these products to stay open. Coming from a Border county, which it brings its own challenges, I am particularly conscious of that. I would like to see more resources, particularly as regards smuggling. We need extra manpower in vital places to ensure that we can clamp down and eradicate the scourge on society.

Senator Gareth Scahill: Last Thursday, during statements here on a report on inclusion, I mentioned Lisa and Aoife O'Rourke's final appearances on Thursday and Friday last. I was lucky, on Saturday evening, to be a part of the welcoming committee welcoming them back to their native Castlerea with their families and their two gold medals. It is something we are getting used to.

Today, I want to bring it back to something that I have raised here on a number of occasions in terms of resourcing the Garda. Probably to follow on from what Senator Gallagher has said about the resources, it is getting to a stage where I am wondering whether we will need Lisa and Aoife O'Rourke to apply justice to certain things across Roscommon because of the lack of resources.

I did some research over the weekend to find out the volume of cases that the Garda was dealing with under section 19 of the Criminal Justice Act 2011, which mandates financial institutions and individuals to report suspected corporate or financial fraud. Some of the stations across Roscommon are dealing with ten plus cases a day in this. Each of those cases, no matter how small - quite a lot of them only relate to €2 or €3 missing out of people's accounts - requires the same Garda intervention as €5,000, €6,000 or €10,000 disappearing out of their accounts. How can we expect to have the Garda numbers looking at the importation of tobacco, drugs, etc., if they are tied up on a daily basis with these small cases? I tried to find an idea of the number of cases that we were dealing with here. The Central Statistics Office excludes all section 19 referrals from its quarterly and annual fraud, deception and related offences metrics because financial institutions are submitting an overwhelming volume of these mandatory reports and the system currently is not able to deal with that. An Garda Síochána noted in 2024 that the sheer scale of the section 19 backlog was so substantial that when the number would finally be cleared and processed, it was expected to trigger a massive artificial surge in Ireland's national fraud statistics. Given the profits that have been made by the financial institutions in this country, surely we need to look at levying the banks to look after these small cases on their own so that we can take that work off the Garda at an earlier stage and find out if people wish to proceed with these small minor robberies and fraud cases.

I would like to also congratulate Senator Duffy on taking the Leader's seat. The people of Mayo, especially north Mayo, will do their very best to ensure that the Senator does not get used to that particular seat but I congratulate the Senator on today and wish him the very best of luck with it.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: We have a responsibility in politics to be honest and truthful when we speak. It has suited the Irish way to talk about the 43% increase in the defence budget, which is a nominal figure. It might sound good for our European partners to pretend that we have increased our budget, which is the worst and lowest budget in Europe, and probably in the world, at 0.22%. It might sound good to say we have increased it by 43% over a five-year

period from 2021 to 2026. The Central Statistics Office will tell you that consumer prices rose by 24% in that period and when we net out the purchasing power of any increase in defence, we see that we have increased it by somewhere between 15% and 19%, so it is time that we start to be honest with the people of this country. We are not putting the money into defence that we should be. Moreover, when the Department of education wildly overspends, we take €12 million off an already starved defence system to compensate.

If defence overspends next year, will we take money off education, health or justice? It is outrageous that we are treating the defence of this nation in the way that we are. We can pretend all we want but at the end of the day, we are the weakest, most defenceless country in the entire European Union. We are going around the place banding figures of 43% - it might sound good, but it is wrong in every sense of the word. Finally, buying hardware is great, but if you are not paying the people, all the hardware in the world is of no bloody use to you.

Senator Niall Blaney: I stand this morning in solidarity with the residents of Garvaghy Road over what has taken place in the weekend gone by. I have to say it is pleasing to see the approach that has been taken by this British Government and this Administration. The caring and collaborative approach that has been taken is very welcome. While some might want to see a quick victory and for this brought to an end, I am a representative that would be very much with Chris Bryant in that whatever agreement is reached, it should be done with everybody coming to the table and with a little bit of latitude, respect, reconciliation and negotiation spirit. I look forward to a resolution there.

I also wish to stand and congratulate the Irish soccer team, which had a fantastic victory in recent days against the Israel team. I was one who watched with immense pride, given the pressure the team was put under - not only the players but also their families - which I think was wrong. A lot of things have been said about the players and the FAI. The FAI took decisions and asked that the decision be taken out of its hands by UEFA. Unfortunately, that did not happen, but I think it was good for Ireland and our sport that the game continued. I hope we get a very good crowd out to support the team on Thursday night, and I wish the players well with the rest of the fixtures. We are 100% behind them.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Today, I raise the issue of the Garvaghy Road. I saw a TikTok of a woman who grew up on the Garvaghy Road who is now engaged to an Orange man, as she described him. That is the reality being lost in all the division. We cannot lose sight of the people who have bridged the divide and built families and homes together, regardless of whether they grew up in republican or unionist households.

As we enter the third day of protests at the Garvaghy Road, we need to remember that the powers that be thrive on polarised communities. When the cost of living is high, hospitals are overcrowded and people are locked out of housing, it is much easier to pit people against each other and to distract from years of policy failures. The decision to allow the Orange Order to march down the Garvaghy Road will only push people to the extremes and reopen old wounds. There has been so much positive work done in the past 30 years and we should do everything in our power to protect it.

Nobody benefits from sectarianism, except those in power. If Stormont collapses, the DUP and Sinn Féin will have to set themselves up for an election that distracts from all the day-to-

day issues affecting every single person in the North, regardless of what side of Portadown you come from. Bertie Ahern, a former leader of Fianna Fáil who was at the helm of the Good Friday Agreement, put it right a while ago when he said they should not be looking for short-term gain for votes at a time when we need peace, people and leaders to work for that peace and shared similarities between communities, and not to stoke flames because of their differences.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I want to raise the issue of the planned inquiry into the State's care of children with spina bifida and scoliosis, following the recent publication of the scoping exercise report.

It is clear from the initial reaction to the report that many families and campaign groups have serious concerns about how it is structured, the proposed structure and the terms of reference of the inquiry. It is critical that the inquiry commands the confidence of the affected families. They have suffered enough and if it does not, it simply will not answer the questions we need answered. The whole purpose of the inquiry is to deliver truth, justice and accountability for those affected. If the structure of the inquiry does not have buy-in from the families, we are failing them at the first hurdle.

Families have many unanswered questions and concerns. They have been consistent in their call for a public inquiry. The Minister for Health said that some elements of the commission could be held in public but we need more clarity and engagement with families in that respect. The narrow scope of the proposed commission of investigation is also a concern for many and something the Government needs to address. Why is the proposed remit only to investigate cases between 2019 and 2025? There was a crisis in spina bifida and scoliosis care long before 2019; it goes all the way back to 2000. Many children and families whom the State failed before 2019 are excluded. It will deny countless families access to truth and justice the inquiry purports to deliver. That is supposedly the objective of the inquiry. The exclusion of so many cases seems to go against that ethos.

The inquiry has to deliver a comprehensive examination of what happened to these children. It must be truly child-centred. That is why the Minister should not move forward with drafting the terms of reference without answering these concerns. Last March, she undertook to ensure the voices of families would be central to the process yet families were informed of the briefing on the scoping report at the eleventh hour. Some had even previously pulled out due to documents on their own children's care being withheld from them. They felt they could not go forward without that transparency. Families need to buy into this process or the whole thing is for show and does not deliver true justice.

Senator Pauline Tully: I attended a protest outside the gates of Leinster House this morning at 11 o'clock by Every Child Matters, a campaign established in counties Cavan and Meath by parents of children with additional needs. It has now spread to most other counties in the State. Afterwards in the audiovisual room, six mothers attending that protest came in to speak to us about their experiences. Their contributions were extremely powerful but heartbreaking. It was shocking to hear about the lack of support for their children with disabilities and additional needs. They have had to fight for everything - assessments for autism or ADHD and services. The CDNTs insist parents do training and deliver therapies themselves to the children. Parents are in favour of doing everything they can to support their children but they are not trained

therapists. The children also need support and input from therapists. They are not getting those services at all. Most of them told us they had not had one session of physiotherapy or occupational or speech and language therapy - nothing - since the service was established.

CDNTs were established under a policy called "progressing disability". We have to realise this is not working. It should be renamed "regressing disability" because successive Governments and Ministers have failed children, young people and their families by not providing the services they need. A level of dependency is being created in future adults if early intervention and the supports children need at this stage are not provided. Children's rights need to be recognised. The State has responsibility to meet them. It is not doing so at the moment. It is letting them down. It is not listening to parents either. The CDNTs say it is a parent-led service yet they will not listen to parents when they talk about what their children's needs are.

I ask for a debate with the Minister for disability on the lack of services and supports for children with additional needs.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Acting Leader, I join those who raised the issue of the Garvaghy Road in expressing my concerns about what has developed over the past week. We unfortunately will remember what happened there nearly 30 years ago and the estimated 21 murders that happened around the Garvaghy Road and because of the issues around it not just 28 years ago but in the years leading up to it. There were numerous parades blocked and allowed through over those years which led directly to the murders of an estimated 21 people.

We do not want to go back to those days. We hope that the Irish Government, working with their colleagues in Northern Ireland, but also Britain, the United States and Europe, make sure that the situation is resolved peacefully and that the peaceful situation that has existed for many years in the Garvaghy Road community would be allowed to continue.

Senator Mark Duffy: I will begin with the Garvaghy Road, as it is something that has been raised by many, including Senators Conway, Murphy, Cosgrove, Blaney and Sarah O'Reilly. As the Cathaoirleach rightly mentioned, it is something that we did not see coming down the tracks. It took us all by surprise, first, in terms of the decision that was made by the Parades Commission. No one in this House wants to go back to the scenes of the past. As we know, peace is something that needs to be protected and worked upon every day. We have made great strides across the island in improving relations across communities, but it also shows the sensitivity that still exists in the North in both communities.

The Secretary for State spoke earlier this morning about both sides needing to double down on compromising. He is travelling to Belfast today to re-engage with communities and civil leaders there. Dialogue is the best way forward but it does bring attention to the sensitivities that do exist on this issue. I hope that a resolution can be found this week because it is such a sensitive issue. As Senator Conor Murphy said in his contribution, it has the effect of retraumatising people who have grown up in that area, both young and old. The new and younger generation in particular, which has benefited from the peace process, do not want to see these wounds being reopened on the Garvaghy Road or anywhere else across the island. I hope that a positive resolution to this dispute between both communities is brought to a conclusion this week.

Senator Comyn raised the proliferation of vape shops across Ireland, and in particular in her home county of Louth. It is something that has been raised here many times by many Senators. It requires an all-of-government approach to address the proliferation of these shops. The issue is raised with me regularly. It is also raised with representatives, councillors, Senators and Oireachtas Members, because people have a civic pride in their town and they feel that the cynical targeting of young people in particular with different flavouring and colouring really does not add anything to a town. I have spoken with the Leader on this and he hopes to bring forward proposals to the Seanad that we can all discuss and debate. It will require a whole-of-government approach. Senator Comyn has my full support in working to help try and address that for every town across Ireland.

Senator Comyn also raised the shingles vaccine, which is something I previously raised in a Commencement matter. I understand that no decision has been made on it. I also understand the real importance of the issue. People do not really appreciate the effect shingles can have until they get it themselves, in terms of the debilitating illness that it is. I encourage her to table a Commencement matter on it. I am sure the Minister wants to see it realised. I believe there are conversations ongoing, so I do not want to pre-empt any commercial discussions, but it is something that would be very well received by us all here.

Senator Nelson Murray raised the publication of the legislation on insurance reform - the judicial council (amendment) Bill - the general scheme of which was published in January this year.

The Senator has been a long-time advocate of insurance reform and has done brilliant work in this House and in her party to help to improve conditions and make them more friendly for businesses, which are already under pressure. I will take it up with the Leader to make sure this item is put on the agenda as soon as possible. The Minister, as Senator Nelson Murray mentioned, is no stranger to this House and has led many Bills through the Seanad in his Ministry and I would like to think the legislation will come before the House sooner than later.

Senator Clifford-Lee raised an important issue in her area, specifically the limitations on car parking at the train station at Rush and Lusk. It is a victim of its success, with the increased use of public transport and the expansion of both towns with housing developments, but if it cannot be adequately accessed by bus transport or active travel infrastructure, that creates a big challenge. I work with the Senator on the transport committee and it is something we can work on together to advocate for it. She has requested a debate on growing communities on the peripheries of cities like Dublin, Cork and different areas where there is a big population and pressure is put on satellite towns. It is a good and worthwhile proposal and I will discuss it with the Leader to consider whether we can facilitate that discussion.

Senator Victor Boyhan discussed the horticulture sector and, in particular, the €2 billion worth of imports of fruit and vegetables to Ireland. We have a strong climate with conditions that could support improvements to increase exports, which stand at €495 million currently. There is merit in an overall conversation in this space to see what Ireland can do from a food security point of view, and from an industrial point of view in terms of creating new jobs, to make sure we maximise what we produce. The Senator has discussed it with the Leader's office and I hope his request can be facilitated.

Senator Joe Flaherty discussed the proliferation of solar farms, in particular in his home county of Longford, where in an area with a 15 km radius, more than 850 acres of solar farms are being developed. While we all want to ensure we have a decarbonised future with wind and solar energy and other renewable projects, we also need to have planning clarity on this. It has been discussed here at length. I encourage Senator Flaherty to put down a Commencement matter on it and I will speak to the Leader to ensure it is highlighted, because every community needs clarity on it.

Senator Keogan discussed the sensitive nature of child trafficking in Ireland. It is a sensitive topic and a lot of the contribution made involves serious content. If there is a lack of resourcing, that is a more general discussion we can have, as Senator Scahill encouraged. However, there will be a good opportunity through the justice committee to discuss and raise it, as there potentially also is through a Commencement matter to make sure those issues are highlighted. It is important that every child in this country is protected, especially those who are most vulnerable, and everything needs to be done to enable and support that.

3 o'clock

I do not think anyone would disagree with that.

Senator Andrews raised the recent football game between Ireland and Israel, which is another very sensitive topic. Many people have many views on this. It is a very sensitive matter. Obviously, the FAI consulted its membership and that membership made a decision to go ahead with the game. The players were consulted by management and their decision was to go ahead with the game. The game went ahead and Ireland won the game. I have the view, and I think my view is shared more broadly, that UEFA has made it very difficult for countries like Ireland, which has a very strong position on Gaza and Palestine, by not making a decision one way or another on Israel's participation in the Nations League games. That has placed a downward pressure on the association and, indeed, the management team and players. As the Senator mentioned, tomorrow an FAI delegation will appear before the Oireachtas committee on sports. It will be a further opportunity to talk through the technicalities of the issue. We all condemn persecution, war and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. No one in the FAI, in Ireland or in this House condones any of that. However, the reality that faced the FAI in the event that it chose not to play the game has put pressure on them. UEFA must bring clarity by making a judgment on behalf of all associations and not singling out Ireland to do the work on that.

Senator Andrews also raised the huge success of Aoife and Lisa O'Rourke, as did Senator Scahill. On behalf of all Senators, I reiterate that it is a huge honour and achievement for them both. It is inspiring for young women in sport. Senator Scahill also mentioned their achievements under the premise of inclusion in sport and ensuring we have sporting access for everyone of all age, gender and ability or otherwise. The O'Rourke sisters are brilliant ambassadors and I convey my sincere congratulations to them on that.

Senator Scahill made an interesting point about the overwhelming nature of reports of fraud cases to the Garda. He made a really good observation about the amount of paperwork and technical work faced by gardaí in each station. As a fellow member of the same Garda jurisdiction in Roscommon and Mayo, we all want to see more gardaí being freed up to be on the beat and be a presence in communities, and support community policing, and active and

proactive policing because that is the most constructive form we can take. I encourage the Senator to raise the issue with the committee and table a Commencement matter to continue the advocacy for it. The Senator has my support because, as he has said, the CSO excludes fraud in the financial sector, which is overwhelming the system and definitely more needs to be done in that area.

Senator Gallagher raised two points ahead of the upcoming budget, the first of which related to the closure of 2,200 pubs in recent years. Obviously there has been a cultural change. Pubs open and close for various reasons so there is not just one small measure. However, pubs are a lifeline in many rural areas.

He addressed pubs that do not sell food but are often a home for community, whether that is people meeting up for a community meeting, having a game of cards, having a gathering after a funeral or a celebration of a community achievement. They offer a really important link for rural Ireland. The Senator called for supports in the upcoming budget for that. We cannot pre-empt the budget but we hope that there are supports in that space. Senator Gallagher also raised smuggling issues, in particular in respect of tobacco, and while over a number of years the rates of smoking have decreased across Ireland, primarily due to the increase in cost and other societal changes, smuggling is the black market that has been an unintended consequence of that price increase. Even solid fuels, which are in a regulated environment, represent a sector which has also been undermined by black market sales. We should have a broader conversation on smuggling because it is unregulated, we do not know the contents of it and it is costing the State both in health and finances.

Senator Craughwell raised the issue of investment in the defence sector, in particular taking issue with the 43% increase for defence because of the impact of inflation on that figure. The buying power is not as pronounced as the headline figure makes itself out to be. He has rightly said that we need to invest more in defence, especially in a more polarised world in the last number of years. Budget day is just around the corner. The Senator would share my support and I hope that we see an increased investment in defence. Senator Craughwell has been a long-time advocate for increased measures in defence spending and brings a lot of expertise to the space. I hope that is realised in the budget.

Senator Blaney congratulated the Irish football team on their win. I would like to share that. It is an incredibly difficult time for them as players, their families and their supporters. There are multiple different views in every household on many different issues but this is a particularly sensitive one that has put the players under a lot of pressure. I hope that we can all get behind the team in their fixture against Austria on Thursday. They lost to Kosovo, have beaten Israel, and have a chance now to really kick on in the group with a win over Austria.

Senator Stephenson has raised the recommendation for a commission of investigation for those with spina bifida and scoliosis. This has been an incredibly difficult issue for many families and for patients. I have met many and have worked with the Minister, who has been sincere and generous with her time in meeting families that have been affected in multiple different ways. I welcome the commission of investigation into it. Clarity and accountability are needed about the matter. I hope that the commission of investigation's scope is broad enough to ensure that all cases are properly considered and those who are affected are listened to because it is important that these voices are listened to and that the reforms are made to protect children to prevent anything that has happened previously in that area.

Senator Pauline Tully attended a protest outside on Kildare Street today and attended the session in the audiovisual room about the Every Child Matters campaign, in particular relating to the lack of support for children with disabilities. She has relayed her views on the CDNT and is asking for a debate on it.

I totally understand. Daily, I meet families affected where there are children or adults with disabilities in the household. While the Government has invested a significant amount in disability and is very sincere in trying to address this problem, there is a long way to go. I think we all recognise that. Budget day is around the corner. I am not trying to pin all the hopes of every issue on it but I hope to see improvements for the disability sector on budget day.

I think those were all the matters raised with me.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Ardagh, from Presentation school in Warrenmount. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann today.

Order of Business agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.11 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.37 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.11 p.m. and resumed at 3.37 p.m.

Council of the European Union Decision: Motions

Acting Chairperson (Senator Teresa Costello): We are taking No. 1 on the Order Paper, the proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the proposal for a Council decision on the conclusion of the agreement between the European Union and the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the return and readmission of persons who do not or no longer fulfil the conditions for entry, presence or residence in the territory of either party; and No. 2, motion regarding proposed approval by Seanad Éireann of the proposal for a Council decision on the signing of the agreement between the European Union and the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the return and readmission of persons who do not or no longer fulfil the conditions for entry, presence or residence in the territory of either party. The two motions will be debated together, but decided on separately.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I move:

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

Proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the return and readmission of persons who do not, or no longer, fulfil the conditions for entry, presence, or residence in the territory of either Party,

a copy of which was circulated to each member of Seanad Éireann on 24th September, 2026.”

Acting Chairperson (Senator Teresa Costello): Before I call the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, I welcome Jenny Kylie to the Seanad, who is a guest of Senator Martin Conway. She is very welcome. I call the Minister to speak. He has five minutes.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan): As the Acting Chairperson indicated in her introductory remarks, I am here to move two motions seeking the approval of Seanad Éireann for Ireland to opt in under Article 3 of Protocol 1 to two European Union Council decisions. The Acting Chairperson has expressly stated what they are already, so I will not repeat them. Generally, they relate to readmission agreements between the Republic of Nigeria and the European Union. The two Council decisions are distinct. The first decision is the signing of the agreement between those two entities, while the second is the conclusion of the agreement between the European Union and the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

As Senators will be well aware, in order for any migration management system to function efficiently and effectively, it must have an effective and credible policy on returns, including readmissions. Readmission is a core part of the returns process at both national and EU level, forming an essential element of the migration and asylum pact and its efforts to enhance communication and co-operation with third countries.

Readmission agreements are intrinsically linked to this objective and constitute an important aspect of the external dimension of migration policy. They play a valuable role in the fight against irregular and unlawful migration by facilitating the admission to their own country of persons residing without authorisation in a member state. They facilitate and expedite the enforcement of return decisions in respect of irregular migrants and may also function as an incentive for countries of origin or transit to enhance their migration control.

Ireland is currently party to 12 EU-level readmission agreements, including with Hong Kong, the Macau special administrative region, the Republic of Albania, Sri Lanka, Russia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Moldova, Pakistan and Georgia. In 2025 Ireland adopted a decision for the EU to enter into negotiations on a readmission agreement with Kazakhstan, which I understand will be forthcoming.

Ireland and the Federal Republic of Nigeria signed a bilateral agreement in August 2001 to establish a formal framework for readmissions and related migration matters. While the agreement was never formally ratified by Nigeria, the Nigerian authorities have previously demonstrated good co-operation on the readmission of their citizens. Nigeria remains a priority country for Ireland in relation to migration co-operation but there is scope for greater consistency and this readmission agreement will support Ireland's efforts in driving increased, improved and sustained co-operation.

Nigeria, as Senators may be aware, is in the top five countries whose nationals applied for asylum in Ireland to date in 2026. I should point out that, already during my term as Minister, I have managed to send a flight back to Nigeria with Nigerian citizens who were unlawfully in

Ireland. I acknowledge the co-operation we received from the Nigerian Government and the Nigerian Embassy in Ireland for giving effect to this. I commend them and thank them for it.

The aim of this readmission agreement is to establish rapid and effective procedures for the return and readmission of Nigerian nationals from EU member states and of EU nationals from Nigeria when they no longer have the legal right to be there. The core objectives of the agreement are to strengthen co-operation, combat unlawful migration, combat human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and facilitate the safe, orderly and efficient return of people who are not legally entitled to be resident in countries. It sets out clear legal obligations on the parties to accept the return of their own nationals as well as timelines for the issuance of travel documents and-or biometric temporary passports. It also sets out how nationality should be established and the mode of transfers.

The agreement will be valid for a period of five years and renewable by mutual agreement of the parties. It does not preclude any further agreement being entered into by member states with Nigeria. In order to facilitate the implementation of the agreement, there is also the possibility for Nigeria and individual member states to conclude bilateral implementing protocols. The readmission agreement affirms that it will be applied in such a way as to ensure respect for human rights and for the obligations and responsibilities of the EU, its member states and Nigeria under international law.

These are measures under Title V on freedom, security and justice and, therefore, they are covered by Protocol 21. It is appropriate that Ireland should exercise its option to opt in under Article 3 to these Council decisions as they are of benefit to Ireland. Opting into these proposals is also consistent with our declared commitment to participate in Title V measures wherever possible. I note that these Council decisions and the related agreements will need to be formally adopted before they come into effect, which will probably be in November.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire go dtí an Teach. The Minister is very welcome back to the House this afternoon. On behalf of the Fianna Fáil grouping, I am happy to support both motions as outlined in detail by the Minister. I commend the Minister on the record for the vigour and the reforms he has brought to his portfolio, particularly on this matter. The reforms are clearly working and I commend him on his work and wish him well in his ongoing reforms in this area.

We all strive to see a migration system that is fair but firm. To have a proper firm and fair system, it is important that proper readmission pathways are in place. I welcome that it is not just the EU but also that Ireland is building up relations with Nigeria in this regard. It is one of the strengths of the EU pact that no one can go it alone in relation to migration and no country can go on a solo run. We have seen that our nearest neighbour, Britain, tried that particular vehicle, but, unfortunately for that country, it has proved to be quite a task and it is finding it difficult to get on top of this issue. Co-operation is the keyword here, not just in relation to our EU partners but concerning other countries too. I welcome that co-operation is growing with Nigeria in this regard. I look forward to that co-operation strengthening in future.

In the list of countries that are top of the league table for people coming here, where is Nigeria? In relation to readmissions or returns of those people not legally entitled to be here, what are the statistics in this regard? I am happy to fully agree with the proposals as set out by the Minister, and I look forward to his response to my query.

Senator Joe Conway: Is aoibhinn liom a bheith anseo inniu. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta O'Callaghan, arís chuig an Teach seo don díospóireacht úsáideach atá idir lámha againn tráthnóna.

Even as I stand here as an Independent Senator, I do not carry a remit from my Independent colleagues. All the Members of the House will understand that. If I were, however, to wager a sense of the level of conversation held among our group, I would pretty confidently guess, that this proposal would not meet with broad approval from the group. There may, of course, be exceptions, and I would not like to speak precipitously on behalf of anybody, but the House will understand that.

From my own perspective, I think this is clearly very judicious legislation to put through these Houses. In common with our European partners, we are all striving to get a handle on this business of immigration and illegal residency. We see all the disasters happening around us in the world. Apart from the immediate pain, suffering and trauma caused by these things, we know that further down the line, people who have been dispossessed and impoverished as a result of these disasters will be looking to emigrate to places like Ireland that have a high standard of living and offer a tenable future. People always wish that for their children. Parents are no different in Afghanistan or Nepal than they are in Ireland. Every one of us wants the best for our children and that is the impetus that motivates an awful lot of migration. It is the sense of desperation that people suffer in these countries that are downtrodden and corrupt and have a legion of things wrong with them that cause them to look to the sunny uplands of places like Ireland, the UK and prosperous countries in Western Europe, along with the United States. They look to the dream of having a comfortable existence, a roof over their head, a health service, a wage packet, a place to call their own, and the ability to sustain a dream, not just for themselves but for their children and for children in the generations to come.

I think the Minister is pushing at an open door in this regard. The proposal is timely and sensibly drafted and I welcome that. I have two small questions to raise. I was delighted to hear the Minister advert to the fact that there is great co-operation from Nigeria in relation to this legislation.

It charms me to hear that.

In freedom of information requests we can see what it costs to charter a long-haul airline to take 70 people back to Nigeria, for example. We see some astronomical figures. Do the State and taxpayers bear the full brunt of that charge or do recipient countries channel into that? At some stage, do we have to sweeten the deal with countries by asking them to part-finance the undoubted financial burden they will undertake when they are trying to reintegrate their own people into a society they may have been away from for ten, 15 or 20 years? In the spirit of openness, I would like my questions answered. If there is some reason such information cannot be conveyed to the House, I understand that perfectly. I would welcome the information. Godspeed with the legislation on this occasion.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Teresa Costello): I welcome TY students from the Intermediate School in Killorglin, County Kerry, and their teachers Seán Houlihan and Anne O'Connor. They are guests of Deputy Michael Cahill.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta O'Callaghan, as ucht teacht isteach chun na rúin atá os ár gcomhair a phlé. Sula dtosóidh mé, cuirim fáilte roimh na daltaí ar fad ón Scoil Idirmheánach i gCill Orglan. Is cuimhin liom go maith an fhoireann peile iontach a bhí acu in 1996, nuair a bhuaigh an scoil Corn Uí Ógáin, ós rud é gur chailleadar cluiche ceannais na Mumhan an bhliain chéanna. I remember the superb football team from 1996 which came from the Intermediate School in Killorglin. It won the Hogan Cup in what was an historic year for Killorglin and coincided with Laune Rangers winning the club championship. There were tough memories for me when I was on the losing side in Munster, but it is great to see students from the school here.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an dá rún atá os ár gcomhair inniu. I would like to particularly welcome the proposed readmission agreement with the Federal Republic of Nigeria. While a lot is said about our process of migration and immigration, international co-operation is very important. This is another step forward in that regard. I very much welcome the proposal to opt in under Article 3 of Protocol 21. It is welcome to hear from the Minister the level of co-operation that has existed to date with the Nigerian Government and embassy to facilitate the repatriation and readmission of those who are determined not to have fulfilled the conditions for entry, presence or residence in Ireland and the reciprocity that exists for Irish people in Nigeria. It is important from the perspective of upholding a strong, firm and fair migration system that initiatives such as these are entered into on an international basis. Ar son Fhine Gael, tugaim mo chuid tacaíochta don dá rún.

Senator Conor Murphy: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. Sinn Féin will support the motion before the House today. However, I want to begin by making our broader position on migration policy clear. We believe decisions on migration should ultimately be made by the Irish people and Government, rather than giving those powers over to the European Union. That is why we opposed Ireland signing up to the EU migration and asylum pact in its entirety. We believe that handing away these powers undermines Irish sovereignty and limits the ability of an Irish Government to respond to the particular circumstances and needs of this State. This position does not mean that we cannot support individual measures where we believe they are reasonable and necessary, and the proposal before us today concerning the readmission agreement with Nigeria is one such measure.

Where someone comes to Ireland seeking international protection, they must have the right to have their application properly and fairly assessed. Every case must be considered on its individual circumstances and our obligations on non-refoulement and fundamental human rights must always be respected, but where that process has been completed and where an application has been fully assessed and a person been found not to have a case for international protection or a right to remain in the State, the resulting return decision must also be capable of being enforced. That principle applies to all countries, including Nigeria. The majority of Nigerian applicants in recent years have not been found to qualify for international protection, although a minority have been granted protection - that distinction is important. Conditions can vary significantly and no person's case should ever be predetermined simply because of the country they come from. There must also be transparency around those decisions, proper monitoring of outcomes and accountability in how an readmission agreement is implemented. We want to see an immigration that is fair, rules-based and compliant with human rights and that means protecting people who genuinely need international protection. It

also means ensuring that decisions are implemented when someone is found not to have the right to remain in the State.

We cannot discuss this issue without addressing one of the biggest problems facing the system at present, namely the extraordinary length of time it takes to process applications. The backlog of applications before the International Protection Appeals Tribunal is now in excess of 21,000 and that is simply not sustainable. Long delays are unfair to the people who genuinely need protection, unfair to communities and unfair to those who eventually receive a negative decision after spending a considerable time in the State.

We need faster and fairer decision-making, proper enforcement of final decisions, effective return arrangements and full respect for our human rights obligations so while we are reiterating our position that migration should primarily remain a matter for the Government, Sinn Féin will support the motion.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I have just come from a meeting of the foreign affairs committee where we were discussing the diaspora. We were discussing some of the effects that the policies designed to create a climate of non-welcome in Ireland for migrants are also creating for our returned emigrants and for Irish citizens when they seek to return. I refer to policies such as the changes to our homelessness supports whereby if people do have not habitual residence, they will not be allowed access emergency accommodation. They are the kinds of things that will affect those who are returned because now we have a situation where Irish people are also being returned involuntarily to Ireland from places such as the United States, which has also engaged in its part of the international clampdown on migration, despite the fact that all of our economies deeply depend on workforces that can move and can travel. I refer, similarly, of course, to the measures in respect of family reunification - restricted measures that will make it very hard for those who want to return to Ireland to care for a family member to bring a spouse with them, if that spouse happens to be a non-EU citizen and they happen to not be in a high-income job.

In that context, it is important that every measures gets looked at for how it is fitting with the piece. In the case of the European Union, additional scrutiny is needed because it has got it so wrong in the migration control funding given to Libya which led to vile human rights abuses, in the funding the European Union gave to Sudan which founds its way into the hands of the Rapid Support Forces and led to the eventual suspension of that funding because of its use for repression, and we now have a large amount of money which is attached to this deal as well. That is why I would like to know what are the safeguards. What has been learnt from the bad policies in migration control from the European Union in the past where it has given money which has been used to violated human rights, data protection, and governance and monitoring? I would like to know what are the safeguards, including for LGBTQ people who are illegal in Nigeria currently and for women, for example, in terms of the societal risks of FGM, and what measures and standards will be there in terms of the funding that is going and, crucially, what assurances are there that this agreement, including the package of supports that the European Union is offering in relation to it, will not be used to facilitate third country deportations, which are being actively supported by other EU member states.

4 o'clock

I am glad that Ireland has not signed up to this grotesque idea of third country deportations, which are in fact human trafficking. In addition to being a colonial and racist notion, they are human trafficking on an institutional level. Ireland has not signed up to it, but several other EU countries are looking for it. Will this package, in terms of migration agreements with Nigeria, also be used to press Nigeria to co-operate with a future third country deportation role? Can the Minister assure us that there is no danger of that with this package and tell us what specific safeguards are in place in that regard? This is about safeguards at each stage and recognising that mistakes have been made in the very recent past.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas leis na Seanadóirí as a n-óráidí. D'éist mé leo go cúramach agus aontaím le go leor acu. I thank Senators for their contributions. I will try to respond to some of the issues raised.

I thank Senator Gallagher for his comments and I agree that we should have a migration system that is fair but also firm. He commented on the co-operation with Nigeria, which we have good co-operation with, and asked what the number of applicants from Nigeria seeking international protection was this year. At present, Nigeria is number two on the list of those nationals seeking international protection in Ireland. This year, to date, there have been just over 1,100 applicants from Nigeria who have made applications in Ireland. As was pointed out by Senator Murphy, and as I have stated before, the significant majority of these applications are rejected at first instance. Indeed, when you look at them after appeal, the majority of them are rejected.

I thank Senator Conway for his comments in respect of this being a judicious proposal and I agree that it is. He inquired about who was liable for the cost of persons being returned to another country, be that Nigeria or any other country. It is the deporting country that is liable for the cost, but we are very much dependent upon co-operation from the receiving country whose nationals are being removed back to that country. I am pleased with the co-operation we have had in the past and I believe we will get in the future from Nigeria.

A flight was sent to Nigeria from Ireland in June of last year, which brought back 35 people. I think the cost was approximately €325,000. However, we are also now using Frontex, which is an EU-wide entity. Ireland is not a member of Frontex, but we are entitled to avail of its services. Recently, we have been availing of joint Frontex return operations, not just to Nigeria but also to other countries.

Senator Murphy indicated that any decisions in respect of migration should be made by the Irish people. I agree entirely and that is what we are doing here. The elected people of Ireland and the Upper House are deciding whether we opt into this proposal. The only reason I am putting it forward is because I believe it is in the best interests of Ireland. In fact, we are able to do this without entering into this European-wide agreement because, as we know, a flight did go back to Nigeria from Ireland last June on a chartered plane. Those operations will continue to happen. However, the benefit of this agreement is that we will have even greater specificity between ourselves and Nigeria when it comes to that in the future.

Senator Murphy also referred to the length of time for assessments. Historically, that was the case, but I am very pleased to say we are now seeing much faster processing of applications. Since the International Protection Act came into effect on 12 June, we have seen people who

have come in under the border procedure having their applications processed within three months and their appeals dealt with. In fact, people who have made applications under the new system that I commenced on 12 June have now not only had their first instance decision heard and determined, but also their second instance appeal heard and determined. That is through the new body that has been set up, namely, the Tribunal for Asylum and Returns Appeals, TARA, which is the tribunal returns adjudication panel that is dealing with those.

We are getting through the historic applications in terms of IPAS. It is essential, however, that if people bring an application for international protection, they are dealt with promptly. That is what is happening under the new scheme.

I listened to Senator Higgins and her criticism of the EU. I have a different political perspective from her in respect of this. I think every country is entitled to protect its borders. It is not unique to Europe. African countries - Nigeria, for instance - are entitled to return people who are unlawfully present there to European Union countries. It works both ways. There have to be safeguards. In this instance, the only time an individual will be sent back to Nigeria is if, having claimed international protection, they have had that claim rejected and the appeal rejected and they have been served with a deportation order. That is the circumstance in which they will be returned. Similarly, somebody who does not go down the route of international protection but is a Nigerian citizen and has overstayed their visa can be sent back in that circumstance as well.

It is a reasonable proposal for any country to say if there are persons there who are not entitled to be and have not been granted asylum, they are entitled to return them. That happens in most countries. We would create an untenable situation for ourselves if it was the case that we could not do anything in respect of people who have come here unlawfully. In that case, what would be the point of having the asylum processing system or visas? It would just be a free-for-all. That is not what the Irish people want.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Teresa Costello): I welcome the students from Sion Hill College in Blackrock. They are guests of Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Question put and agreed to.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I move:

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

Proposal for a Council Decision on the signing of the Agreement between the European Union and the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the return and readmission of persons who do not, or no longer, fulfil the conditions for entry, presence, or residence in the territory of either Party,

a copy of which was circulated to each member of Seanad Éireann on 24th September, 2026.”

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.08 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.08 p.m. and resumed at 5.01 p.m.

5 o'clock

Energy and Fuel Costs: Motion

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The proposer of the motion will have 16 minutes and there will be six minutes for every Senator thereafter.

Senator Mark Duffy: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

agrees that:

- energy and fuel are essential to everyday life, with households, families, workers, farmers and businesses depending on affordable and reliable access to electricity, heating and transport;
- the cost of energy continues to have a significant impact on household budgets, the cost of living, business competitiveness and the cost of providing goods and services across the State;
- high fuel and energy costs can have a disproportionate impact on older people, people with disabilities, low-income households, rural communities, commuters, and those living in homes with poor energy efficiency;
- affordable, secure and reliable energy is fundamental to Ireland's economic competitiveness and to maintaining living standards;
- Ireland must continue to pursue a long-term transition towards secure, renewable and lower-cost domestic energy while ensuring that the cost of that transition does not fall disproportionately on households and businesses;

acknowledges:

- the impact that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the conflict in Iran has had on the price and supply of crude oil and that de-escalation will have the single biggest impact on reducing prices;
- the Government has already taken significant action to address energy and fuel costs, including reductions in Mineral Oil Tax on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil during 2026, reductions in the National Oil Reserves Agency levy, enhanced support for the haulage and passenger transport sectors, and targeted supports for farmers, contractors and fishers;

- the Government extended the Fuel Allowance season in response to increased fuel costs and, under Budget 2026, increased the Fuel Allowance from €33 to €38 per week and extended eligibility to families receiving the Working Family Payment;
- the Government has extended the reduced nine per cent VAT rate on electricity and gas until the end of 2030, providing a continuing reduction in the tax burden on household energy bills;
- that Budget 2026 provided a record €558 million for residential and community energy upgrades, supporting measures which can permanently reduce household energy demand and heating costs;
- the Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the EU per head of capita totalling over €1.3 billion, targeted at households, farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers, and businesses;
- the Government established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce to identify the drivers of high energy costs and develop short, medium and long-term measures to improve energy affordability for households and businesses;
- the Government has invested €1.5 billion in the ESB for electricity infrastructure;
- that the carbon tax revenues are supporting the fuel allowance, home retrofitting and the Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme for farmers;

calls on the Government to:

- continue support for households most exposed to fuel and electricity costs, with particular regard to pensioners, people with disabilities, carers, low-income working families, those in rural areas, and households experiencing energy poverty;
- examine the impact of increased energy bills on elderly people living alone;
- support those homeowners who rely on kerosene to heat their home, the majority of whom are in rural areas;
- continue to support sectors particularly exposed to fuel costs, including agriculture, fisheries, haulage, public transport, construction and other energy-intensive sectors, while protecting employment and regional economic activity;
- accelerate the delivery of the National Retrofit Plan, with a particular focus on fully funded and accessible upgrades for households experiencing energy poverty and improved access to supports for older and less energy-efficient homes;
- continue to expand investment in renewable electricity generation, grid infrastructure, storage and interconnection, with the objective of increasing Ireland's domestic energy security and reducing exposure to international fossil-fuel prices but prioritise new solar farm planning guidelines and update wind energy guidelines;
- progress reforms identified by the National Energy Affordability Taskforce to address the structural drivers of high energy costs for households and businesses; and

- continue their engagement at an EU level to explore windfall tax on energy firms that have made excessive profits.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I second the motion.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, can indicate whenever he wishes to speak, if that is okay.

Senator Mark Duffy: I am sharing time with Senator Cathal Byrne.

I thank the Minister of State for being here this afternoon for this very important Private Members' motion that we are bringing forward on behalf of Fine Gael Senators. From the outset, we must all appreciate and acknowledge that this is an external crisis in terms of the incredible pressures that increases in fuel and energy costs have caused to every household right across the country and across the Continent, because of factors outside of our control. People are feeling the pinch and in some cases households are acutely exposed in an unprecedented fashion, whether that be those working in the haulage sector, in agricultural settings or in intensive industrial sectors. This is the worst the world has ever seen in terms of an energy crisis centred on the Strait of Hormuz. It means that families in counties right across the country are feeling a pronounced pressure and pinch. That is why we are calling for additional supports to ease the burden on the families and sectors most affected to make sure that there are supports and ways that ensure those who are most vulnerable in our society - the elderly and those who are in fuel poverty - are given confidence and support to make sure they are warm and looked after in their homes this coming winter.

It is a very timely opportunity for us to bring forward this matter in a constructive way ahead of the budget next week. We also recognise the supports that have been put in place today, with the package of over €1.3 million targeted at the households I mentioned - farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers and businesses. *Per capita*, it is one of the largest interventions in the EU. We should put that on the record and acknowledge it here today as well. We appreciate that the Government cannot do everything because it is a global energy shock, but it has acted decisively and crucially at every moment and in an agile way. That has been done and more can be done. I look forward to hearing more about that today and in the coming days.

Being from County Mayo, I know at first hand the contribution of renewable energies in terms of decarbonising our energy. The 20% supply of gas that comes from the Corrib field on the coast of County Mayo is also contributing to our supply. We need to make sure that we shield consumers from all of the aforementioned shocks. Something that I have raised on the climate, energy and environment committee is the 13.2% of wasted energy that comes from dispatch down. That is where turbines are turned off because the grid cannot handle the capacity that is required to realise that energy potential. When we think of the opportunity that exists, it is worth over €600 million per annum in terms of wasted energy. I have brought forward proposals on residential battery storage for households that can help to capture excess energy, improve the energy independence of households, reduce bills, address wasted energy and decarbonise our energy use. That is something that needs to be seriously looked at so that we capture wasted energy and allow households to capture electricity at a nighttime rate when

it can be one third of the cost of electricity. That would be a strong way to rebalance demand, which is generally higher in the day. Battery storage would allow households to realise and capture energy at night when it is a third of the cost and release it by day. That is something that needs more attention. It is more of a longer term play, but it could be a fairly quick win for the State if it is rolled out.

I would welcome the Minister of State's consideration and thoughts on the short-term challenges. The fuel allowance benefits 470,000 households, which is very significant figure. Increases to that cannot be understated. The warmer homes scheme, which is retrofitting houses across the country, is an incredibly good news story in terms of mitigating the exposure we have to the fuel crisis at the moment. While there are extreme challenges at the moment, we need to bring it to a head, understand how reliant we are on external factors and try to repatriate that reliance and have more independence in terms of our energy. We are doing that strategically, but where the grid cannot catch up we need to have novel and creative ways to make sure we can help those who are most exposed to the volatility.

Ultimately, peace in the Middle East is the best outcome in terms of realising all of these challenges, but as Members of the Oireachtas we should do as much as we can and advocate to encourage the Minister of State and the Government more broadly to make sure that we can support the vulnerable and the businesses that are most exposed to it, ensure that we can keep costs down and that we can keep competitive as a country, and reaffirm our efforts towards better energy independence for the country so that when the next crisis hits we are much more resilient and can respond in a much more effective way. We would not need to respond as much if we had the proper infrastructure in place and the proper schemes and programmes in place for households and businesses alike. I thank the Minister of State for being here. I thank him for his work on this. I will hand over to Senator Byrne.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I thank the Minister of State very much for being with us today. There is no question that up and down this country at the moment, on the tip of everybody's tongue is the question of what is going to happen in the budget this day next week. We will know the details but it is very important for me and my colleagues to put forward some of the suggestions we have around what we feel would be an adequate set of supports for people who are really feeling the impact of the cost of living and, in particular, the impact of the fuel crisis. That is what my colleagues and I have set out to do. I very much support our motion. The fact that there are no Opposition amendments to it make the case for what we should have in this Chamber, which is a collegiate sense of doing the right thing to support people who are hard-pressed.

Let us not be under any misapprehension but that this fuel crisis is as a direct result of what is currently taking place in other parts of the world. I am thinking in particular of the war that is taking place in Iran and the knock-on impact that that is having on international fuel supplies, particularly on oil getting out of the Strait of Hormuz and across the world to our island. It is important to recognise that it is not the Government that sets international oil prices but supply and demand.

That is not to take from the role the Government can have in excise duty, taxes and levies. So far this year, we have seen a €1.5 billion allocation directly taken from the Government's surplus to support businesses, individuals, families, farmers and other people up and down the

country who work very hard day in, day out and who through no fault of their own really do need support at this time. That money has been spent in a number of different ways. In my area in County Wexford, farmers have needed and benefited from the supports that have been given. As part of this motion, it is important that those measures that were put in place to support farmers be extended and there be certainty for the agricultural sector about how long those supports will be in place. The Government previously came forward and said that the supports would be provided for as long as they were needed. It is very important that we put our case on the floor of the Seanad directly to the Minister of State and say that the crisis is not over yet and the supports must be continued. It is important that we not hide behind anything and that we be upfront and make that case clearly.

The vast majority of rural people heat their homes through home heating kerosene oil. For ordinary families up and down the country, the bills coming through their doors to heat their homes are far too much. We in Fine Gael genuinely feel that there has to be a clear, targeted measure to support families with the price of home heating oil, a price that is set at international level. There are supports that the Government can bring. We would encourage the Government in its budget next Tuesday to bring forward those supports.

I am thinking particularly of individuals who come into my offices in Wexford and tell me that they are grateful for the fuel allowance support. We know that about one quarter of households are receiving the fuel allowance, which is an increase, particularly given the fact that individuals who did not qualify last year were able to qualify this year. We in the Fine Gael group want to see the fuel allowance extended in recognition of the impact that the fuel crisis is having on hard-pressed families up and down the country.

I want to be clear that there are measures that will require the Government to spend a considerable amount of money. It is important to recognise that we are in a position to do so because the economy has been carefully managed through crises in the past and this Government continues to be prudent in how it spends money so that in difficult times like these, it is able to deliver financial support to those who most need them. We hear day in, day out from the Opposition about how there is a need to spend more money in one area or another, but we are all in agreement that the fuel crisis is hitting families up and down this country through no fault of their own. While there will be a drive towards decarbonisation, more solar panels, renewable energy, offshore energy and all of those things, we have to see clear, targeted measures in next Tuesday's budget to support those who are most affected by it and who are not in a position to put in solar panels or benefit from offshore renewable energy that might come in three, five or ten years down the line.

I am very happy on behalf of my colleagues to second this motion.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to deal with this important matter of energy and fuel costs. I also thank the officials from the Department who are here today. It is timely to have this discussion.

At the outset, I want to say that protecting agriculture, forestry, horticulture and farm viability will be the centre of my contribution to the debate on energy and fuel costs. Without a viable agricultural sector, food security, rural employment and the resilience of local economies will be in deep trouble. Energy security must be central to budget 2027 and I have no doubt from utterances from the Government members and, indeed, the Opposition that it

will be a central part of budget 2027. That is an important focus that the Government has chosen to take and lead out on. I want to acknowledge that.

The cost of fossil fuels has virtually doubled in the last year. I welcome the proposed kerosene boiler scrappage scheme that was announced informally yesterday but formally today. That is a positive and welcome intervention. As part of budget 2027, I am calling for a number of measures. I am calling for a reduction in the levies and taxes on fuel across the board generally, given the set of circumstances in which budget 2027 is now going to have to be framed. I am calling for enhanced financial measures on renewables. I am calling for a halt to the proposal to phase out the selling of solar power back to the electricity grid. It has been confirmed by a number of newspapers in the last week that there is this proposal on the phasing out of selling solar power back to electricity grid. Selling solar power back was a positive intervention and one that was marketed and sold as a positive contribution in terms of people's partnership and active engagement. That is an important issue to look at.

I am calling for greater support for the Irish horticultural industry, which is heavily reliant on energy for production. Greater supports for protected crops and mushroom producers are central to any vibrant, profitable horticultural food sector. It is a particularly vulnerable sector due to its reliance on energy-intensive production - heat, cooling, water, irrigation - all of which requires the use of energy to be successful.

Dairy, beef and tillage farmers, along with agricultural contractors, are facing soaring operational costs, which threatens overall food production and, indeed, profit margins. That is simply not sustainable in the long run. I acknowledge the fact that the Irish Farmers' Association, IFA, made a detailed submission to the Department outlining significant exposure to growers in relation to the increased fuel and energy costs. The IFA works collaboratively with the Government and the Government has engaged with it in pre-budget talks. That is an important facet and one I want to endorse in terms of the IFA's asks of Government in the context of budget 2027. I hope that the IFA recommendations and those of other farm representative organisations and bodies will form part of the Government's central response to the sector in budget 2027. The Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Harris, has acknowledged that fuel, fodder and fertiliser are the top challenges facing the sector. He has also acknowledged the need for targeted responses and interventions, and I hope those will be seen in budget 2027.

Turning to solar energy, we cannot have a situation where solar farms impact negatively on highly productive agricultural land and our communities. I have been to counties Meath, Tipperary, Cork, Cavan and Galway where I have met with communities that have real challenges in this regard. There are no specific planning guidelines in place to deal with solar energy development.

I acknowledge Senator Kennelly, who had a Commencement matter in this House only a few days ago. On 22 October 2025, the Minister clearly said there were no guidelines in place at that time. Surely it was important to call that out and certainly that must be happen. This must be a top priority for Government along with reform of the outdated wind energy guidelines. A national planning statement for solar energy needs to be fast-tracked and it needs to include appropriate environmental assessment and, more importantly, meaningful, not meaningless, public consultation.

I draw the Minister of State's attention to the national energy affordable task force interim report of 2025. This document and its successor contain the keys to reform in terms of social intervention and taxation intervention. It has to be measured, targeted and responsive. When I started, I said I wanted to focus on agriculture, horticulture and forestry. These are critical areas that require diesel, green diesel, fuel. I spoke earlier today about the billions of crops that we are importing into this country. This is a country where we grow beet, cauliflower, cabbage, carrots and broccoli very successfully. We have to support the horticultural sector. When I talk about protected crops I am talking about soft fruits and crops that are under cloches, tunnels or glass houses. They need energy for ventilation, irrigation and light. They need energy to sustain their businesses. I ask for these matters to be taken on board. I know this is not budget day. I thank Fine Gael for tabling this motion, which allows me and others on this side of the House to make a contribution to the bigger debate about energy, its costs and its impact on sustainable enterprise and sustainable agriculture, food and forestry.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I too welcome this debate, which might be the first of many debates will have on energy over the coming years because, of course, it is one of the frontiers of our geopolitical landscape and something we will be dealing with for many years to come. We all live in the real world. We know that people are under pressure. We know that fuel poverty is a real thing. Many people are looking towards the winter with great trepidation.

The Strait of Hormuz is central to all of this. The Government is very aware of it and very concerned over the ongoing conflict. The diplomatic efforts that we partake in at every level are the key to unlocking this. We have had unprecedented success with our diplomatic efforts in recent years. I think particularly of the visit of President Trump a few weeks ago. Many parties in this House and the other Chamber want this Government to boycott any visit of an American president. It was a coup to actually have such time and have a positive engagement with the president because that soft power is something that we can utilise hopefully to bring about some positive change in the global sphere.

We are well known for our peace efforts. The Government should take a greater role in trying to solve the current Middle East conflict. Of course this is not the only conflict. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has had a devastating impact on fuel security right across Europe. The Government very swiftly dealt with that when that incursion happened. However, we are where we are. We are in a position to offer significant support and we have offered significant support over the past number of months in particular because of the prudent management of our economy, because of setting up rainy day funds, because of setting up of all sorts of schemes and being able to manage our way through this process.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is actively monitoring the evolving geopolitical situation and its implications. It is a moveable feast and every day we can see the price of oil and diesel going up. There is only so much that the Government can do but the Minister has set up a cross-governmental national energy affordability task force chaired by his Department. It continues to work at pace to assess the implications of the Iran conflict on energy affordability in Ireland and to identify appropriate short-, medium- and long-term responses. This is key to delivering the appropriate responses in the budget next week.

I am in the same boat as most people in this Chamber. We are just reading the reports we are not privy to what is going on. However, I know fuel affordability is to the forefront of the

Minister, Deputy Chamber's, mind and the Taoiseach's mind, particularly the cost of home heating oil used mainly in older and less energy-efficient homes. Older homeowners might not be in a position to upgrade their homes as many people have done in recent years. I was particularly heartened to see the boiler scrappage scheme announced yesterday. I look forward to that having a real impact on the ground because, as I said, older people might not necessarily be able to afford the full cost of upgrading their system and decarbonise their home heating.

Border security, fuel security and food security are to be the central themes for the next number of years. My colleague Senator Boyhan touched on the food security aspect, something I have spoken about time and time again. North County Dublin where I live has a huge tradition of horticulture. For example, we produce 47% of the potato output in country. Across all the fields and in protected horticultural produce, they are very energy-efficient. However, we need to support our farmers and particularly our farmers in Dublin, if I may be parochial, because of the huge food output that we have. They are coming under a lot of pressure from a fuel point of view. Productive land is being taken over for solar farms and for housing. Because we are in the greater Dublin area, it is very hard for them to remain productive.

However, for our security purposes we need to have adequate supports in place for the horticulture industry and perhaps that comes from EU funds. We need be thinking about this on an EU basis. Because we export a huge portion of our agricultural produce to the EU, Ireland is key to keeping Europe food secure. I know the Minister of State will take that back given his own work within the Department of foreign affairs. I know all of these larger geopolitical issues are in his considerations.

The Government has done a lot. As has already been mentioned, 25% of households are now in receipt of the fuel allowance which is really significant. An extra 470,000 households are receiving this financial support which is really significant. The extension of the period for receipt of the fuel allowance has also meant that people have more money in their pocket. We need to constantly look at what we are doing. It is an evolving situation. We need to decarbonise and need to secure our own needs so we are not as vulnerable to these types of shocks in the future. As I said, this is one of the frontiers that unfortunately we will be dealing with. The more aware we all become of the need to be energy secure, the more work we can do in these Houses.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. I too am delighted to get the opportunity to talk on fuel again. We did not table an amendment to the motion. The simple fact is I do not have time to write amendments that I know will get shot down every single time. We tabled a Private Members' motion on protecting rural Ireland and it was completely rewritten to take out everything that we called on Government to do. My time is better spent by arguing what I think should be in the motion.

I had hoped that by bringing this forward a week before the budget, we would hear something and I am still hoping for that, not for me but for the 700,000 households that use kerosene to heat their homes. Those people have been telling me that they are not filling their tanks and are not buying kerosene in the hopes that next Tuesday they will get some kind of a relief. As others have said, a lot of these are older homes and older people. I know it is not freezing cold outside, but homes are cold especially in the evening and night time. Homes are getting cold and people are holding off. I really hope something comes for them.

The motion calls on Government to continue support for households most exposed to fuel and electricity poverty. I am not sure what those supports are and if it refers to fuel supports or the fuel allowance.

You cannot measure your success on standing up and saying that 25% of the households in this country get fuel allowance. I think that signifies failure more than success. If 25% of our households in this country are earning so little that they cannot afford fuel and need support, there is a serious failure in this country when it comes to fuel and the cost. The motion calls for an examination of "the impact of increased energy bills on elderly people living alone". It goes to show that the Government obviously is not listening to anybody. People have been shouting and screaming about kerosene, which has been increasing since last February with not one cent taken off the tax. Not one cent was taken off the carbon tax. We have been calling for it since last March - we have proposed eight different pieces of legislation - and never has one penny come off it. I can tell the Government that it does not need to examine any further. I am here to say there are serious issues when it comes to older people and heating their homes.

The motion calls on the Government to continue to support the agriculture sector, fisheries and haulage. A rebate scheme was put in place last April after the fuel protests. That rebate scheme is not fit for purpose for a lot of these companies. It is heavy on administration. There were cut-off dates. Some were filling out the wrong forms. Small farmers and small contractors were afraid to fill out these forms to apply for fear they would get chased by Revenue. I am not for one minute saying they should not pay taxes on anything but I am just saying there are a lot of them. The Government knows that because a lot of them did not claim the supports and there was money left over. There are serious issues with the rebate schemes.

The motion mentions the need to "update wind energy guidelines". I love that one because we are waiting about 20 years. There are wind energy guidelines and they are sitting there but I am assuming there is something in them the Government does not like, which is why they have not been brought out. There are all of these wind farms going to An Coimisiún Pleanála and going through judicial review because the communities do not want them there as they are too close. It is not just that. Some of them in County Limerick are even going against the guidelines that have been out since 2006 because the turbines are too close to each other.

The Government talks about solar farms and wind turbines, but the grid cannot hold what is there. These companies are getting grants to put up their turbines and put in solar farms. They still get paid, even though they are not giving us electricity because the grid cannot hold it. We are dumping it. The everyday consumer is paying for this and paying to dump it, which makes no sense. Upgrade the grid first and then bring us the wind farms and solar farms, if that is what the Government wants. I say this every time we talk about energy. Shannon Foynes Port in County Limerick has a massive plan to install offshore wind that would sustain the entire country and be a major exporter, but the Government started the DMAP on the east of the country, the opposite side to where Shannon is. That is another thing that could be looked at.

The motion calls for continuing "engagement at an EU level to explore windfall tax". That is something for which we have been calling for a long time. It makes no sense that energy companies are earning millions every single year while people are in energy poverty. They need to be held to account and taxed correctly. People are told to get EVs because it will be cheaper and to charge them at night. The electricity companies came out last week or the week

before with what I think was a 25% increase in night-time rates. Where do you win? You cannot win if you tell somebody to do something and then the energy company comes in and screws you on the other side.

There is a lot of talk about replacing boilers. What are they going to be replaced with? You cannot put an air-to-water system into an old home because it is not airtight. You will just ramp up electricity bills even higher. There needs to be a proper transition. People are stuck on solid fuel and kerosene. They do not have a choice. It is the way the homes were built back then. They were not built for air-to-water systems as they are not airtight. You will lose energy that way.

On carbon tax, I know the Government is saying there are rules. I am not expert on finance. I will put my hand up and say I do not understand what can and what cannot be taken off it. I know that the airlines are not charged and the private jets are not charged. Why is it on petrol, diesel and kerosene when you have private airlines and private jets coming in and out of this country that do not get charged carbon tax?

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I thank the Fine Gael Senators for giving us the opportunity to speak about this today. We all know that energy and fuel costs are increasing rapidly as a consequence of war and conflict. An unnecessary war of choice has to be named as the number one cause of current fuel inflation around the world. There is a normalisation of war, which our President has spoken about so much, and we are accepting the normalisation of war. As a result of that, we can see the direct impact on prices of fuel and energy. We see an increase in the price of food and other day-to-day essentials.

It has to be called out that while 700,000 people are struggling with fuel poverty, others are profiting. This needs to be called out. It was welcome to see the call for a windfall tax on energy suppliers. Six European countries - Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland and Austria - have introduced a windfall tax. We did it in the recent past, during the energy spike caused by the invasion of Ukraine. A tax was placed upon excess profits by energy companies too. We cannot understand why we cannot do it again. These companies are still making vast profits. This includes private companies, like Bord Gáis Energy, which made €72.5 million. Among the semi-States, ESB made €640 million in 2025, EirGrid made €429 million and Bord na Móna made nearly €32 million. Private companies need to make a profit but they do not need to make such an extraordinary profit. This is even more the case for semi-State companies. How can such profit levels be justified at a time when so many people are facing a genuine crisis and a winter choice between heating and eating? It is time to introduce this windfall tax - it is good to see it in the motion - to redistribute the income to those who need it the most. Perhaps we should name this an energy solidarity tax, which could end up funding this. As a party, we are calling for targeted energy payments of €400 per household for people earning under €80,000 so that those who need it most are getting it, along with an increase in the fuel allowance.

I rise today to speak about public transport too. As a representative of rural Ireland, it baffles me that the charges for public transport have gone up. Now is not the time to increase public transport fees. It does not make sense. We can see that an increase in public transport fares hits the people on the lowest incomes the most; students, elderly people and commuters. I cannot understand how this is justified. The Just Transition Commission has urged the

Government to halt plans to increase fares by an average of 15%, bringing in an estimated €70 million to the Exchequer. However, there was underspend of €65 million of carbon tax in 2025. Why should that not have been pushed over towards public transport?

We must welcome the increase in production of renewable energy in recent years. That has to be said. At a time when we are generating new levels of renewable energy, these potential benefits are being absorbed by energy-hungry data centres. Energy should be getting cheaper as new renewables enter the market but it is not - it is getting more expensive. My colleague, Deputy Ciarán Ahern, introduced a Bill last week which would compel data centres to produce 100% of their own energy from renewables, which is very reasonable. I have asked many times in here why we are throwing money at building new fossil fuel infrastructure, such as LNG storage. Now is the time when we should be investing in and rolling out renewable technologies.

We always hear this argument that carbon tax is used for SEAI grants but we know that SEAI grants are for people who need to have the money upfront. I know there have been changes to it. There absolutely have been changes, which is welcome because we know renters are particularly affected by this. They are living in freezing homes and the landlords are not willing to put the money into it. Let us see how this works out. It is good to see that. The ESRI report has said that the carbon tax hits the poorer homes the most, which I have known for a long time. We cannot tax our way out of it so there is absolutely no justification for an increase in carbon tax.

The Government has responded to this crisis in a reactionary way. You cannot just keep throwing money at something. If we really want to reduce energy prices, we have to invest in renewable energy and not be throwing money at LNG infrastructure. We need to look at people and make sure they are able to use public transport, particularly people in rural Ireland who want to use it. Putting up this price at this time makes absolutely no sense. I hope the suggestions the Opposition have made will be listened to and taken on board, given our opportunity to speak here.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome guests of Sabrina Brennan to the Visitors Gallery. I welcome John, Joan and Seán Brennan. They are all very welcome here today.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I welcome the Brennans as well. I thought it was the Brennan brothers who were coming in to do the place up and take over from the OPW. They would probably do a better job. I am delighted Fine Gael has put this motion forward because if they put this motion forward, that means the Tánaiste is not out telling everybody what will be in the budget.

I hope he will give them a chance to speak about it today. We have to be very careful in our language and in what we say to people. In the build-up to the budget, I have been struck by the amount of narrative from the Minister for Finance. People are uneasy and uncertain. There are people in this country who cannot get by from one week to the next. They are literally scraping by, surviving on 50 cent or €1, and are on WhatsApp trying to get a son or a daughter to send them a couple of euro to get them through to the next payday or the next payment of social welfare support. That is deeply unfair. We live in a kind of balloon in this building. We

are very insulated. We do not understand the scale of the poverty that remains in this country. Senior Ministers and political leaders in particular are largely insulated from that. Their language is very important, particularly when we are speaking about whether the increase for pensioners is going to be €10 or €7.50. Most senior politicians would not see €2.50 as making much of a difference but, for a 70-year-old man living on his own who drinks three pints a day to combat social isolation, to get out and meet someone or to save putting on the heat in his house, that €2.50 is an awful lot of money.

One of the most disturbing things about this budget has been the race to get out there with news or soundbites. The Tánaiste went to the ploughing and came out with the three Fs: fuel, feed and fodder. It was particularly alarming that he did not know that the three Fs were actually fixed, flexible and future, the principles of cost, as any accountant would tell you. If you are doing the budget for one of the most progressive and successful countries in Europe, that is really what you should be focusing on.

Aside from that, this is a very important budget for the Government. It is a collective Government and both parties are in it. I will put my hand up and say that the last budget did not reflect the ethos and values we have as a Government and as a caring society that values all people. We reined in supports that we had provided previously and we did so too quickly. We were not there for people when they needed us most. I hope that we have learned a lesson from that. We faced a public backlash for it. I hope we will see the result of that lesson in this budget. It needs to be a budget that emphasises care, empathy and, above all else, the support that underpins and defines the Fianna Fáil Party. We have been there since the foundation of the State. We have been through many a crisis but we have always been there to help and support people. It is now more important than ever that we do that.

I would certainly support a windfall tax. I was particularly disappointed when we provided the energy credits. We gave a huge amount of money to energy companies and got no commitments from them in return. We probably improved the enterprise value of every one of those companies by several percentage points by giving them that large amount of money and bringing down their credit base, and we got nothing in return. We did not get a commitment from any of them that they would not increase their profits or anything. We should rain fire on them with a windfall charge. They did the country no service in what they did after getting that money. They more or less gave two fingers to this House and to society in general. I would certainly welcome a charge.

I would also like to see a hospitality tax introduced in the budget. It is very important for tourism in Ireland. It is important for rural Ireland. I was in Dublin at the weekend and nearly everybody there was from either America or Canada. I do not think Dublin needs to benefit from a windfall tax. That money needs to be ring-fenced and needs to go back into the promotion of tourism across the rest of the country. The likes of Longford and Leitrim need to be able to retain that tax locally and to use it to develop tourism in the locality. Just like the local property tax is used to benefit other counties in the country, this new tax, when it is brought in, cannot benefit Dublin, Cork and the other big cities. It needs to go where tourism is struggling, where we do not have small hotels because we allowed them to be used to take in refugees. We need to build our tourism base back up. The Americans I spoke to at the weekend spoke about the dearth of accommodation on the west coast, saying that they found it incredibly hard and that they could only stay for one night because the accommodation simply

was not there. We need to address that. We have a very nuanced hospitality offering in this country. You either go to the big cities or you do not go anywhere. In a similar way, the hospitality providers only want to invest in Dublin. They do not want to invest in new hotels in any other part of Ireland.

Renewable energy is very important. It is great to see progress on that. I spoke in the House earlier today about a frightening scenario. There is now the prospect of the largest ever wind farm in Ireland. This is being brought in by stealth through three separate planning applications, which cover over 800 acres between them. It is bigger than the current largest wind farm we have, which is in Meath. It is only marginally smaller than the largest wind farm in Great Britain. If a wind farm is proposed in Ireland that is almost on the same scale as the largest wind farm in England, something has got completely out of control. The largest wind farm in Ireland - the one in Meath - is on the market for €250 million and is likely to be bought by an overseas investment company. In all likelihood, the combined worth of the assets of the three solar farms and the wind energy facility being promoted by Bord na Móna on 4,600 acres, if they all get planning, will be in the region of €1.5 billion. These projects will account for 6,000 acres of land in Longford. It is inevitable that these will be sold in the future. Right across the country, we are engendering, promoting and encouraging the wholesale and rampant development of alternative energy with absolutely no checks or boundaries. We have reached the point at which, as a Government and as a society, we need to say "Stop". The next generation will potentially be faced with the prospect of selling off 6,000 acres in County Longford. That is a step too far.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Richmond, as teacht isteach chun páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht. Tá sé tábhachtach a rá gurb é seo an ghéarchéim is deacra ó thaobh fuinnimh de atá feicthe i stair an domhain. Níl a leithéid feicthe againn le blianta anuas. Dá bharr sin, tá formhór na ndeacrachtaí atá againn ag teacht ó chomhthéacs idirnáisiúnta. Nílím ag iarraidh éalú ó na freagrachtaí atá againn mar pholaiteoirí agus mar Rialtas ach is tábhachtach an méid sin a rá.

At the outset, I will make what may be an obvious point to many. The energy crisis we are experiencing at the moment is primarily caused by international conflict and the escalation in prices that has resulted from the supply issues we are experiencing with oil, petrol and gas throughout the world. I do not seek to abdicate our responsibility or to make excuses; it is just a fact.

Looking at the progress that Ireland has made and the measures that have been introduced since this crisis reached a peak in March and April of this year, it is interesting to compare where we stand to our international partners, particularly in the EU. Back in March of this year, when preparing for a debate on the same subject, I did an analysis of petrol and diesel prices throughout the EU 27. At the time, Ireland was ninth on the list of the EU 27. I compiled the list by simply looking at the price per litre of petrol and diesel and adding them together to come to an aggregate figure. There were obviously variations between countries. In some, petrol prices were higher and, in others, diesel prices were higher. At the time, Ireland came in ninth. Conducting a similar analysis today of the EU 27, again looking at aggregate prices, Ireland ranks 14th. The measures that have been introduced are having an effect. It is also worth pointing out that, of the 27 EU countries, 25 have seen an increase in the combined price of a litre each of petrol and diesel while two have not. Those two are Sweden and Ireland. I

make that point not to deflect from the challenges that are being faced. We acknowledge that the challenges are difficult. They are challenges being felt by households throughout the country. However, it shows that the measures that the Irish Government has taken since the crisis reached its peak are having an effect. We look forward to seeing further measures that will help alleviate concerns in next month's budget.

The analysis I am just after making reference to does not make reference whatsoever to home heating oil. However, it is important to acknowledge it because there is a little bit of misinformation out there in relation to calls on Government to do measures A, B, and C. With regard to home heating oil, the Government cannot because of commitments made at EU level to reduce the rate of VAT on home heating oil below the current 13.5%. That is not to say those who are experiencing difficulty in that regard do not require support. That is why we have the fuel allowance, the extension of the winter heating season by four weeks, which is an important measure, and the warmer homes scheme, as alluded to by Senator Duffy at the outset of this debate.

I am making these points not to deflate or abdicate responsibility, as I said at the start, but rather to say that in the teeth of an international crisis we are taking measures. Those measures are having an effect. I am not going to stand here today and pretend everything is rosy in the garden because of that. However, as referenced by Senator Byrne in his contribution early in this debate, because of prudent management of the country's finances, we are in a position to provide supports to people who most need these supports. That is because of the efforts of people like Paschal Donohoe, Michael McGrath and, more recently, Simon Harris since he has taken over as Minister for Finance. I welcome this afternoon's motion. I think progress is being made. We are not blind to the challenges the country is facing, and I look forward to further support measures in next month's budget and beyond.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Minister of State for being here for this important debate. I thank my colleagues and, in particular, Senator Duffy, for leading on this motion that the Fine Gael team has put forward.

We sometimes forget that we are in a lucky position to support our citizens across the country. As a Minister of State who travels within Europe and outside of Europe, I do not need to tell Deputy Richmond about the struggles other countries are having in managing their budgets and deciding not whether they can support citizens but rather where they can make cuts, which can impact and cause real problems for their citizens.

It is also important to be honest with people. There is no government, not even a government with a surplus or economy as strong as ours, that can actually shield households from the price increases that have happened in the past year. Most people who think rationally understand that the price increases on kerosene or oil in the last 12 months are not because governments have made decisions and increased taxes. They have gone up because of geopolitics, because of a war in the Middle East and, predominantly, because the Strait of Hormuz is closed. When we make decisions next week in the budget, our decisions, certainly within Fine Gael, will be about making sure we can support people who work hard, support people to be able to get ahead, finance people to be able to build more and, as a Government, be able to deliver better for our people. We have an economy, surplus and tax intake to be able to make some decisions to do that.

We have already given over €1.3 billion in financial support. When the crisis started in the Middle East in Iran, we made a decision to give €750 million in packages to support people during the initial crisis. That was obviously not supported by many in opposition even though it was one of the highest, if not the highest, support package *per capita* in the European Union. Even though Opposition Members were calling for more and more at the time, one of the reasons we said we would not go beyond €750 million, even though that was the highest in the European Union, was because we felt in a couple of months' time it could be even worse. Where are we now? We are in a situation even worse than it was in April.

The money with which we are talking about supporting our citizens in this country would have been spent by the Opposition in April. They would not have the money themselves for all the things they are calling to be funded or supported because they would have had it spent. That is not just this year; that is in every single budget. I know people talk about the budget, and last year's budget was mentioned, but in the round, the budgets that have been delivered, particularly by Paschal Donohoe, have always had a core element to make sure we never end up in a situation like we did 15 years ago. That is why we are in the lucky position to be able to make these decisions next week.

A number of people spoke about fuel allowance, the 470,000 people that impacts on, and the extension to that. That was a real relief for people. In Tipperary and when I was canvassing in the Galway by-election for Seán Kyne, the issue of home heating oil did come up an awful lot. We have spoken about this as a party in terms of wanting to prioritise home heating oil and making decisions in the budget that can support those people. I am confident the Minister of State and all Ministers understand that home heating oil has become quite challenging for people, especially in rural Ireland. Even though we have extended fuel allowance, which is hugely welcome, home heating oil is a one-off payment. I suggest, as the Minister for Finance is aware, a one-off lump payment of some kind to support pensioners in particular who, being realistic about it, are never going to be in a position to change their whole heating system in their later years. It is just not credible, but they do have the financial burden and struggle more than most people. I am sure a number of my colleagues will talk about farming and supporting farmers, and I will echo and agree with what they say.

I was surprised when Senator Collins stood up to say the reason she was not putting down amendments was because she was not bothered.

Senator Joanne Collins: I did not say I was not bothered.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I genuinely thought the reason was-----

Senator Joanne Collins: Did you think it was because I agreed with everything?

Senator Garret Ahearn: -----because of the developments in Northern Ireland. I came in here tonight thinking there would be a whole load of amendments from all political parties in opposition. Amendments are accepted in this House.

Senator Joanne Collins: No, they are not. Our motions are not even accepted. They are rewritten every time.

Senator Garret Ahearn: They are certainly accepted more regularly than in the other House.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: They are not.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Who gets elected to this House to say that they just do not bother putting down amendments or putting down work?

Senator Joanne Collins: I never said I did not bother. I did not use those words.

Senator Garret Ahearn: What this means for the motion we have put down, unless they vote against the suggestions we are recommending-----

Senator Joanne Collins: I will be voting against it.

Senator Garret Ahearn: -----which would be remarkable, is that they would support it.

Senator Joanne Collins: No.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Why would they not support it when this is about supporting people throughout the country? Just like in previous budgets and at previous times of crisis when this Government has always been there to support people when they need it, I have no doubt that next Tuesday that will happen as well.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Senators Linda Nelson Murray and Gareth Scahill are sharing time. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I welcome this motion and thank my Seanad colleagues, especially Mark Duffy, for working on this. Energy and fuel are not luxuries; they are actually essentials. When we talk about energy affordability, I want us to remember the people behind the figures. The two things I want to talk about are older people and those people going to work.

Only last week, ALONE published its latest cost-of-living survey and the findings were really concerning. Three quarters of older people surveyed said they had been affected by the rising cost of living this year and 58% are struggling to pay their bills. However, the figure that stands out the most to me is that 45% of older people said they are going cold to save on energy costs. That means almost one in two older people surveyed are making a decision on whether they can afford to properly heat their home. No older person should have to sit in a cold room, put on another jumper or go to bed early because they are afraid to turn on the heat.

Both my parents have now passed away, but for the nine years my dad was alive after my mam passed, he became obsessed with the gas and electricity bill coming in. He took great pride when he could get it down on previous months. I am using my dad as an example to show how so many people think about heat, weather and cost, particularly older people. I

would not count myself as an older person, but even in my friend group we talk about good drying weather, which makes it sound very sad.

6 o'clock

I know it is quite funny but the reality is everybody is looking to save a few bob when it comes to energy.

To ladies on the other side of the room, we have made great progress. The fuel allowance has increased to €38 a week, eligibility has been extended and there is significant investment going into retrofitting homes. A warmer, more efficient home can reduce a heating bill for years to come. That is why I strongly support accelerating retrofitting, which is what the carbon tax is used for, particularly for older people living in older, less energy-efficient homes.

I want to highlight another side of this motion, that being, the cost of getting to work. For many people, particularly in rural Ireland, driving is not a choice. It is how they get to their job. It is estimated that 59% of people commuting to work drive a car and the percentage is 72% in rural areas. This is hugely important in my county of Meath. Meath has the longest average commute in the country. In fact, 19% of Meath commuters travel for more than an hour a day. That is about 17,000 people every day. We have also seen a massive increase in fuel prices. Some workers who travel 100 km every day reported that the increase was costing them an extra €20 a week just to get to work. For many workers, fuel is not a luxury or a lifestyle choice, but the price of getting to work. If people cannot afford to fill the tank, then they cannot get to the workplace. Even though we are at a good level in the economy in terms of work, with an increase of 26,000 in quarter 2 of this year in the number of jobs, it is a bit scary because the more that is in the car's tank, the less there is at home. This may impact the weekly grocery bill, the extra education you want to give your child, or your membership of the local Ladies Gaelic Football Association, LGFA, club.

We know there are pensioners who are afraid to turn on the heating and there are workers who are afraid to look at the price at the pump. Both are telling us the same thing. The cost of essential energy is putting a real pressure on people's lives. We need to continue supporting those most exposed to these costs. We need to accelerate the retrofitting of older and inefficient homes. We also need to support rural communities and workers who have no realistic alternative to the car. We need to continue working towards an energy system that is more secure, more domestic and less exposed to international shocks.

I am glad that Senator Kelleher has shown us that Ireland has been rated as No. 14 out of 27 in the EU when it comes to fuel.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The Senator is sharing time.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I am nearly finished, sorry. To date, this Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the EU *per capita*. This is a really good thing. I think that most of us here in this room recognise how important that is and the urgency of doing more.

Senator Gareth Scahill: The lesson there is to never go second. I thank the Senator.

I fully support the motion. I will not go over a lot of the points that have been mentioned, but I want to highlight that this motion is targeting assistance for vulnerable households, which is something that I have regularly raised in the House. I have been a big proponent of the warmer homes scheme and ensuring that those who need it most - those who are getting the assistance that many of my colleagues have mentioned - get the actual retrofitting that they need in their homes.

I have spent a lot of my time in the House focusing on skill sets not being there on the ground to deliver this in a timely manner. We know that there are individuals eligible for these schemes all over the country who are waiting 24 and 36 months for these schemes to be put in place. Over the last couple of days, I have had a number of meetings and I have found that the actual delays to the system is not actually the lack of skill sets on the ground. The contractors are out there. They are bringing in people to do this retrofitting, where needed, and sourcing materials, where needed. However, the system that the SEAI has in place for assessing the properties that are eligible and for awarding the contracts for retrofitting them to contractors is not working and takes 12 to 18 months. This means that some of the most susceptible people in our economy, who should be benefiting from these schemes for which the Government is putting money in place and that is available to draw down, are not getting them in a timely manner and are looking at a second and third winter without having this retrofitting in place. If the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, was actually here tonight, then I would be calling for a review of the system so that the money that the Government is allocating to these schemes can be spent.

Another issue that I have raised on numerous occasions in the House is that of PV solar panels for medically vulnerable individuals. I welcome the news from the SEAI this afternoon and from the Minister's Department that batteries will be included in this scheme. I have called for assistive technologies to be available and for that money to be used for this scheme and for the house adaptation grants, and I welcome the fact that these batteries are going to be in place in that regard moving forward.

We are doing a hundred things really well but one thing that probably has not been mentioned here is the road transport support scheme. Last year, the Department of Transport paid €6.9 million to the Department of Education and Youth to support school bus providers who were in three-, four- or five-year contracts to deliver a service. They entered those contracts before the price of fuel increased to the level it is at today. I would like that we look at this matter. We have called for that within my party. I hope that the Minister for Transport has heard that call because the bus drivers have never taken to the streets. They have continued to provide a school support service throughout this crisis. We want to ensure that all of our kids continue to get to school during this crisis in the winter ahead, so I hope that something will be done in relation to that.

The Cathaoirleach was not here but I was docked a few minutes beforehand.

An Cathaoirleach: Were you?

Senator Gareth Scahill: That is why I ran over a small bit.

An Cathaoirleach: Was it for bad behaviour or anything like that? I am sorry about that. The Senator can take it up with the rules and procedures committee or something. Anois, an Seanadóir Tully.

Senator Pauline Tully: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss the cost of fuel and the devastating effect it is having on people. It is having an effect on everybody across the board but certain sectors are affected more. As we head into the winter and as the weather gets colder, older people and disabled people will end up being forced to live in one room because that is all they can afford to heat or they will go to bed earlier and get up later or sit with several layers of clothing on them in the house, and that is not right. That should not be happening.

Carers are adversely affected, especially in rural areas. People are dependent on their cars in rural areas because there is very limited public transport. As carers must go from client to client, they have no option but to use the car. Earlier, there were families in here with children with additional needs. They are all the time on the road going to different appointments and so on. They are dependent on a car.

We see the cost of fuel at the pumps. The cost has now gone way over the €2 mark and is up to €2.20, which is driving up the cost of everything else. It is driving up the cost of production and transportation. Our shopping bills are increasing as a result.

We have over 300,000 people in this country who cannot afford to pay their electricity bill and are in arrears. That is an absolute disgrace. People talk about the fuel allowance. We should not have so many people depending on a fuel allowance. They should be able to pay their bills if energy was controlled.

For homes depending on kerosene, it now costs up to €1,600 to fill a tank, which is nearly twice what it was this time last year. Today, a boiler scrappage scheme was mentioned. I do not know the details of the proposal but we await seeing them. As Senator Collins said, most houses are not built for heat pumps or air-to-water pumps, so I do not how boilers will be replaced.

There are Government schemes that encourage people to buy electric cars or avail of SEAI grants. Richer people can afford to avail of those. It is Government schemes supporting richer people to increase their energy efficiency. Everybody should be increasing their energy efficiency but we should not use public money to support those who most can afford to pay for it themselves. The warmer homes scheme is a great scheme but it has too long a waiting list. Therefore, we need more investment in the scheme and more people able to avail of it. As matters stand, we have poorer people forced to drive older and dirtier cars that are more expensive to run. They are dependent on kerosene. It is not a fair setup around the grants and supports.

On the road transport support scheme, I talked to the owner of an SME last week. He has ten vans on the road and employs about 30 people. He is considering who he will have to lay off because he cannot avail of the scheme because his vans are less than 3.4 tonnes in weight. Why is there a cut-off point like that? His fuel bill increased by between €1,500 to €2,000 a month since March. He cannot afford that. If there are no supports forthcoming in this budget,

what is he going to do? He will have to let workers go yet still expect the smaller workforce to produce the same.

We talk about the wars. They are driving up the cost of fuel. Obviously, those wars are outside the control and responsibility of the Irish Government, but the Irish Government is responsible for domestic energy security. We have had Fine Gael in government for 15 years, and we have had Fianna Fáil supporting it or in government with it for the last ten years, yet we have not invested significantly in wind, solar or wave energy.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: The money has been offered.

Senator Pauline Tully: Excuse me, I am speaking.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Tully, without interruption.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: We have offered supports, Senator.

An Cathaoirleach: Sorry, but Senator Tully, without interruption.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: Sinn Féin would have it all spent.

Senator Pauline Tully: Oh, for God's sake. Whisht up.

An Cathaoirleach: There is a Standing Order for interruption during speeches.

Senator Pauline Tully: Yes.

An Cathaoirleach: If people want to utilise it, they can utilise it but, without that, Senator Tully, without interruption.

Senator Pauline Tully: Thank you, a Chathaoirligh.

One hundred years ago, we had a Cumann na nGaedheal Government that had the foresight to invest in the hydroelectric station in Ardnacrusha and the roll-out of rural electrification. It cost a lot of money at the time. Why is there no foresight now by the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Government to do something similar and make our country's energy secure? We need proper plans around solar energy, wind energy and wave energy. The technology is there. We need to invest in the infrastructure needed to put that in place. That has not been done. We need to make this country not just energy secure but we should be exporting energy to other countries if it was done right. It needs to remain in the control of the State or at least work with communities and not be sold off like Fianna Fáil Governments did, selling off our natural resources to foreign investors time and again, at a loss to the people of this country.

Carbon tax was mentioned. A total of €65 million of carbon tax that was ring-fenced last year was not spent. It was not spent on creating carbon efficiency. That is crazy. We need more money in the warmer homes scheme. We are looking at increasing fares on public

transport. That should not even be considered. We should be encouraging people to get out of their cars and use public transport where available, not increasing the fares and making it harder for them to do so. I have heard people saying that it will now be cheaper and easier to hop in the car and drive to their work where they had been using public transport. No thought is going into any of these things.

Senator Alison Comyn: Like many of my colleagues, I am aware that when we talk about energy prices in this House, we are talking about people who are looking at a bill and wondering whether they can pay it. They might be thinking twice about whether to buy the dinner or pay the heating bill. It is just another increase on top of tight budgets in their homes. We recognise that. Fianna Fáil will not oppose the motion because we know and recognise the pressure that everybody is under in the country at the moment. As has been said, much of what is driving what is happening is international and beyond Ireland's control, such as the continuing war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East, which, one again demonstrated just how exposed we are to events thousands of kilometres from our own shores. Telling somebody that the causes are international does not make their electricity bill any easier to pay. We are very aware of that.

We have intervened significantly. The reduced VAT rate of 9% on gas and electricity has been extended, while the fuel allowance increased from €33 to €38 per week this year. Importantly, it has also been extended to the working family payment. When the energy prices rose sharply this year, the fuel allowance season was extended by another four weeks. That meant an additional €152 for more than 470,000 households. Those interventions make a difference but I am not going to ignore the people who are clearly falling through the cracks across the country. They are working and managing, but only just. It might be that they qualify for every State support. They might be paying a mortgage or rent and trying to absorb increase after increase. We understand the pressure everybody is under.

Something that has been mentioned is home heating oil. For many people in rural Ireland, and even for people like me on older housing estates, kerosene is not a lifestyle choice. There might be no gas connection. In the same way, I have no gas connection to connect to. Replacing the entire heating system simply is not feasible. It is not financially possible. We have to be cognisant of that. As was mentioned, the possible boiler scrappage scheme will help many households, but that is a conversation for another day. That is why I want to talk about the particular impact of rising kerosene prices. It must remain firmly on the table as budget 2027 is finalised.

There is another side to this debate that is quite often overlooked. We, quite rightly, want people to leave their car at home and use public transport, but we have to make that a realistic choice. I just spent half an hour across the road today with Iarnród Éireann representatives talking about that how we can make it easier for commuters in my own home town of Drogheda to use the train. It requires a much more holistic approach. It is useless telling somebody that there is a train every hour or that they can get out of the car and onto the train if they cannot find somewhere to park. In Drogheda, my own town with a rapidly growing population, huge amounts of housing going in and an enormous commuter base, we need progress. We need a second railway station and extra parking. My colleague said earlier that they have the same issue in Rush and Lusk. We have to make it easier for people to leave the car at home. The cost of fuel is rising, including the cost of electricity prices if a person has an electric vehicle.

The Government has shown that when circumstances change, it can respond. We have reduced taxes on fuel and provided additional support when international energy prices have placed exceptional pressure on households. Our response cannot only be about getting people through the next bill or next bout of bad weather. We have clearly become too dependent in Ireland on imported fossil fuels, where prices, as we can see, can be transformed overnight by war or distribution to international supply. The long-term answer has to be greater energy independence, with more of our energy generated at home and the infrastructure in place to deliver it to the people who need it. We have been investing heavily in solar and wind energy both onshore and offshore.

Retrofitting has been mentioned. That is an important part of the transition as well. It cannot become something available only to those who can afford to pay the balance. Some of the people living in the coldest and least energy-efficient homes in poor or rural areas are precisely the people who cannot afford the work needed to improve them. We have to keep that firmly on the table for budget 2027. People understand that we cannot control the international price of oil. What they rightly expect, however, is that we will take action and look at what is really hurting people in the country, and we do. The Government will recognise that and will respond. We have done that throughout this crisis, but we all know we cannot be complacent. As another winter approaches, energy affordability has to remain at the heart of the decisions we make in the budget, which we will look at closely next week.

An Cathaoirleach: Senators Kennelly and Brady are sharing time. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister of State this evening. I also welcome and support this important motion on fuel and energy costs. It is an issue that affects every household, business farm and community across Ireland. Energy is a necessity. Families need it to heat their homes. Businesses need it to keep their doors open. Farmers need it to run their farms. Workers need affordable fuel to get to and from work.

When energy prices rise, everyone feels the impact, particularly in rural counties such as Kerry, where I come from, where many people rely on home heating oil, and where long journeys for work, education and healthcare remain a fact of life. That is why supports such as the fuel allowance, which has been mentioned, are so important across Ireland. Over 470,000 households are receiving this support, including 17,200 households in Kerry alone. It is particularly important for older people in older homes, for carers and for low-income working families. In Kerry, over 5,000 carers receive carer's benefit, while dedicating themselves to caring for spouses, parents, grandparents and people with disabilities in their homes.

For many households, this payment is the difference between heating their home and going without. Today, I am calling on the Government to increase the fuel allowance by €5 to €43 per week, and to reduce the carbon tax element on home heating oil. This will help pensioners and vulnerable households remain warm throughout the winter. I also welcome long-term supports that work for our people. What families are asking for is certainty and security, not short-term measures that come and go. Our Opposition wants a mini-budget every week. As far as I can see, most of them are written on the back of a stamp.

We must also look at Ireland's long-term energy security. Recent international events have shown how quickly energy markets can be disrupted. Ireland remains heavily dependent on imported energy, leaving us vulnerable when global supply chains come under pressure. That is why I believe liquefied natural gas, LNG, must play a key role in Ireland's energy future. This is not a choice between LNG and renewable energy. We need both. Ireland should continue investing in wind and solar power, but we must also be realistic. When renewable generation is low and demand is high, we need a reliable backup supply. LNG can supply that security. What is particularly frustrating is that we have a shovel-ready LNG terminal project on the Tartbert-Ballylongford land bank in north Kerry, yet we are still waiting for action and approval on this project. Quite frankly, it is totally unacceptable. For years we have spoken about energy security, but progress on critical infrastructure has been far too slow. A national LNG facility would strengthen energy security, support the industry, protect local jobs and help shield households and businesses from future energy shocks, such as what we are witnessing now. Energy security and renewable energy must go hand in hand.

LNG is not about abandoning climate targets, it is about ensuring a secure and reliable energy supply while we continue the transition to cleaner energy. We must also continue to expand renewable energy in a fair and balanced way, as has been mentioned. Solar energy has enormous potential but communities are concerned about the scale of some developments. In north Kerry alone, there are currently ten solar farm applications approved or in progress, covering over 4,000 acres. People are not opposed to renewable energy. They simply want proper planning, common sense and meaningful consultation with local communities. The Government should introduce clear national guidelines for solar developments to protect agricultural land, biodiversity and local communities while allowing renewable energy projects to grow. I am sorry I am nearly at my four minutes.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator is nearly out of time.

Senator Mike Kennelly: The rise in energy and fuel prices has been driven largely by international events affecting global oil supplies. Fine Gael is in government and we have secured a lot of supports over the past couple of months. It was gas when Sinn Féin Members came in here and they opposed the last set. They voted against them. They cannot come in here and speak from both sides of their mouths guys and not support our motion tonight. It is without amendment.

Senator Pauline Tully: I missed that.

Senator Paraic Brady: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. Unfortunately I am not left with a lot of time. I support the scrappage scheme. It is a great scheme. When people say that they do not know what is going to take over from oil, I will give an instance. A pellet burner in a house will take over from oil. It will do the exact same job as oil. For instance, it is more efficient and more carbon friendly. That is one instance that we should look at and maybe support more of that.

With regard to the roll-out of the rebate scheme to farmers, hauliers and contractors, I attended a meeting in Moate last Sunday where a huge number of farmers turned out. When they start a tractor, they cannot use anything else only green diesel. To produce food they have

to use green diesel. There is no renewable. There is no way of charging a tractor. There is no other way. The one and only source farmers have is green diesel to produce food and to go to the field. I hope that the Government will understand that there has to be supports coming in the green diesel sector maybe where food production is involved. Where food production is involved, we certainly need to do something around the green diesel.

The carbon tax on home heating oil is certainly something we need to look at in the budget. I hope that we will do so. Regarding our power - and just give me one minute please as I am last to speak - and our power lines, when we talk about the TAMS grants and supporting farmers and one thing and another, when we go for the TAMS grant there is only a certain amount of solar panels we can get on. If people have a single phase low power line coming to a house, they would only be allowed to fit so many solar panels on that because the lines are not fit to take the excess that it produces. I hope that we see huge investment from the ESB going forward. If we intend to be serious about this, we have to get away from putting solar panels on land that is used for food production and put them back where we can put them such as on our sheds and on areas where farmers can produce electricity.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: Does the Senator want some time? I will split time with Senator Brady.

An Cathaoirleach: No. The Senator cannot come back in.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: Can he not?

An Cathaoirleach: That is very generous-----

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: That is very unfair.

An Cathaoirleach: -----and your generosity is on the record.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn: Go raibh míle maith agat. I am not going to take up too much time. I did not think I had six minutes; I thought I had three. I welcome the motion. I thank the Minister of State for being here and thank him for hearing us out. I find it very surprising that any party would vote against this motion given that we are trying to help families and people all around the country. Every day I meet people in my constituency who are struggling with the cost of energy, whether that is trying to get to work, which Senator Linda Nelson Murray has mentioned around transport, but also with energy bills.

There are two aspects of this motion that I want to especially speak to in relation to my own constituency. One is older people and older people living alone and the cost of energy. The motion calls for greater supports for older people living alone. One of the best ways we can support people with the rising cost of energy is to extend the fuel allowance to the full year rather than only for winter months as it currently is typically. This is something I raised in this House previously. Typically, people have respite from the cost of energy in the summer months but due to the rising cost of transport and fuel this year, many have had no respite from energy costs with high fuel prices throughout the year putting real pressure on people. This is why I

am reiterating those calls I made earlier for the forthcoming budget to extend the fuel allowance throughout the full calendar year. I raised it in the context earlier at the outset of the war in Iran and the beginning of the energy cost inflation. Other Senators have also mentioned this, and the fact that we are in this position because of something outside of our control which is outside of these territories. It is something we are trying to battle with and we are doing our best in that regard. That is why this motion has been brought forward. By extending that fuel allowance to cover the full year we could significantly increase the lump sum payments made to fuel allowance recipients, which would make a real difference for them in dealing with elevated fuel and energy prices.

Another issue I want to briefly mention in relation to my own constituency is the energy efficiency of homes and the retrofitting schemes that are available to people. The government grants that are available to homeowners and local authorities to support retrofitting are making a difference in reducing energy consumption and costs for people. However, according to the ESRI report earlier in the year we are not on track to meet our 2030 goal of 400,000 deep retrofitted homes. This cost is a major factor in this. The report highlights that even after availing of government grants the cost ranges from €16,378 for an apartment to just over €42,900 for a detached house. The Government backed five-year retrofit loan monthly repayments range from €249 for an apartment to €770 for a detached house. In Dublin South Central this is a big issue people are dealing with because of the age of the homes and the energy inefficiency of many homes in the area. Many homeowners want to improve the efficiency of their homes but due to the cost it is prohibitive for them, locking them into permanently higher bills to heat their homes. Budget 2027 has the opportunity to improve the existing grants to further cover the cost that homeowners are facing to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. In four years we have faced two energy crises. While there is a need to implement measures to protect people today, such as extending the fuel allowance and other energy supports, we must use this opportunity to invest in energy security going forward by enhancing supports for homeowners to retrofit their homes.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank all the Senators for raising these important matters and welcoming the opportunity to discuss the continued high cost of fuel and energy costs for households and businesses. As referenced by many of them, the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine have caused significant disruption to global energy markets. The Government indeed recognises that these pressures are resulting in high energy prices and are placing Irish consumers and businesses in a vulnerable and difficult state.

This Government understands that any price increases can place significant pressures on households and business budgets. As a result, we have been proactive and introduced a series of measures to reduce fuel prices, and further measures are under consideration by the national energy affordability task force as part of the budgetary process. Specifically on fuel, the package of Government support measures, which now totals over €1.4 billion, is helping to reduce the cost burdens at the petrol pumps and in assisting key sectors such as agriculture, haulage and transport which are critical to keeping our economy moving.

A range of measures in last year's budgets also supported households with energy costs, which included an extension until 2030 of the 9% VAT rate on the gas and electricity bills. We also enhanced social protection payments including an increase in the fuel allowance rate and

an expansion in eligibility rules, as well as a €400 income disregard for households involved in microgeneration, which has extended for a further three years until the end of 2028. The best way of insulating our economy and society from future fuel price shocks is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. This is why we are investing record amounts in retrofitting, both through part- and fully-funded schemes. Budget 2026 also provided a record allocation of over €640 million for the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland residential and community grant scheme. That is allowing us to target over 75,000 home energy upgrades this year.

In January of this year, we expanded and reformed retrofitting schemes to ensure more homeowners can receive grants. The new measures included increased attic and wall insulation supports, an increased grant of over €12,500 for heat pump installation and new grants for windows and doors. Simple upgrades like attic insulation, cavity wall insulation or external wall insulation can reduce heating bills by up to €230 annually. A full home retrofit can lead to savings of €750 to €1,120 per year on energy costs. Almost 89,000 applications have been processed up to the end of August of this year. That compares with 41,100 applications received to the end of August of last year. That saw a 116% increase year on year and follows changes to the schemes that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, introduced earlier this year. Capital expenditure of over €2 billion has delivered over 287,000 home energy upgrades from 2019 to the end of August of this year, including over 39,500 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the warmer homes scheme.

As of the end of August of this year, the domestic solar PV scheme has supported 21,000 homes to install solar PV panels this year and over 35,000 applications have been received. That is a 72% increase in applications year on year and indicates that the scheme is working well and that householders are recognising the benefits of investing in solar PV.

While these are all positive indicators, this Government is very conscious of the price increases in home heating oil. Kerosene prices increased from approximately 95 cent per litre before the conflict to €1.77 in April of this year. The current average price is around €1.62 per litre. The conflict in the Middle East has resulted in economic pressures that can be felt far beyond the countries involved and has severely impacted the cost of kerosene for many households. In order to ease the financial burden on households, earlier this year the Government extended the fuel allowance by four working weeks, resulting in additional payments of €152 to each of the 470,000 fuel allowance recipients. This Government also deferred the planned increase in carbon tax on home heating fuels, which was due to occur on 1 May, until 14 October to help mitigate price increases. I appreciate that people living in rural Ireland are twice as likely to use home heating oil as their main heating fuel. According to the latest CSO figures, around 26% of households in Ireland use it as their main heating fuel. That is around 500,000 households. This Government understands that these are disproportionately older households, disproportionately rural and, in a lot of cases, low-income households. Many of these households would be eligible for the aforementioned fuel allowance. The Government is also very conscious of those who use home heating oil but do not qualify for the fuel allowance payment. That is why in the upcoming budget we also want to deliver for middle-income families.

The Government is examining the different levers available to it in relation to the cost of home heating oil. There will be an energy tax package as part of budget 2027. The final composition of this is under consideration.

This Government is also acutely aware of the pressures arising for the agriculture sector, which has been referred to in this House this evening, as a result of prolonged high fuel prices, high fertiliser prices and additional fuel costs, and we will deliver a strong budget to protect farmers, fishers and foresters, helping to secure the future of our agrifood sector. The agrifood sector has demonstrated its ongoing resilience despite current uncertainties, rising fuel and fertiliser costs and challenging weather conditions. Payments are continuing under the fuel income support scheme, with a spend of over €26 million to more than 30,000 applicants to date, and under the areas of natural constraints scheme this Government has delivered €179 million in payments to over 85,000 farmers.

A specific €15 million tailored fuel support scheme for owners of registered vessels in the fisheries and aquaculture sector has been developed, with payments to date of more than €10 million under the fishing and aquaculture registered vessel fuel support scheme and the aquaculture business vessel fuel support scheme.

To support our hauliers and road transport operators, the Government also increased the maximum repayment allowable under the diesel rebate scheme, from 7.5 cent up to 12 cent per litre of diesel, backdated to January. This currently applies until 30 September 2026 and is to help temper inflation on food and public transport costs. It is the Government's intention, as part of budget 2027, to extend this timeframe to give continuing support to these sectors.

At a time of real global energy uncertainty, it is now more important than ever to continue to develop and accelerate the deployment of indigenous renewable resources and associated grid infrastructure to provide long-term energy security and price stability for Irish households and businesses. The programme for Government reaffirms Ireland's target of 80% of electricity demand to be met by renewables in the near term, with plans to move to net zero by 2050. We have made substantial progress in the development of renewable electricity capacity in recent years, doubling our wind capacity and establishing a thriving solar industry. Accelerating and increasing the deployment of renewable electricity generation, especially onshore wind and solar, is fundamental to our transition to a renewables-led system. We have now reached over 8.7 GW of renewable generation capacity, up from 4.8 GW in 2020. This growth in renewable electricity capacity has been supported by Government policy measures such as the renewable electricity support scheme, the small-scale renewable electricity support scheme and the microgeneration support scheme. We are also investing record funds in ensuring our electricity grid is fit for purpose. That is a key priority for this Government.

In relation to an EU-wide windfall tax, the European Commission published its AccelerateEU communication in April of this year. It addresses the EU's rising energy costs and volatile fossil fuel markets and aims to accelerate the clean energy transition and strengthen EU energy resilience. While the communication notes member states may take domestic measures, no EU-wide approach has yet been agreed.

Previously, the temporary solidarity contribution, TSC, was introduced in line with Council Regulation 2022/1854 of 6 October 2022 to tackle windfall gains being made in the energy sector at the time, following the commencement of the war in Ukraine. The TSC formed part of a co-ordinated response, reflecting the highly interconnected nature of EU energy markets - when we acted, we did so at an EU level - and a view that an emergency intervention to mitigate the effects of high energy prices at the time could not be sufficiently achieved by member states individually.

The national energy affordability task force is working intensively on an energy affordability action plan to be submitted to the Government in the coming weeks. We are very much focused on short-, medium- and long-term measures to support households and businesses to meet their energy costs. It continues to be the Government's view that tackling the energy crisis in a co-ordinated way between EU member states is best, given the interconnectedness of energy markets. We are working with member states to achieve that.

The Government has introduced substantial supports - as I said, €1.4 billion to date - during this volatile period. They are timely and necessary, and we will continue to monitor the situation. Ultimately, we need to reduce our reliance on expensive fossil fuels if we are to reduce energy costs in the long term. Tough decisions will need to be made during this budget. We are very fortunate that we are in a very strong position due to a strong economy. The way out of fossil fuel dependency and high energy costs is a shift in electricity generation to renewables.

That is what the Government is supporting.

Again, I commend the Senators on bringing this motion to the House and thank them for their contributions.

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for being here for this important Private Members' motion. I thank everyone in the House, including Fine Gael colleagues and members of all parties and none, who made substantial contributions to the debate.

As the Minister of State and many Senators outlined, people are facing huge pressures and it is important that those most affected by the energy crisis are supported. Everyone who has been exposed to it, whether that is those in business, those living alone, those in fuel poverty or those in fuel-intensive businesses in the agriculture and haulage sectors, needs to be supported. We have seen and heard a lot in the past year. We have seen the importance of fuel and energy to sectors, which speaks to a few points, one of which is that we need to improve our independence and security in energy. We need to be more efficient in capitalising and utilising the excess energy that is created, building better grid capacity, empowering homeowners through different schemes, including battery storage, making improvements to warmer homes schemes and ramping up delivery.

There are a lot of positive things and opportunities we can take from the crisis, but there also is the here and now and its immediate effect on the winter ahead of us. As the Minister of State mentioned, we can meet this head-on from a position of strength because of the strong management of public finances. It is important that we use this opportunity, because it is a crisis for many, to make sure we respond and deliver for those most affected.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and before him, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, for being here and taking on board all the contributions from across the House. I look forward to next week with the hope that delivery can be made for all the sectors and people who need help and support the most at this time of unprecedented global energy shock. It is an external factor, as has been mentioned, but that needs to be reiterated. We need to respond now as best we can from our position.

Question put and declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Garret Ahearn: Tomorrow at 10.30 a.m.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 6.43 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 30 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.43 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 30 September 2026.