



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 21 Deireadh Fómhair 2026

Wednesday, 21 October 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

Senator Pauline Tully - the need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the establishment of a family resource centre in Cootehill, County Cavan.

Senator Joanne Collins - the need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the reporting of breast density at mammogram stage.

Senator Dee Ryan - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the measures in place to mitigate the projected surge in presentations at University Hospital Limerick over the coming months.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin - the need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on staffing issues at St. Brigid's Primary School in Kildare town, County Kildare.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly - the need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the delivery of education and awareness on endometriosis, as outlined in the national framework for the management of endometriosis in Ireland.

Senator Martin Conway - the need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on closures of the Ennis to Limerick railway line due to flooding at Ballycar, Newmarket on Fergus, County Clare.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - the need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on funding available for transport expansion for rural communities, in particular additional bus services for the north east.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected those raised by Senators Tully, Collins, Ryan and O'Loughlin and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Family Resource Centres

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State to the House.

Senator Pauline Tully: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. The issue I raise relates to Cootehill, a town in north-east Cavan on the Monaghan border. There has been a long-running campaign there to establish a family resource centre, FRC. Cootehill is an area with significant deprivation and disadvantage and people there face many challenges. For example, one third of the population have primary school education only and less than 9% have a third level qualification. The town has the oldest age profile of towns with over 500 people in County Cavan. It has a very high number of child welfare referrals. Substance misuse is the highest in the region and suicide rates in the town are double the national average. There is also a high level of rental reliance, both through the housing assistance payment, HAP, and in the private sector. Dereliction is widespread.

A committee was established in Cootehill in 2017. It is not the first committee that has been established. Many voluntary organisations have operated in the town trying to assist people in different ways, which in itself established that there is a need and demand for a service. They have worked extremely hard for the people in the town in the meantime. They provide so much support to families and individuals and engage in outreach. There is a parent and toddler group and information and support are provided to those who have mental health or addiction issues. This is not sustainable, however, as it is done on an *ad hoc* basis. The services required in the town cannot be provided on a voluntary basis. What is needed is a professional, sustainable, bottom-up approach with sufficient front-line and co-ordination personnel to make a difference, as is the case with a family resource centre.

The FRC programme has the goals, values and resources to make a significant impact on disadvantage and the overall community development in an area. The community group, Croílár na nDroimliní, has made huge efforts to prepare an application for a family resource centre. It has engaged with many other organisations, both voluntary and statutory, in the area. It has the support of Cavan County Council, the local development company, Tusla and the Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, as well as the Le Chéile group in Cootehill and the Cootehill town team. These organisations have all worked extremely well to try to get a family resource centre because they realise the town needs one to address the many disadvantages it has.

There is a family resource centre, Teach Oscail, in Cavan town. Another FRC in west Cavan, the Focus Family Resource Centre, based in Killashandra, serves the people of Killashandra and the west Cavan area. These centres do such important work supporting families who are going through many difficulties, as people in Cootehill are. They see the value of that. There are also three family resources centres in Monaghan that do outstanding work.

The work the community group has done in preparing the groundwork to attract a family resource centre is absolutely amazing. They have done extensive research. They also have an available and suitable premises in the town. They have a suitable legal entity. They have

support from the relevant agencies. They have cross-community support and almost a decade of reflection and learning as to how to prepare, direct, oversee, implement and involve users in a bottom-up local development. When the last family resource centre applications were made, assessed and delivered, the group was given a strong impression from political sources that they were going to be successful, and it is very unfortunate to be given that information and then not be successful. They have put so much work into the application. They want to know when the next call for applications will open and if there could be a rolling process so they do not have to go through everything again but, rather, could just update a few details.

Senator Alison Comyn: I welcome to the Chamber the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank Senator Tully for raising this important issue and for offering the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Norma Foley.

The programme for Government commits to "work to increase funding and expand the capacity and network of family resource centres". Budget 2027 honours this commitment, with funding secured for a further ten family resource centres. This will bring family resource centre programme membership up to 146 members in 2027. This further expansion of the programme is the latest in several very positive developments for the programme over the last few years. It follows the increase in the membership of the programme in 2025 by five members, and in 2026 by a further ten members, bringing overall membership to its current 136 members.

The most recent national application and assessment process was undertaken in 2025. It was led by Tusla and independently chaired by a representative of the University of Limerick. This followed an open call for applications, with applications reviewed and scored against clearly defined and published criteria, including population need, level of deprivation, child population data, existing service provision and existing service gaps. Decisions on the successful services were made by an assessment panel.

I am aware that there continues to be a strong level of interest in communities around the country in having family resource centres as part of community infrastructure. This was borne out in the 49 applications in response to the 2025 call. The securing of funding in budget 2027 will, I understand, result in a new call for applications, including from those whose applications were not successful on the last occasion. Details of this process and how to apply will be publicised widely when they are available.

We all understand the benefits of community-led services such as family resource centres, which cannot be overstated, and many of us will have witnessed first-hand the impacts of family resource centres in our communities, and how they serve the many who require that support.

They engage with vulnerable people, offer services to individuals across the whole life cycle from early years to senior citizens and, crucially, foster a positive and inclusive community spirit. The range of services they provide can be extensive, determined by the needs of the relevant communities. It is particularly important to note that many services are delivered at no cost or low cost to families who otherwise might not be able to access them. Also, by

availing of funding schemes operated by other Departments and agencies, there is great potential for family resource centres to grow their scope and reach, and further embed themselves in their communities.

Senator Pauline Tully: We are expecting applications to open some time in 2027, which is good news. I think the Minister of State said there were 49 applications last time for ten places, so there is going to be a lot of interest again, obviously, and there may be new communities ready now to make an application for a family resource centre, so the competition will be fierce. It is a pity there cannot be sufficient resources put into such an important service. I see what services are provided by other resource centres in supporting families, including families that have suffered intergenerational poverty and deprivation. It is so important. If we do not invest strongly in our communities, we end up spending far more money at the other end when we see people from those communities ending up in prison. These centres are lifesaving and community-saving. I commend the local community for the amount of work they have done on this and the amount of work they do on the ground. They really do need the support of a family resource centre to sustain that work.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, I thank Senator Tully for raising this important issue. I accept entirely her advocacy on behalf of the residents of Cootehill. They have made a strong case, as the Senator expressed, through the application from Croílár na nDroimliní. That demonstrates their ambition and also their commitment that existing services be strengthened. The Senator has expressed a strong desire for that to be fulfilled. As I have said, there is an independent process and all prospective applicants will have to make their submissions next year. I will certainly bring back the concerns and aspirations expressed here today to the Minister. Hopefully, once it is open, Cootehill may see the potential of delivering this family resource centre that is badly needed in their community.

Women's Health

Senator Joanne Collins: Today, I wish to raise a couple of questions and statistics on breast density. A lot of my colleagues across this House and the other House have often spoken about breast density. There was a briefing in the audiovisual room last week on this topic, which was quite harrowing and tear-jerking. If you had any heart, you would not have left with a dry eye having listened to what these women have been through.

The data shows that up to 43% of women have dense breasts. When women get to a certain age they are entitled to a mammogram. When they go for that mammogram, a cancer shows up as white, but dense breast tissue also shows up as white; therefore, it is impossible for a radiographer to see if there is cancer there or not. We had a radiographer in the audiovisual room last week and she said it is impossible and there is no way to determine whether a person with dense breast tissue has cancer or not. Also, quite shockingly, they do not tell the patient if she has dense breasts or not, so the patient is going away with a clear mammogram, thinking that everything is fine. Down the line, these women end up going back for appointments and are eventually told they have cancer and it has been there all along. It may now be at stage 3, stage 4, or inoperable; what might have been a lumpectomy becomes a full mastectomy requiring chemotherapy. The cost, the strain on the family and the strain on the patient is all

because they are not given that one piece of information. That one piece of information is not going to cost the HSE or the State one penny. It is just a matter of giving information to a patient to say they have or do not have dense breasts.

I have just been looking at the HSE's website. It states:

Dense breasts are common. About half of all women have dense breasts. Breast density is non-fatty breast tissue and is one of the risk factors for breast cancer. The advice for all women, whether you have dense breasts or not, is to be breast aware and talk to your GP ...

However, being breast aware is not good enough when it comes to this because if a mammogram cannot show it up, a self-check is not going to show it up. It is not going to give that information. A GP cannot tell the person they have cancer or do not have cancer because they only have a mammogram. If these women are given the information and are just told they have dense breasts, they can then go themselves and request a computed tomography scan or whatever next is in line. That way they know for themselves. We all love to see a positive response from a doctor or scan, but to have that false positive or possible false positive can be very worrying. We met women and the line they all used is, "Tell me I have dense breasts before you tell me I have cancer." It is very simple. As I said, there is no cost to the State for this.

It is basically about giving us the information that we own ourselves. It is our information. It is the patient's information.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Senator Collins for giving me the opportunity to discuss this really important matter and for highlighting the concerns of women and advocacy groups. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. Enhancing Ireland's population screening programmes is a priority for the Minister. The programmes are a vital component of our health services.

Dense breast tissue is common. Around half of all women have dense breasts and it is a normal variation in breast tissue. It is very important to say that having dense breasts does not mean a woman will develop breast cancer. BreastCheck mammograms remain the best screening test available for population breast screening for women aged 50 to 69. It can save lives by finding many cancers early, often before symptoms develop. It is important to point out that mammography detects the majority of breast cancers, including in women with dense breasts.

Consideration of any changes to Ireland's screening programmes is facilitated through established evidence-driven protocols. The national screening advisory committee, NSAC, is the expert group that advises the Minister on any proposed changes to Ireland's screening programmes. At the request of that committee, the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, has commenced a health technology assessment, HTA, to consider proposals for the expansion of the BreastCheck programme. This review comprises three distinct components. One is the proposed extension of the age range eligibility to those aged 45 to 49. Another is the extension of age range to those aged between 70 and 74. The third element is the potential introduction of a standardised breast density notification. HTAs facilitate the assessment of relevant evidence on the effects and consequences of healthcare technologies or programmes. They seek to guide decisions regarding the appropriate use of technology and efficient

allocation of resources. It is expected that the final HIQA HTA report on all three elements will be submitted to the NSAC before the end of 2027. Once received, the committee will consider the findings and make a recommendation to the Minister.

The introduction or expansion of any new screening service requires careful consideration, particularly when we are considering all the clinical, ethical, societal, legal and economic perspectives. The Minister for Health wishes to develop services that are clinically effective and have positive health outcomes and she needs to be informed by the experts in order to do this. This is particularly relevant in the context of significant differences in international clinical opinion on the incorporation of breast density notification into screening. This emphasises the need for an evidence-led approach to ensure that any decision serves the best interests of Irish women.

Senator Joanne Collins: I thank the Minister of State for the response and for taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Health. I believe that BreastCheck needs to be expanded and I have called for that in the past. We should bring the age range down because women can still get cancer at a younger age. It is not just an issue for women or men over 50. However, I am not actually asking for that today as that does cost money.

It is a shame that it will be the end of 2027 before the HIQA report is finalised. That is another full year of women going for mammograms who will not know whether they have cancer or not. All I am asking for today is that the Minister tell the HSE, radiographers, surgeons and GPs that they can tell patients if they have dense breasts. Just tell them; it does not cost anything. It should not take another year and two or three months for us to decide that they can give that information to patients. It is going to take that long for the HIQA report to be finalised, which is probably going to say that we should tell the patients. It is very simple. Information sharing is all that I am asking for. I agree that we need to expand our screening services. That is definitely something that has to happen but today, all I am asking for is a commitment from the Minister to put it in writing that patients can be told that they have dense breasts. That will give them the opportunity to decide themselves if they want to get a CT scan to see if there is cancer there.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, I thank the Senator and acknowledge the genuine concerns she is raising on behalf of the many women who want this information. They want certainty and they want to have enhanced confidence in the decisions being made in the national screening programme. As I said, I am not dismissing the concerns and the Minister is not dismissing them either. There is a process in regard to how this can be incorporated into the national screening programme in a way that is clinically appropriate and delivers the best outcomes for patients. We have a process now. HIQA is working on the HTA. I understand the concerns raised by the Senator and I will relay her views to the Minister for Health in the context of actions that can be taken to further strengthen confidence in the programme.

Hospital Overcrowding

Senator Dee Ryan: The Minister of State is very welcome, although it is disappointing that the Minister was not available to take this matter. The issue I raise is crucial. I hope it is not the case but it may be a matter of life and death in the coming months in the mid-west. I do

not say that lightly. Regrettably, due to severe capacity constraints and overcrowding at University Hospital Limerick, UHL, we have had instances of preventable deaths in recent years.

This Government and the previous one, I am pleased to say, have been fully committed to addressing these concerns. The previous Minister for Health, former Deputy Stephen Donnelly, commissioned a HIQA report, which was published last September. I am very pleased that the current Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, with the support of the Cabinet, has confirmed that she will be progressing all three recommendations from that report. Those recommendations are: to increase bed capacity in Dooradoyle at the former regional hospital in Limerick; to expand to a co-located nearby site to augment facilities in Dooradoyle; and to open a new model 3, or possibly even model 4, hospital - we would like to see the latter - with an accident and emergency department. This would mean there is a second hospital with accident and emergency capacity in the mid-west region.

I know the situation is fully understood at the highest levels of Government and the Minister herself has demonstrated her knowledge of and commitment to addressing these issues. That is why it was deeply alarming for me, as a Fianna Fáil Senator in the region, to attend a HSE mid-west briefing on Monday where we were advised that the projections for this coming winter are to go to 400 presentations a day through the accident and emergency department. That level of presentations to UHL would be a bigger workload than in any other hospital in the country because far more of those people will require hospitalisation. We go to hospital as a last resort in Limerick. If people have the means to go somewhere else, they will. If they can go to an injury unit or their GP or if they have the capacity to go to a private hospital, for example to the private accident and emergency unit in Galway, they will do so. There is no other accident and emergency department in the whole region. The people who are walking through the door of the accident and emergency department of UHL are people in dire need who do not have any other options. They have explored every other option before presenting to the accident and emergency department in UHL.

I am confident that HSE Mid West has corrected its operations and procedures to the best of its ability and I know the staff in the hospital are working flat out, to the best of their ability, to manage the very heavy workload. What happens is that we get a high number of presentations, a huge proportion of whom require to be hospitalised and the average hospital stay is five days. Patients will take up a bed for five days in the hospital. HIQA identified that the problem in UHL is not a small accident and emergency unit but a lack of beds to move people on. As a result, we have ongoing, persistent trolley care. HIQA has advised that this issue will not be addressed fully until the gap is closed. I know we are building on the hospital site at the moment and there are plans being developed to provide more hospital beds in Raheen. However, as of today, HSE Mid West has requested sanction to take 80 sub-acute beds from a nearby facility to help it to handle the overflow and the projected surge to 400 presentations per day over the winter period. It has also requested sanction for approximately 35 hospital doctors to administer trolley care and corridor care to the best of their ability in the circumstances in which we find ourselves right now, while we are waiting for those further beds.

Why have those two requests not been met?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Senator for her contribution and acknowledge the real concerns she has raised. I am taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I also acknowledge the significant and sustained pressures experienced by patients and healthcare staff across the mid-west. University Hospital Limerick continues to experience exceptionally high levels of demand. In 2025 the hospital experienced its busiest year to date and recorded 95,374 emergency department presentations. Demand has continued to rise in 2026, with an increase of 8.4% between January and September compared with the same period in 2025.

I commend the staff and management across the mid-west on their work. Nobody is suggesting that the current levels of demand are acceptable, and nor is anyone underestimating the challenges facing the region as we enter the winter period. Throughout this period, the hospital and regional teams have implemented extensive escalation and patient flow measures to support patient safety and maximise available capacity across the health system. They have used all measures available to them, including increased access to diagnostics, step-down facilities and virtual wards, alongside enhanced community care. To assist, following a recent tender competition, a bespoke national panel arrangement was established for the provision of short-stay therapeutic beds, with 125 such beds now available to the mid-west region. This arrangement supports access to community-based, therapy support beds for acute hospital patients, with hospitals approaching the nearest panel provided first, subject to availability.

It is important to be clear that responsibility for winter planning, staffing, patient flow, emergency response and day-to-day service performance rests with the HSE and its established management structures. In line with Sláintecare, the HSE's 2026 national service plan delegates responsibility for the management of pay and recruitment to regional executive officers. This provides regional management with greater responsibility for deploying resources in response to local service pressure and priorities. Meanwhile, the Government is continuing to support the expansion of capacity at UHL and across the region, in line with the recommendations from HIQA's review of urgent and emergency care in the mid-west. There has been sustained investment in the region. Funding for hospitals and staffing in the region has more than doubled, rising from €445 million in 2020 to €763 million in 2025. A second 96-bed inpatient ward block was announced by the Minister for Health in June 2026, following completion of the first 96-bed block in 2025 and the delivery of two 16-bed rapid-build units.

Capacity across Ennis, St. John's and Nenagh hospitals will also be expanded, with an additional 114 beds planned by 2031. Overall, 420 additional beds are planned for delivery across the mid-west between 2024 and 2031. In March, acting on directions from the Minister, the HSE secured a 44-acre site at Raheen, just 2 km from UHL. This site will provide a significant opportunity to provide meaningful additional capacity and health services to the people of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary. Importantly, the site sits on a direct corridor linking it to the main hospital campus, providing strong connectivity and operational advantages for future service delivery. The Minister is committed to support the HSE in addressing immediate pressures while also delivering the additional capacity and reform required for healthcare in the mid-west to sustainably meet the needs of the region into the future.

Senator Dee Ryan: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I agree it is important that we set out all the investment. However, the specific issues I asked for an answer on were why the final two levers available to us to mitigate the expected significant surge in hospital

presentations this winter have not been pulled, despite being flagged with the HSE. I know that Colm Henry was in Limerick in August. HSE Mid West management invited him down to satisfy himself that management is doing everything in its their power to handle the situation. The two requests, which were for 80 sub-acute beds and 35 additional doctors to be sanctioned, have not been met.

The Minister of State said that management of pay and recruitment has been delegated to the regional executive officers. Was that not taken back off of them over the summer months? That was taken away from them because of overspend. I will point out that of all the regional executives in the country, the UHL group was the one that best kept within its budget. It is unfair to put that in there when it is not the case. Will the Minister of State take this back to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill? It appears that we require her intervention with the HSE to get the urgently needed sub-acute beds and 35 hospital doctors sanctioned immediately to manage corridor care ahead of this winter.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank the Senator for raising this matter. I will ensure the specific concerns she raised, including on additional bed capacity, workforce requirements and winter preparedness, are brought to the Minister's attention. I acknowledge the concerns she has raised.

Patients and families in the mid-west want reassurance that the health service is planning ahead for the challenges we know are coming. That is a reasonable expectation for the Senator to raise. I will ensure those concerns are highlighted and conveyed directly to the Minister. I also accept that the regional executive management has a responsibility, working with the HSE, with regard to prioritisation. As I outlined, it is in all of our interests to share the objective that we continue to support front-line healthcare staff, clinicians, doctors and all those who continue to deliver a service under enormous capacity concerns and pressures.

School Staff

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, for being here, although this matter relates to mainstream education. I raised this before on the Order of Business and I have written to the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton. It relates to an unsustainable leadership crisis in St. Brigid's Primary School in Kildare town. It is a very fine school with great staff. Donal Fleming was the previous principal. He showed incredible visionary leadership, leading one school across three different campuses. That came about through amalgamation a number of years ago. This exceptional situation, where we have more than 1,000 pupils across three different campuses, means children and teachers have to move between different campuses in Kildare town. We have a new principal, John Goff, who is another excellent principal. He has taken on the mantle. Mr. Goff and the board of management have written to the Minister three times since June, following initial correspondence dating back to May 2025.

Genuinely, they have not received a response, just a formulaic answer that is not offering any practical solutions or help to a school community that is under immense strain. As regards what the leadership team is being asked to manage now, St. Brigid's Primary School is a DEIS-status school with an enrolment of 1,031 pupils. The school has exceeded the 1,000 mark for

a number of years because Kildare town has had a lot of growth and development over the past number of years. Managing a DEIS education community of this size across multiple sites presents a lot of unprecedented administrative, governance, child protection and health and safety challenges and it places the voluntary board of management at severe personal and statutory risk as it attempts to safely oversee daily operations.

The Department's position has consistently been that staffing rules ensure equitable treatment of schools of a similar type but that logic does not stand up in this situation because there is no primary school of a similar type in Ireland. There is no other primary school in the country with over 1,000 pupils. The school in nearby Kilcullen is very close to that figure but at least it is on one campus. A school with 550 pupils receives the exact same administrative deputy allocation as St. Brigid's, which is nearly double the size and is split across three campuses. By contrast, a secondary school of an equal size would automatically be allocated three deputy principals.

Telling this leadership team to wait for the results of a three-year action research project pilot completely ignores the acute daily operational pressures they face right now. I am requesting that the Minister implement an immediate exceptional interim management. I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's response and I hope he will have some positive news for us within that.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Senator for raising this matter of St. Brigid's Primary School in Kildare town. She has outlined the challenges that are there. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton.

In budget 2027, we have had further funding made available to provide enhanced school leadership with additional deputy principals in primary and post-primary schools. This is in recognition that school leadership and management play a key role in improving educational outcomes by creating a positive school climate and environment as well as motivating and empowering educators and learners within their school communities. We will publish the details of this plan in due course.

The Senator has outlined the size of the school and the leadership that has been there, from the previous *príomhoide* to the current *príomhoide* of the school, the work that is being done there and the students in it. I take very seriously the points the Senator has made. We have got funding but in the context of that funding we have to look at how we will enhance the leadership within primary and post-primary schools. We take that role very seriously because it is hugely important for all schools that they are resourced properly and when a school, whether in Kildare town or any other place, has a cohort of students of that number, there are many challenges in operating the school.

The Senator also mentioned the school is operating from a number of sites that form the overall campus. Without going into specifics, I wish the school extremely well. I know from speaking to the Senator that the school community, from the leadership down, is doing an excellent job. I also acknowledge the Senator's engagement on education matters, not just on this issue but going back a number of years.

I will take back the points the Senator made. There are a number of key points. She made a comparison between the situation in St. Brigid's Primary School and a post-primary school of similar numbers. She also made points about working on different campuses. I will take those points back. It would be wrong of me to give the impression that I can say yea or nay today in relation to St. Brigid's Primary School. I take on board the points the Senator has made. We have put in extra funding but have to look at how best that can be distributed right across the education system. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Department will be making those decisions in due course. We are very conscious of the challenges being faced in large primary schools across the country. I will take the Senator's points back to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Department for their consideration. The points the Senator made are certainly not lost on us.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State for his empathy and understanding. It is good news that funding of €11 million is being made available to provide for enhanced school leadership, with additional deputy principals. I hope that will be in place for the start of September next year. That has to be a must.

Yet again, I stress that there have been a number of requests for a meeting of the Minister, Deputy Naughton, with the school and board of management. I ask the Minister of State to bring that message back.

I know the Department regularly facilitates temporary measures such as secondments, interim teaching posts or acting-up appointments in unique circumstances. I am saying that St. Brigid's is in a unique situation and surely it presents a case for such flexibility. In the best case scenario, I ask the Department to immediately sanction an additional interim administrative principal post to engage with the school as a Department-led case study on exceptionally large primary schools. We will see more of these schools, particularly within the Dublin commuter belt. I absolutely want a commitment that the Minister, Deputy Naughton, or at least senior officials, will meet with the school and board of management to secure a safe and sustainable pathway forward. This is in the interest of not just the school community, but the 1,019 students there.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I assure the Senator that both I and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, are acutely aware of the challenges that are being presented right across the school system. Both of us are out with school communities on a regular basis, looking at the challenges that are being faced. We looked at the points the Senator made and in the budget negotiations the Minister, Deputy Naughton, was very clear about school leadership and believes very strongly in supporting it so we can get the best outcomes for the educators and the learners. In any assessment of the Department of education and primary and post-primary schools there is a huge amount of work going on and we have to support that at every level.

Regarding the issue the Senator raised in relation to St. Brigid's, I will ask the Department officials to liaise with them to get a better understanding of the challenges they are facing. I am mindful of what the Senator has said here today and I will refer that back to the Department officials to ensure there is an understanding of where the challenges lie in the first instance.

The overall point is that we have increased our budget this year within the Department of education. We have €14.4 billion across the education system but all of that is needed because

we have a huge amount of need within the primary, post-primary and special education sides and that is continuing to grow. The Senator mentioned the commuter belts. We have seen a huge growth in numbers in some schools - Kildare town continues to grow as well - and we have to be mindful of that.

I will give the Senator the undertaking that we will get Department officials to go back and look at this issue and liaise with the school authorities. I take on board everything the Senator has said about St. Brigid's Primary School and compliment the school leadership there on the work they do, which the Senator outlined in her opening remarks. It is important we acknowledge the school leadership, the teachers, the SNAs and all the ancillary staff and the teams there because they do amazing work, not just in St. Brigid's but across the country as well.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Absolutely. I thank the Minister of State.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.20 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.31 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.20 a.m. and resumed at 11.31 a.m.

Visit of Austrian Ambassador

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the Leader to outline the Order of Business, I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery the Austrian ambassador, visiting on Austria's national day. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Austria. This day commemorates the constitutional law on permanent neutrality enacted on 26 October 1955, which signalled the restoration of Austrian sovereignty and the end of Allied occupation after the Second World War. The relationship between our countries goes back a long way, all the way to St. Fergal, who was known as St. Virgilius of Salzburg, who became the bishop of Salzburg.

Another enduring legacy between our shared history is the establishment of an abbey in Vienna in the heart of the city in 1155 by Irish monks, which shares a connection with St. Colman, who was one of the Irish pilgrims. In the 17th century the Irish Wild Geese went to Austria, as they did to many countries across Europe, and Irish military generals featured in the Austrian army over those centuries. In fact, Count Maximilian Karl O'Donnell von Tyrconnell was remembered for saving the life of Emperor Franz Joseph during an attempted assassination in 1853.

EU membership is, of course, one of those shared links that we have in a modern context, along with our shared peacekeeping roles with the United Nations. There is a thriving Irish community in Austria, and there are 400 Austrians living in Ireland, with hundreds of students coming every year to get an Irish experience. Gaelic games are celebrated in Austria through a Gaelic club in Vienna, along with the Irish studies programme at the University of Vienna.

I welcome the ambassador and thank her for taking time out of her busy schedule to be here. We wish her a happy national day as we share so many ties, historical but also current. I thank her for being here.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Garret Ahearn: I also welcome the Austrian ambassador to the Chamber and congratulate her on her national day. The Cathaoirleach spoke about our history and ties. We also have an important match next month, and I am going over to Linz for it. I have one or two colleagues in this Chamber who might be going as well. We will not be supporting Austria that day but in general, our friendship is hugely important.

The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the Protection of Young Persons (Employment in Food and Beverage Services Sector) Regulations 2026, referral to committee, to be taken without debate on the conclusion of the Order of Business; No. *a2* on the Supplementary Order Paper, motion regarding the Media Regulation Bill 2026, instruction to committee, to be taken without debate at 1 p.m.; No. 2, Media Regulation Bill 2026, Committee Stage to be taken on the conclusion of No. *a2* and to adjourn at 3 p.m. if not previously concluded; No. 3, Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026, Committee and Remaining Stages, to be taken at 3 p.m. and to adjourn at 4.30 p.m., if not previously concluded; and No. 71, motion 6 on the Supplementary Order Paper, Private Members' business, regarding fuel costs, to be taken at 4.30 p.m. and with time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I also add my voice of welcome to Ambassador Schubert. It is lovely to see her in the Chamber.

As well as the very strong Irish-Austrian links, County Kildare had the good honour of being twinned with Austria during the EU Presidency. I look forward to meeting the ambassador later tonight, when we will have the opportunity to continue the conversation.

I wish to speak about the recent withdrawal of Sally Rooney's novels from sale in the UK. Sally Rooney is an incredible, very accomplished author, and this is an unprecedented situation that highlights the extensive reach of British anti-terrorism legislation. Following Rooney's commitment to donate her book royalties to Palestine Action, her publisher is now legally barred from processing her UK earnings. This outcome is fundamentally wrong, as it uses state anti-terrorism powers to effectively censor contemporary literature and restrict non-violent expressions of political will. The government maintains the ban and it is wrong. There has been an overreach in relation to a number of areas. While generally we do not comment on other government and state legislation, when it is impacting Irish authors, business people and indeed Irish people living in the UK, it sets a very dangerous precedent. We need to have a debate in relation to it.

I warmly congratulate Dr. Siofra O'Leary on her Government nomination to the Court of Justice of the European Union. She is a person of the highest international calibre and historically she was the first female as well as the first Irish president of the European Court of Human Rights. She brings unparalleled experience to Luxembourg and we take immense pride in her continued leadership at the very apex of European jurisprudence. We wish her the best. I had the opportunity to work closely with Dr. O'Leary during the Irish Presidency of the Council of Europe, and it is important that we note it here.

I wish to speak very briefly about the issue facing Kildare commuters of severe train overcrowding. At least once a week, I get the train from Newbridge-----

An Cathaoirleach: I ask for silence in the Chamber.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I see first-hand how absolutely cramped the trains can get, particularly in the morning. This really is a safety issue because commuters are packed very tightly in the corridors and where people exit from doorways. I would like to have a debate on plans for the future. There are carriages coming down the line, but we need to have better facilities if someone cannot get on a train, or if they are delayed, as one train was the week before last by 55 minutes in Newbridge with people waiting in the rain while the waiting rooms and toilets were locked. We need to have proper facilities and carriages with space for our commuters.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome guests of Deputy Moynihan from the Balgaddy Parish Group. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Scahill.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome a new campaign launched last week by the Western Development Commission called "It's Happening Here". It is a campaign that highlights the enormous opportunity that exists across the west and north west, including in my own county of Roscommon, if I have not mentioned it before.

It is an important message. Often the conversation about rural Ireland has focused on what we do not have rather than what we do have and what we can achieve. The figures behind the campaign by the Western Development Commission are very impressive. Businesses supported by the commission have generated €6.3 billion in exports. Almost one in six people across the region volunteer in their communities and, remarkably, 28% of Ireland's social enterprises are based in the west and north west. We also have one third of the country's connected hubs, providing opportunities for people to work remotely, build businesses and raise their families in their own communities. In Roscommon, we are seeing the potential at first hand. Look at the investment secured recently by Novo Nordisk in Monksland, the investment put in by Harmac Medical Products in Castlerea, the innovation at the Aurivo centre in Ballaghaderreen - with a €12 million investment and the first of its kind, a wood-pellet burner and boiler system at its dairy ingredient facility - and the opportunities that are being created on a daily basis by small businesses and entrepreneurs right across the region.

Promoting the region is only part of the equation. We must also invest in making it possible for people to live and work there. That means continuing to deliver on things like housing, which the recent housing and infrastructure investment fund will help to do; childcare, like the recent announcement in Boyle of a State-led facility; and the national broadband plan, under which Roscommon was recently completed, following an investment of €76 million. However, we still have to be ambitious. We could still do with better roads and I will continue to call for a ring road for Castlerea and Roscommon town to be submitted as part of the regional economic spatial strategy. We need accessible transport, which is something I highlighted again yesterday during the debate on disabilities in this Chamber. We also need to look at regional education and apprenticeship opportunities. I was delighted last Friday to be in the company of Senator

Duffy and the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, at the sod-turning of the Pro Rail Academy in Kiltimagh, County Mayo, which is going to open up rail and engineering training opportunities for the whole mid-west region. We should not expect people from the west or Roscommon to leave home in order to build careers when they have the potential to create those opportunities locally. We should be encouraging those who have left to come home.

I commend Mr. Allan Mulrooney and his team at the Western Development Commission on a very positive campaign. Rural Ireland does not need sympathy. It needs the opportunities, investment and the confidence to promote what it has on offer. I believe that is what this campaign has. I encourage businesses, local authorities and community organisations right across the region to get behind this campaign because the message is very simple: you do not have to leave the west to get ahead. It is happening here and, with the right investment, we can make more happen.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I wish to raise one issue here today, which is in relation to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. There were a number of Senators there, as I was, for the past few days in Sheffield, discussing many issues around the agenda of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. For those in this House who do not know what the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly is, I am going to spell it out. It was clearly very much talked about in the past few days on how we need to go back to our respective Parliaments and talk about the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I will be asking the Leader if we could arrange something in collaboration with a number of Senators. Indeed, there are Dáil Deputies but, for the purposes of this exercise today in the Seanad, I believe we need a two-hour session, possibly inviting people in from the Department of foreign affairs, to talk about the assembly and its work. We need a greater connection between each of our respective Parliaments and the work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly was founded to promote co-operation between political representatives of both Britain and Ireland for the benefit of the people they represent. The assembly was established in 1990 as the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, to provide a link between the two Houses of Parliament in the UK and the two Houses of our Oireachtas here. In pursuit of that aim, the membership was extended for that body, enlarging it to include the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is important because we talk a lot about devolved powers. We have a lot to learn about the recent developments in regard to devolved functions of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Parliament. That is an important thing and it is also important that we clearly understand and have greater accountability in regard to our roles. We are there as representatives of this Parliament in the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I ask that between us, the Leader and I could work together on an informative and interesting agenda we could use to showcase the work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly in this House. It is very important that we do so.

I also wish to acknowledge our new ambassador, H.E. Ms Sonja Hyland, who is in London, and also H.E. Ms Kara Owen, who is over here as the British ambassador to Ireland. They both came to Chatsworth House. We had a dinner on one of the nights and they both came. Unusually, both of them addressed the full delegation and they are two very impressive ambassadors. What was very clear from their engagement is that they collaborate and work closely together. Both embassies work exceptionally. I acknowledge that because it is an

important point. I said at the assembly yesterday that it was important we celebrate how far we have come. Who would have thought so many jurisdictions with so many historic conflicts could sit together, co-operate and advance the causes of all their peoples?

It is a good organisation. We need to do more and engage with it more, and what better place to showcase and talk about the work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly than in Seanad Éireann.

Senator Pauline Tully: I wish to raise my concern about the slow pace, or possible deliberate delaying, of essential school building projects. I have been contacted by several schools in Cavan, both primary and secondary, which are in the middle of the process of getting an extension. They feel the whole process is not progressing at all. It is an extremely slow pace. They have submitted their information, drawings, all they need for the school and so on. They expect to progress to the next stage. Some of them hope to go to tender and start the building project this year with completion sometime next year but then they are told they are not in the national development plan, so they cannot progress and are not seen as a priority. In some cases, they are waiting years for these extensions. They have applied years ago. The needs of the schools have even changed and they may need additional space at this stage but that is always used as an excuse then to delay the project further, because they have to submit new drawings and information. You would expect that but it should not delay the project from going ahead.

In one school, they seven classes and two special education classes. That is nine in total. There are six classrooms. No matter how bad your maths are, nine into six does not go, so they are using every other available space in the school to accommodate their students. They have no staff room for 18 staff. They have no physical education, PE, hall. They are even using corridor space. Another school has been five years without a staff room for 28 staff. We are not talking about a small number of staff who could maybe go into an office and use it as a staff room on a temporary basis. There are 28 members of staff in total who have had no staff room space for a period of five years. Again, every available space is being used and some of the classes are operating out of temporary accommodation. We are told that the Department prioritises where there are children with additional needs in the school. All of these schools have special classes, and more than one; they actually have two or three. They are not being prioritised.

The demographics for that age group are decreasing and some wonder if the Department is playing a waiting game in the hope that there will be spaces available. However, for each of these schools, the projected enrolment is increasing and it will increase for the next few years, because there is a quite a lot of house building going on in the area, with new families moving in. I am looking for the Minister to come into the Chamber and discuss this because being told you are not a priority, even though you are operating with very limited space and no comfort in the school, is a horrible place to work out of. If you know there is a building project coming on stream very soon, you will put up with that for a period of time, but when you do not know how long this is going to take, it is very frustrating. I would appreciate if that could be factored in.

Senator Eileen Flynn: There is a park in Ardara, County Donegal. It is 26 years since it was opened. The park is now very run down and it is not a safe space for our children. In 2023, I

contacted the council for the first time. The council is willing to do up the park but, unfortunately, it cannot get the money. Just before I came in here, I wrote to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I also wrote to the Minister, Deputy Foley. The community is looking for a safe space. The park needs to be closed down permanently until they can refurbish it.

In the next town of Killybegs, there is a top range park for the children. What is wrong with the young kids in Ardara? It is very rural community. The park is a place where 13-year-olds and 14-year-olds would hang out as well. The park needs to be refurbished and done up with the support of the community.

I ask the Leader to support me in my ask for a better playground for the children in Ardara. We must also make sure that the playground is suitable for children with additional needs because mothers and fathers in Ardara have to travel to Dungloe for their children to get included in outdoor play.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome a guest of the Leader, Senator Ahearn. Aaron Doran from Dunlavin, County Wicklow is here for a week's work experience. You are most welcome. I hope that the Leader is not working him too hard. Anois, an Seanadóir Joe Flaherty.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Sometimes we must marvel at the HSE. It gets criticised an awful lot but what really plagues me is that when it gets something right that it cannot maintain it and I will talk about the diabetes unit located at Mullingar hospital. For the third time in five years, a question mark hangs over the future of this excellent service as the withdrawal of diabetic nursing services almost brings the service to a standstill.

Dr. Michael O'Grady is a paediatrician and a leading light in the treatment of diabetes in young people. He is the clinical lead for the HSE in the delivery of these services and in Mullingar has built up a fantastic service over the years. Before this unit existed, this service could only be attained by people from County Longford and the midlands travelling to Dublin. The expertise of diabetes nurses cannot be underestimated. They educate patients about their condition and how to monitor it and prevent admissions to hospital and attendances at the emergency department. I cannot countenance or understand how for the third time in five years we again have staffing issues in this service, especially because the unit works very well. This service has a feel-good factor and is a good story for the HSE to tell yet we are back here three times in five years.

Ireland is leading the way in terms of diabetes through the likes of Dexcom and Abbott, which has a facility in Longford town, in terms of detection and the monitoring of diabetes. Yet, something as basic as delivering a diabetes clinic in Mullingar is again thwarted and, indeed, there are doubts over its continuation as a result of an inability to staff that service.

I ask that the HSE tackles this issue once and for all. The current situation is simply not good enough. It speaks volumes about the ineptness of HSE management that they have allowed this to happen for the third time in five years, and are unable to future-proof a service that works very well and is a benchmark for the delivery of diabetes care in this country. If it was happening in any other organisation in the private sector, and the same thing was let happen

three times in five years, there would be a problem. Certainly, if I did not put out the rubbish three times in five weeks I would be out the door.

Senator Mark Duffy: I wish to highlight and welcome the new sports capital fund that will become operational this week.

Recently I attended the official opening of the Knockmore-Foxford Boxing Club. This is a brilliant example of a community-led project for young people and boxers of all ages in the area and, indeed, the wider area of Ballina and Swinford. I acknowledge the leadership of Billy Rice who drove the project from start to completion. It was brilliant to see the project come full circle. The Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary, performed the official opening. I also acknowledge the support given by local representatives. Councillor Neil Cruise helped secure funding of €30,000 to secure the site at the beginning of the project and supported, with another €12,000 in funding, to provide ducting for the ESB connection and, indeed, Councillor Joe Faughnan in Knockmore who supported with another €10,000. I was delighted to support the club along the way in getting planning permission over the line in time for grant applications.

The club is a brilliant amenity and asset for the area and its environs. It would not have happened without Billy Rice and a team of volunteers who drove on the project to completion. I acknowledge and thank them for their contribution to the community. I encourage everyone to support them as they are still raising funds because they finished the project to such a high specification.

Finally, I lend my support to the Horkan family. Detective Colm Horkan was tragically killed. His family and his brother, Dermot, have called for a public inquiry into the death of Colm and I lend my support to that call. This was an attack on a member of An Garda Síochána. It is an attack on us all and deserves a full inquiry because there are more questions than answers. The family deserves answers. It is the least that the State can give them considering that Detective Colm Horkan made the ultimate sacrifice defending us all and defending the community.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I attended the International AI Summit that took place in Dublin on this day last week and listened to an insightful address by Eileen O'Mara. She spoke candidly about a frustrating reality, namely, the immense difficulty of getting an AI or tech start-up off the ground here in Europe. I entirely agree with her core message. There is absolutely no difference between Americans and Europeans when it comes to raw initiative, work ethic or innovation. The difference is the system. European founders are suffocated by invisible domestic barriers with regulatory differences from one member state to the next. Most emphatically, they lack somewhere to mobilise real large-scale capital.

I am sceptical of unifying Europe to the point of eroding our national sovereignty but the emerging EU Inc. framework is an idea that has some merit. By acting as an optional digital-first corporate layer that sits alongside our national laws, without replacing them, it unifies fundraising and equity across the Continent. It unlocks the American-level scale that we need to compete globally without centralising domestic political power.

In the meantime, Ireland has a critical self-inflicted crisis with capital mobilisation. On one side, archaic domestic regulation, like deemed disposal, is actively punishing local investment,

forcing people to liquidate multi-asset funds every eight years and driving private wealth out of our domestic ecosystem. On the other side, we constantly laud ourselves with the establishment spin that Ireland is a great place to start a business. The reality, on the ground, is that we are not. Ireland's small businesses face some of the most expensive commercial bank loans in the eurozone. Better still, our State has failed to build the basic reporting infrastructure to even enable banks to issue informed risk-assessed business loans efficiently. We must stop the administrative complacency, scrap deemed disposal and cut this redundant red tape.

Senator Manus Boyle: Today, I call for the Berkery report, concerning the budget ask, to be published. The Berkery report is in three parts. The first part is the financial path of each section, which was done in the budget.

As the Leader will know, having listened to me in here week after week, the Irish fishing industry is on its knees. We lost the Hague agreement last year for the first time ever when a voting bloc was put up against us. We lost 26% with Brexit while other countries lost very little. We have been left with nothing but a steady decline. They talk in Europe about a fair playing field. It is the unfairest field that I have ever encountered because we seem to be up against it all the time.

I am not here giving out about the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, or the Minister, Deputy Heydon. In fairness, the two men have worked very hard. I thank them for the budget. They kept me in tune with what was going on. They had a massive ask to get €20 million for the fishing industry. They really fought hard and I wish the amount was more. They did their bit and €20 million is a start.

The first stage needs to be implemented as soon as possible. We need to get money into people's pockets. We cannot live on fresh air alone like we have been doing. In particular now, with the way the cost of fuel and bait have increased, it is out of our hands now.

12 o'clock

The fisheries committee heard yesterday from onshore pelagic fishermen who said that, across the board, boats are being tied up because it is not viable to go to sea. I never thought I would hear fishermen say it was not viable to go to sea, but I heard it yesterday. We need to roll out a financial package right away. I have been told a lot of work has been done on the Berkery report. He was very fair and travelled the country to listen to everybody in the marine industry. The report needs to be published immediately. It cannot lie on the shelf like all of the other reports we have heard about down through the years. I ask the Leader to help. Time is running out. We are hanging on by our fingernails.

Senator Maria Byrne: I want to raise something I have raised on previous occasions. Those who receive a diagnosis of a terminal illness should automatically qualify for a medical card. The matter was raised with the Department, which said it would review it, but that does not seem to have gone anywhere. I have dealt with a number of young families recently where a parent has received a terminal diagnosis. It causes stress and strain, not only to the young couple and their family. The Irish Cancer Society in its pre-budget submission sought free car parking for people in receipt of cancer treatment in hospitals. University Hospital Limerick provides parking spaces for people who are having treatment, but not enough of them are

available. In some hospitals, people are charged to premium rates when having treatment. A terminal diagnosis is something that causes a lot of stress and strain. Another issue is that those with an end-of-life prognosis should qualify for the fuel allowance. Many people who are seriously ill have their heating running constantly. Some support should be put in place for them. I would like the support of the Leader on that and perhaps he could ask the Minister to come to the House for a debate on the issue.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I want to raise an issue regarding the criminal legal aid dispute. I want to be constructive about it. Reform of legal aid fees is definitely needed and we all know that. The Law Society accepts that. I have known the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, since I became a Senator. I believe he wants a system that is fair and gives value to the taxpayer. Through Tiglin and having worked with the legal profession in Wicklow, Kildare and Dublin, I find people from the legal profession very fair. When there are fair people on both sides, a compromise is possible.

The figures we are presented with are stark. Around 3,400 certificates have been issued under the new scheme, roughly a tenth of the volume this time last year. The number of adjournments sits at an all-time high and includes offences such as robbery, assault, sexual assault and drugs cases. Every case has a victim waiting. We are told that 75% of cases finish in one appearance, but the Minister's letter in September said only a quarter of cases had concluded - three quarters of a quarter is one in five. After 20 years of working with people who have addiction and complex needs, I can tell the House that somebody who is in active addiction arrives at the point of a criminal conviction with more than one charge. They could have four or five different charges in different districts. If they plead, they need time with the Probation Service, the drug treatment court and services like our own. If those cases are not viable, they will be closed with no rehabilitation. The person then goes straight back into the cycle.

The Law Society is not asking to scrap the flat fee. Rather, it proposes two modest changes, namely a further certificate after ten appearances for genuinely complex cases and separate certificates for separate prosecutions, capped at five per client per day. That answers the Minister's concern about outlier cases. I ask the Leader to invite the Minister to the House and encourage him to sit down with the Law Society. I know letters to and fro will not resolve the dispute, but a conversation between two reasonable parties will.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I wish to highlight the dangers of fireworks in our communities in the very long lead up to 31 October, the official Hallowe'en night. With Hallowe'en fast approaching, I want to make a simple appeal to parents, young people and communities across the country. Let us use a bit of common sense and make sure everyone can enjoy the occasion safely. Hallowe'en should be about fun - it was always about fun for children - dressing up, meeting friends, going trick or treating and people enjoying themselves. It was never about frightening elderly neighbours, intimidating vulnerable people or creating extra work for gardaí and emergency services.

Every year, we hear the same complaints about fireworks and bangers going off from the start of October. It is like Christmas now; you hear the first cracker going off three months before Hallowe'en. It is intimidating vulnerable people and, as I said, creates extra work for gardaí. Last year, in Listowel a firework was dropped through the letterbox of a resident's

home. Thankfully, not a lot of damage was done and things could have been a lot worse. A village in north Kerry was torn apart two years before that by a mob of youths who had a firework fight in the middle of the street. We also need to think carefully about bonfires and the dangers of fireworks. There are public awareness campaigns, but unfortunately the message is not getting through to kids and people using fireworks. In Listowel responsible adults behind the wheels of cars are dropping kids off to let off fireworks around the area.

This time of the year highlights the need for CCTV coverage in our towns. I highlighted the village in north Kerry when I first came to the House two years ago. My first contribution was about protecting the people because it was a war zone that night. I am still seeking CCTV for the area. It is a deterrent for the people who drive those kids around and allow them to cause anxiety for pets, elderly people and the whole community. Let us make Hallowe'en memorable for the right reasons. Let us respect our neighbours and gardaí, look after our pets, mind our own safety and let the children enjoy Hallowe'en without becoming it another story of controversy.

The text alert system number for gardaí in Listowel is 50555. It is anonymous and safe. I ask people to report incidents as soon as possible because the gardaí need to know what is happening. Often it is the case that people leave it to others to report incidents. If people see something they need to say something to save the community.

Senator Laura Harmon: I want to raise a number of issues. First, I want to raise the issue of Bessborough in Cork. I want to welcome the fact that the Minister, Deputy Foley, got Cabinet approval this week to make an application to the High Court to release burial records relating to the site. Survivors and their families have a right to know the truth regarding these records. This needs to happen without delay. The Minister should outline clearly to survivors and their families the steps being taken.

The second issue I want to raise is student visas. We know a number of cases relating to Palestinian students who have applied to study in Ireland are currently under judicial review. They were accepted onto fully funded courses, but the Government is denying them visas. We need information from the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and his Department on the process under which these visas have been dealt with. This should not have ended up in court. I want to commend the lawyers who have worked closely with these students.

Related to that, I want to request a debate with the Minister on student visas in general. I was alarmed to hear at the further and higher education committee last week from University College Cork that it is currently down €3.7 million in income this year because of international students who did not take up places at the college due to the fact that their visas were being delayed. We need full transparency from the Government on its visa processes and how that might have changed in terms of delays or how they are being granted.

This is affecting different sectors of society and it is affecting the income of the colleges. If UCC is down €3.7 million, I would like to know what the other higher education institutions are down in revenue because of changes to visa situations. This is a significant impact on our higher education institutions which are already underfunded.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I want to talk about a meeting I attended on Monday about community needs analysis for Bailieborough and Mullagh in County Cavan. It was sobering to hear some of the statistics that were given to us from the analysis. The information was shocking but the issues have been there and I have been raising them since I was first elected ten years ago. One statistic is that 26% of households in Bailieborough live in the most disadvantaged areas of minus 10 or greater on the deprivation score. That is a very sobering statistic to be told. The deprivation is highly concentrated and based in individual areas. There have to be targeted supports. This is what the analysis has shown us. I tried to get a Commencement debate today and yesterday but I was not picked. Bailieborough is badly in need of a family resource centre. We need services and we need a building to house those services. One of the issues is that if services like Youthreach, addiction services or counselling services want to come into the town, there are no buildings available for these services to work from. The report also found that referrals to Tusla for child welfare concerns were 40% higher than the national average and 35% higher than the whole of Cavan and Monaghan. This too is shocking. These are stark figures. As public representatives we needed to hear these figures but it was not easy listening. There are high numbers of single parent families in the area as well who are trying their best but who are struggling. They need these services too.

The report indicated that there is very little for teenagers. We need youth services, counselling for addiction and DEIS status for our secondary school. The national school has DEIS status but, unfortunately, after years of writing to Ministers for the secondary school to get DEIS status, it still has not come about. The primary school has six ASD classes, which is more than some special schools in other areas like Dublin, but more services are needed. I need the Minister to come in and answer questions on this in a Commencement debate.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the 14 Senators for their contributions today. Senator O'Loughlin spoke Sally Rooney's books and the decision made in the UK. Obviously, it is a decision for them, not for us, but as the Senator has said, it does start a dangerous precedent that someone's books are not being sold for a reason that is not justifiable in a lot of people's eyes. The Senator also acknowledged Dr. Síofra O'Leary, who was appointed to the Court of Justice. I congratulate her and wish her well in her new role. I know that this is done through the Council of Europe, which is where Senator O'Loughlin would know her from and from where I also know her. We wish her well.

In relation to overcrowding in Kildare, there is huge investment in public transport and trains in particular. Kildare is an area where a lot of people live but travel to Dublin to work. We do need significant investment, which is coming, from a safety perspective, as the Senator has said. We will try to have a debate with the Minister for Transport on that at some point.

Senator Scahill spoke about the Western Development Commission's "It's Happening Here" project, which is about promoting an area as opposed to talking about what is not in your area. Those things are hugely positive when people come together and actually put a case for why their community and their region is a place to visit and to come to. From the Government's perspective, as it is for the Senator, it is our job to try to promote to people living in rural Ireland. This is why there have been changes made in rural planning guidelines through the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and that is why there is more investment in rural Ireland such as never before. It is to give people that option to stay and live where they grew up.

Senator Boyhan spoke about the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly that was held in Sheffield. The Senator is right that a lot of good work is done but it is particularly done at an individual level, as the Cathaoirleach will know, with Senators in this House and in the Lower House building up those relationships. We have not had a real debate on that in this House. A lot of Members in this House are on the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, so I will certainly try to facilitate a debate on that for Senator Boyhan.

Senator Tully spoke about school buildings and slow processes. This is a frustration for all of us. There is a long process when a principal of a school starts to try to build an extension or extra classes onto their school. It is incredibly frustrating for a principal and for a board of management. There is massive investment from the Government. The Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, has put huge money into school buildings because of the need and because of the increase in population. That investment will continue but I understand it can be frustrating, from a principal's perspective, in terms of the speed of it. That being said, we do have the money to invest in school projects, which happen on a daily basis. I will ask the Minister to come into the Chamber just to have a debate on that.

Senator Flynn spoke about a park in Ardara that has been run down. The council is willing to support it and to redevelop it but obviously it needs funding from the Department. I suggest the Senator puts down a Commencement matter with the Department to see if funding can be acquired. Councils are always very supportive of doing something, but when it comes to actually having the money to do it, then it is normally the Department they need to get funding from as they have limited resources themselves, from my experience with most Departments.

Senator Flaherty spoke about the diabetes service in Mullingar, which has obviously been very successful over recent years but which constantly has challenges in recruitment. We heard yesterday On the Order of Business that there are recruitment issues in UHL. This morning we have heard of recruitment issues in a very key and important service in Mullingar that serves people in Longford and Westmeath and which is hugely important for the Senator's area. I am well aware. We do not want people to have to go back to what they used to do, which is travelling to Dublin to receive that service.

Senator Duffy spoke about the sports capital fund and the Knockmore-Foxford Boxing Club, particularly Billy Rice and the work that he does there. It is immeasurable the amount of work that volunteers do in organisations, especially in smaller sports like boxing, not the GAA, rugby or soccer but the smaller sports that connect communities and really bring people in who otherwise would not be into sport. The Senator is using Billy Rice as an example of someone who does that work and we see the benefit for the whole community on the back of that. I know that Councillor Neil Cruise is someone who is naturally very good at finding money from somewhere to support a really good cause and he has done that again here, as the Senator said. We also have a sports capital fund coming through, which has been launched and announced. I think it has been said in this House numerous times that we need to prioritise the smaller sports, whether it is boxing, rowing or gymnastics or whatever, and to encourage them to apply for a significant amount of money to support their organisations and their clubs.

I too acknowledge Garda Colm Horkan's family, who have called for a public inquiry. That is obviously a matter for the Minister and for the Government but everyone is very much aware of his case. I think everyone in the country wants them to have answers and have closure. I support that.

Senator Keogan was at the Dublin AI summit last week. It is a challenge for businesses in Ireland and in Europe in terms of start-up businesses. As we know, there are a lot of supports from the local enterprise offices for small businesses setting up. There are a lot of schemes and a lot of funding out there. I find that a lot of people who are starting up businesses are not actually aware of it. There is, however, more red tape than there is in the US.

There is an argument that this is for a good reason. It depends which way you look at it. There are huge challenges and trying to have a similar system in all 27 states is probably not credible, as was said, but the suggestion the Senator made is not unreasonable at all. Anything we can do to support businesses to get up and going and have the opportunities that we see businesses in America have is good for Ireland and Europe.

Senator Boyle spoke about the Berkery report, which needs to be published. Fishermen need funding and financial backing. They got €20 million in the budget, which is a significant amount of money. Senator Boyle was a key figure in pushing for that for Donegal, and Killybegs in particular. As he requested, I will speak with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to see if the report can be published as soon as possible. We have rising costs in all businesses, and fisheries are no different from any other sector, with costs going up on a weekly basis. It needs funding.

Senator Maria Byrne spoke about providing a medical card to people with terminal illnesses. She has mentioned this numerous times. When I started here six years ago, I assumed that people with a terminal illness would get a medical card. It would seem logical but it is still not the case. From her experience in Limerick, the Senator knows the stress a terminal illness puts on an individual but actually more so on the family of the individual. The last things they need to be worrying about are a parking space or a medical card. We should be there, and we can be there, to make sure this process is easy and causes as little stress as possible for someone going through a very traumatic period. I am more than happy to support the Senator on this and I will ask the Minister to come to the Seanad on it. There are a number of requests for the Minister for Health to come in on a number of issues. We will try to have an opportunity over the coming weeks to have a good debate on a range of health issues. Medical cards for people with a terminal illness is a very obvious one on which to have a debate.

Senator McCarthy spoke in relation to the legal aid dispute, which was raised yesterday as well. I noted in a newspaper this morning comments made by a judge. When we are getting to that stage we just need people to sit down, talk and come to an agreement. There are people being affected by this in court cases through no fault of their own. One side can blame the other, but we need to make sure there is an agreement in place. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has always said he wants to modernise and improve the Courts Service, and I know solicitors want that as well. There has to be some agreement. People just need to sit down to talk and support that. I am happy to have the Minister come into the Chamber as well, which was requested by Senator McCarthy.

Senator Kennelly spoke on fireworks. It is always good when a colleague raises an issue that is going to be an issue in a week's time as opposed to a week after it happens. It is hugely important to highlight that Hallowe'en is a wonderful time. It is a wonderful time for kids and it is meant to be fun and enjoyable, with people dressing up. However, on a yearly basis, we have situations where someone is badly injured or criminal activity happens because of

fireworks. We need to make sure that this does not happen. It is important that the Senator highlighted it today.

When Senator Harmon said she had a couple of issues to raise, I knew the first one would be Bessborough because she has spoken passionately about it so often. It is significant that the Minister, Deputy Foley, has got Cabinet approval to release those records because that is part of the closure and acceptance of what happened. I know that once agreement at Cabinet has been secured, the next question is when will it actually be done. We will try to push that as much as we can on the Senator's behalf.

On the issue of student visas, I am happy to have the Minister for justice come here for a debate on this and other issues. As the Senator knows, all applications are processed on an individual basis and I cannot say why one has been denied. From my experience, particularly with Palestinian children, we have tried to bring them in and tried to support them, for obvious reasons. They feel welcomed and supported by the State because of decisions we have made, and they can give back an awful lot. We will do that. I am not surprised that colleges are having issues but, again, each case is dealt with individually. We will bring the Minister in to see if we can identify the problem. If it is happening more regularly than normal, there is obviously an issue.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly spoke about a community needs analysis that was done in Baileborough in County Cavan. In every county we have areas that need extra support and this needs to be highlighted here and in the Lower House. One of the reasons the Department of rural affairs was set up some years ago was to invest in towns in rural Ireland, through the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, the town and village renewal scheme and the community centre investment fund, CCIF. These schemes provide funding to towns to bring them up to a standard that people can be proud of. The Senator mentioned no buildings being available. We can also invest in upgrading buildings and then bring in services like Jigsaw and other support services that are starting to be introduced in other counties. I accept that the Senator's concerns are genuine but there has never been more money put into rural Ireland, and that will continue in the coming years.

Order of Business agreed to.

Protection of Young Persons (Employment in Food and Beverage Services Sector) Regulations 2026: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Protection of Young Persons (Employment in Food and Beverage Services Sector)
Regulations 2026,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 24th September, 2026, be referred to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in accordance with Standing Order 79(2)(b), which, not later than 5th November, 2026, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 84, and Standing Order 86(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.26 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.03 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.26 p.m. and resumed at 1.03 p.m.

1 o'clock

Media Regulation Bill 2026: Instruction to Committee

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): The Minister of State is welcome to the House. I welcome the gentlemen in the Gallery, who are guests of Deputy Peter "Chap" Cleere. I offer a special mention to Councillor Mick McCarthy. I hope he has an enjoyable day and I am sure Deputy Cleere will be looking after the group for the rest of the day.

Senator Mark Duffy: I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, in relation to the Media Regulation Bill 2026, it be an instruction to the Committee of the whole Seanad that the Committee has the power to make amendments to the Bill for the purpose of giving effect to Article 20 of Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 (the European Media Freedom Act) and for that purpose to amend the Broadcasting Act 2009; and to change the long title to reflect the content of the Bill; and to make other consequential amendments required to take account of such amendments.

Question put and agreed to.

Media Regulation Bill 2026: Committee Stage

Section 1 agreed to.

SECTION 2

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Amendments Nos. 1 and 13 to 18, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Government amendment No. 1:

In page 6, between lines 3 and 4, to insert the following:

" "Act of 2009" means the Broadcasting Act 2009;"

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Acting Chairman and Members for taking Committee Stage today and seeing the Bill progress through the House. The purpose of this group of amendments is to give full effect to Article 20 of the European Media Freedom Act, EMFA, and to provide Coimisiún na Meán with appropriate powers to monitor compliance with Article 20 in Ireland. Article 20 of EMFA provides users with the right to easily change the default settings of devices and user interfaces giving access to media services. This is a response to

commercial practices which seek to incentivise users to choose certain media offerings over others. Relevant devices and user interfaces would include those which guide users in their choice of media service, for example, connected televisions, remote controls or car audio systems. Manufacturers, developers and importers must ensure that any devices or user interfaces placed on the market include a functionality enabling users to change their configuration at any time. EMFA also requires that member states take appropriate measures to ensure compliance with the provisions of Article 20. Amendments Nos. 14 to 16, inclusive, amend Part 8B of the Broadcasting Act 2009. A failure by a manufacturer, developer or importer to comply with Article 20 will now be a contravention under Part 8B, and Coimisiún na Meán will be empowered to use its existing powers to conduct investigations and impose administrative financial sanctions.

Amendment No. 17 will insert a new Part 16 into the Broadcasting Act to provide Coimisiún na Meán with further powers to ensure compliance with Article 20. In cases of a contravention but where a full investigation under Part 8B of the Act may not be proportionate, an coimisiún may issue compliance notices to manufacturers, developers or importers. The new Part 16 also establishes a complaints procedure, whereby individuals may make a complaint to an coimisiún where there has been a failure by a manufacturer, developer or importer to comply with Article 20.

The remainder of the amendments in this grouping, amendments Nos. 1, 13 and 18, are consequential amendments. Amendment No. 1 inserts a definition of the Broadcasting Act 2009 for use throughout the Bill. Amendment No. 13 amends a reference to the Broadcasting Act, in line with the definition provided for under amendment No. 1. Amendment No. 18 amends the Long Title of the Bill to account for the insertion of the new provisions to give effect to Article 20.

Amendment agreed to.

Section 2, as amended, agreed to.

Sections 3 and 4 agreed to

Amendment No. 2 not moved.

Sections 5 to 10, inclusive, agreed to.

Amendment No. 3 not moved.

Section 11 agreed to.

Amendment No. 4 not moved.

Sections 12 to 14, inclusive, agreed to.

Amendment No. 5 not moved.

Sections 15 and 16 agreed to.

Amendment No. 6 not moved.

Sections 17 to 23, inclusive, agreed to.

Amendment No. 7 not moved.

Sections 24 to 31, inclusive, agreed to.

Amendments Nos. 8 and 9 not moved.

Sections 32 to 34, inclusive, agreed to.

Amendments Nos. 10 and 11 not moved.

Section 35 agreed to.

Amendment No. 12 not moved.

Section 36 agreed to.

SECTION 37

Government amendment No. 13:

In page 37, line 4, to delete "Broadcasting Act 2009" and substitute "Act of 2009".

Amendment agreed to.

Section 37, as amended, agreed to.

NEW SECTIONS

Government amendment No. 14:

In page 37, after line 25, to insert the following:

“CHAPTER 2

Amendments of Part 8B of Broadcasting Act 2009

Amendment of section 139ZG of Act of 2009

38.Section 139ZG(1) of the Act of 2009 is amended—

(a) in the definition of “contravention” by—

(i) the deletion of “or” where it thirdly appears in paragraph (c),

(ii) the substitution of “, or” for “;” in paragraph (d), and

(iii) the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (d):

“(e) a failure by a manufacturer, a developer or an importer to comply with Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA;”,

and

(b) by insertion of the following definitions:

“ ‘developer’ has the meaning assigned to it by section 203;

‘importer’ has the meaning assigned to it by section 203;

‘manufacturer’ has the meaning assigned to it by section 203;”.

Amendment agreed to.

Government amendment No. 15:

In page 37, after line 25, to insert the following:

“Amendment of section 139ZK of Act of 2009

39. Section 139ZK(1) of the Act of 2009 is amended—

- (a) in subparagraph (i) of paragraph (a), by the substitution of “, designated online service, manufacturer, developer or importer” for “or designated online service”,
- (b) in paragraph (g), by the substitution of “a hosting service provider, a designated online service, an intermediary service, a manufacturer, a developer or an importer” for “hosting service provider or a designated online service or an intermediary service”,
- (c) in paragraph (n), by the substitution of “;” for “.”, and
- (d) by the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (n):
 - “(o) in the case of an investigation where the suspected contravention falls within paragraph (e) of the definition of ‘contravention’ in section 139ZG, require any person who has relevant equipment in his or her power or control to supply without payment that relevant equipment or sufficient samples thereof for testing, examination or analysis.”.”.

Amendment agreed to.

Government amendment No. 16:

In page 37, after line 25, to insert the following:

“Amendment of section 139ZW of Act of 2009

40.Section 139ZW of the Act of 2009 is amended—

- (a) in subsection (1), by the insertion of “or (e)” after “paragraph (a)”, and
- (b) in subsection (4), by the substitution of the following paragraph for paragraph (b):
 - “(b) be set with a view to deterring the inquiry subject from committing a contravention and—
 - (i) where the inquiry subject is a hosting service provider or a provider of broadcasting services, audiovisual on-demand media services, designated online services or intermediary services, with a view to deterring other such providers from committing a contravention, or
 - (ii) where the inquiry subject is a manufacturer, a developer or an importer, with a view to deterring other manufacturers, developers or importers from committing a contravention.”.”.

Amendment agreed to.

Government amendment No. 17:

In page 37, after line 25, to insert the following:

“CHAPTER 3

Insertion of Part 16 into [[Broadcasting Act 2009]

Insertion of Part 16 into Act of 2009

41.The Act of 2009 is amended by the insertion of the following Part after Part 15:

“PART 16

Right to Customise Media Offering

Interpretation (Part 16)

203.In this Part—

‘developer’ means a developer referred to in Article 20(2), 20(3) or 20(4) of EMFA;

‘importer’ means an importer referred to in Article 20(2), 20(3) or 20(4) of EMFA;

‘manufacturer’ means a manufacturer referred to in Article 20(2), 20(3) or 20(4) of EMFA.

Compliance notice (Part 16)

204.(1) Where a person authorised by the Commission under subsection (2) is of the opinion that a manufacturer, developer or importer has infringed Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA, that person may direct an authorised officer to serve a notice (in this section referred to as a ‘compliance notice’) on the manufacturer, developer or importer concerned.

(2) The Commission may authorise any Commissioner or member of its staff for the purposes of subsection (1).

(3) A compliance notice shall—

(a) state the contravention to which it relates,

(b) state the grounds on which the person authorised under subsection (2) is of the opinion referred to in subsection (1),

(c) for the purpose of ensuring compliance by the manufacturer, developer or importer with the provision which is the subject of the contravention, require the manufacturer, developer or importer to do or refrain from doing anything specified in the notice by a date specified in the notice, and

(d) contain information regarding the bringing of an appeal under subsection (7) against the notice, including information specifying the manner in which an appeal may be brought.

(4) An authorised officer may withdraw a compliance notice at any time.

(5) An authorised officer may amend a compliance notice by notice in writing to the manufacturer, developer or importer concerned to substitute any later date for the date for the time being specified under subsection (3)(c) or this subsection.

(6) A date specified under subsection (3)(c) or (5) must be later than the date by which an appeal under subsection (7) may be brought.

(7) A manufacturer, a developer or an importer may, not later than 14 days after the service on it of a compliance notice, appeal against the notice to the District Court.

(8) An appeal under subsection (7) shall be brought in the manner specified in accordance with subsection (3)(d).

(9) The authorised officer and the manufacturer, developer or importer concerned shall be entitled to be heard and to adduce evidence at the hearing of an appeal under subsection (7).

(10) The District Court shall, on an appeal under subsection (7) against a compliance notice, do one of the following:

(a) affirm the notice;

(b) cancel the notice;

(c) cancel the notice and require the manufacturer, developer or importer, as the case may be, to comply with such directions as may be given by the court.

(11) A manufacturer, a developer or an importer on whom a compliance notice is served who fails to comply with the notice by the due date shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a class B fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or both.

(12) The due date for the purposes of subsection (11) is as follows:

(a) where no appeal is brought under subsection (7), the date for the time being specified in the compliance notice in accordance with subsection (3)(c) or (5);

(b) where an appeal against the notice is brought under subsection (7) and the court affirms the notice, the day falling immediately after the expiration of the period of 14 days from the date on which the court affirms the notice.

(13) Nothing done under this section prevents or restricts the taking of any other action for the purpose of ensuring compliance with Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA.

Complaints (Part 16)

205.(1) A person (in this section referred to as a ‘complainant’) may make a complaint to the Commission, in the manner and form specified by the Commission, that there has been a failure by a manufacturer, a developer or an importer to comply with Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA.

(2) The Commission may request a complainant or the manufacturer, developer or importer the subject of the complaint, or both, to provide further particulars to it in

writing in respect of the complaint within such reasonable period as is specified by the Commission.

(3) The Commission, having considered the complaint made under subsection (1) and any further particulars received upon request under subsection (2), may take any of the following actions:

- (a) serve on the manufacturer, developer or importer concerned a compliance notice under section 204;
- (b) investigate the complaint in accordance with section 139ZI(1);
- (c) dismiss the complaint where the Commission finds—
 - (i) the complaint is frivolous or vexatious or was not made in good faith,
 - (ii) the subject matter of the complaint is trivial, or
 - (iii) the subject matter of the complaint is not relevant to Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA;
- (d) take such other action in respect of the complaint as the Commission considers appropriate;
- (e) take no further action in respect of the complaint.

(4) The Commission shall notify the complainant and the manufacturer, developer or importer the subject of the complaint made under subsection (1) in writing of its decision under subsection (3) and the reasons for that decision.”.”.

Amendment agreed to.

TITLE

Government amendment No. 18:

In page 5, lines 9 and 10, to delete “to give full effect to Article 24 of that Regulation and, for that purpose, to amend section 34 of the Broadcasting Act 2009;” and substitute the following:

“to give full effect to Articles 20(4) and 24 of that Regulation and, for those purposes, to amend the Broadcasting Act 2009;”.

Amendment agreed to.

Title, as amended, agreed to.

Senator Pat Casey: Pursuant to Standing Order 165, it is reported to the Seanad that the Title has been amended.

Bill reported with amendments.

Senator Pat Casey: When is it proposed to take the next Stage?

Senator Mark Duffy: Next Tuesday.

Report Stage ordered for Tuesday, 27 October 2026.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.16 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.16 p.m. and resumed at 3.01 p.m.

3 o'clock

**Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill
2026: Committee and Remaining Stages**

SECTION 1

Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Kelleher): Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Michael McDowell: I move amendment No.1:

In page 5, line 24, after “and 28(2),” to insert “and subject to *subsection (4)*”.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, to the Chamber. I have a few general observations to make in relation to the context of these amendments. The consumption of nicotine products is the subject of a variety of measures from the Government, but there does not seem to be an overall strategy in relation to them. First, we have a proposal that cigarettes should be made progressively unavailable by age over the next number of years. That is the first thing. The second proposition is that some of the products should be regulated, such as inhaling products like vapes and so forth. The third issue is the whole question of tobacco pouches and other products, which are called nicotine consumption products, that are not being properly addressed by the Government.

We have a contradiction on top of this, namely, that a number of people participated in a committee of these Houses on the issue of drugs. They produced an elaborate report in this regard. One of the suggested consequences of the report being implemented is, for instance, that cannabis should be legalised in the sense that possession of it for a person's own use should not be a criminal offence in the future. Unfortunately, the same logic has been applied to other controlled drugs, including stronger drugs. We know from recent tragic and savage events just how serious the whole drug problem is for Ireland and innocent people, who are not merely losing their lives but having the lives of their communities destroyed as a consequence. I want to put everybody on the same basis as a tobacco retailer, at the very least. The regime for nicotine inhaling products should apply to tobacco pouches, lozenges and other items. I am surprised the Government has not done this.

Amendment No. 3, which is in my name, has been ruled out of order. It would have extended the existing licensing fees and controls to persons who are retailing nicotine products generally. That has been ruled out of order on the basis that it contravenes Standing Order 42, which prohibits amendments being accepted that could impose a charge on the people. The logic of all of this is that a huge area of retailing is being left outside control, whereas nicotine

inhaling products are being more rigidly controlled than before. I do not see a logic in what is being proposed.

Amendment No. 2, also in my name, is designed to delay the introduction of the provisions that are laid to nicotine inhaling products for, effectively, one year in order to allow those people who are involved in the legitimate and authorised sale of these products by retail to make all the relevant changes to advertising, display, packaging and product presentation that will flow from the other provisions of the Bill.

That is what I want to say at this stage on my amendments that have survived scrutiny, namely, amendments Nos. 1 and 2. I strongly believe that those people who are complying with the law and paying substantial sums in respect of the retail sale of tobacco products should have an adequate window of time to comply with the new regime this Bill proposes. I say that in the context where I am very much of the view that the failure to deal with nicotine consumption products in this legislation is not merely regrettable but inexplicable. If we are going to have barber shops and nail bars selling nicotine products without control of any kind whatsoever, it makes a mockery of the pretensions of our public health policy to address the damage that is being done by nicotine inhaling products, which are so widespread in our communities.

They are not aimed at weaning people off smoking anymore. They are aimed at introducing youngsters to inhaling nicotine. The evidence is to be found in every gutter in every street in every town in Ireland. We have not adequately dealt with the whole vaping phenomenon. We are now going to create a new form of nicotine consumption, which is unregulated, through pouches, lozenges and the like. For want of a proper consultation before this legislation was put in place, and I am speaking on behalf of the convenience stores proprietors who are now effectively heavily regulated in relation to tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products, they are to be in competition with unregulated premises right across the country in respect of whom this legislation makes no difference to whatsoever.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State so much for coming in. I fully support the legislation, but I support Senator McDowell. I am former owner of a convenience store. I have been contacted by many convenience store owners about their concern that pouches are not being regulated. Maybe it could be tied to the licensing of vapes. At the moment, convenience stores have to apply for a licence for selling tobacco and vapes, but there is no licence to sell pouches. When a shop has a licence, the environmental health officer calls around and checks that everything is up to date. However, there are shops that are selling some of these products from the corner of the shop. They do not have a licence, and the environmental health officer has no control over it. We should put in place some sort of regulation of that whole area because convenience stores are up against so much competition, as Senator McDowell outlined. There are so many corner shops that are not even convenience stores, but they have pouches that are on sale and the young people know where to find them. I support Senator McDowell in relation to that.

Senator Teresa Costello: I support the Bill. As a party, Fianna Fáil has had a huge focus on the consumption of nicotine products. The smoking ban has saved the State so much money. We cannot quantify it because we cannot even imagine how many people would have been affected by illness if that had not come into effect. Pricing younger people out of the market

for nicotine products is a very effective way of dealing with it. We are in new territory. It is evolving. I am not a smoker. The pouches are relatively new. They are a new habit. They are even taking away from the physical element of the habit of having something in your hand. It is just the direct hit of nicotine. It is all about addiction. I know the hard work the Minister of State does. I know her understanding and feelings on addiction. We want to protect our children from addiction because, primarily, the packaging and flavours associated with these single-use vapes are really to capture younger people.

Senator Maria Byrne: Absolutely.

Senator Teresa Costello: The pouches are a worry. They should be increased in price as much as they can to squeeze them out because they are serving no real use, only just to get people immediately addicted to nicotine.

Senator Joanne Collins: I will not hide the fact that I oppose the Bill. I wish to pick up on something Senator McDowell said about the drugs committee, the health approach and the talk among the committees about the possibility of decriminalising the likes of cannabis and stuff. It stood out to me when I heard it. I did not correlate the two at the time. On looking at the possibility of decriminalising something like cannabis but a banning a flavour on a vape that is nicotine, one point I have on the amendment is that we seem to be going very far when comes to vapes and we seem to be softening a little bit on the other side. I will leave it at that until our amendment.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir. Sula nglaoimid ar an Aire Stáit chun freagra a thabhairt, cuirimid fáilte roimh ár gcuairteoirí. I welcome our visitors from Crana College in Donegal who are here as guests of the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue. They are all very welcome.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank Senator Byrne and Senator Costello for both having the speaking points. This is an important Bill. I thank Senator McDowell for his amendments Nos. 1 and 2. I wish to go back to the drugs strategy. We are the Department of Health, so we are health-led and we work with the Department of justice. It is very much a health-led approach, and this is part of what we do.

Regarding the Senator's amendments, this Bill will make it illegal to sell or give out free nicotine to our children. At the moment, a child in primary school who goes into a shop and looks for a pouch is not breaking any law. They can get a pouch. They can get other nicotine and other similar products as well. At the moment, a child can go into a shop and buy a pouch. The first thing we need to do, and urgently, is to stop that. We have to make sure anyone under 18 cannot go into a shop and buy a pouch or any other similar products. That is the first reason we have to move on this. If we delayed this today, it would mean that we would have to go back to Europe. As Senators know, if we have to go back to our counterparts in Europe, it could take months. This Bill will now stop any children from going into a shop and buying pouches or similar items. That is important.

I pay to tribute to the retailers here today. Most of them are compliant. I always feel it is important we recognise them. A lot of them implement the age policy. If they have the nicotine pouches, they are inclined ask a person's age, even though a young person can go in and buy it. It is important we recognise that. The age of sale for nicotine inhaling products was brought in shortly after the commencement in 2023. Again, it is important that this Bill gets approved today. Under section 21, it creates a 12-month transition period for restrictions on flavours. The Senators asked me about this. Regarding the packaging and appearance of nicotine inhaling products, the timeline for introducing the age of sale to retail, advertisements and display measures for all nicotine will be determined. That will go back to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. She will decide on that herself. Amendment Nos. 1 and 2 would mean that these measures could not be brought in sooner because of this.

Senators mentioned about pouches and what we are doing. With this Bill we are putting a ban on sale to minors to ensure no one under 18 can buy a pouch. The other part of this is that we have a ban on display in general stores. As part of this, when we go into a shop and see all the different pouches and products, that cannot happen anymore. We are also putting in a ban on advertisements in shops. We are doing a lot of work on this. I know what Senators are saying and that we should look at the long-term measures, such as licences, going forward. I understand the Senators' concerns. These are really good initiatives. This is about our children. I am delighted to see the school in the Visitors Gallery today because I am talking about pouches and nicotine and it is lovely to see a class here. It is important that we legislate on this. We want to keep our children healthy.

We are here as part of a health-led approach. That is why this Bill is very important.

On another matter that Senator McDowell brought up, the Government first announced these proposals in 2024. The Senator said that there was not enough time. The Government announced its intention to extend this to all nicotine products almost a year ago. Following enactment, the Minister will decide on this. I understand the Senator's concern but we have to get this Bill done so that no child under 18 will be able to purchase a pouch or similar product.

I do not propose to accept either of the two amendments.

Senator Michael McDowell: I am disappointed by that reaction. What I am seeking to achieve is limited control. I seek to put people who are complying with the law and paying €1,000 to apply for a licence and another €1,000 every year to continue selling on roughly the same football pitch as people who are not prohibited by these laws from selling these products to adults. The Government has to ask itself whether it is looking around any corners at all. For instance, are we really aiming for it to be possible to sell nicotine pouches to adults without regulation? Is there some problem relating to our relationship with the European Union or in the bureaucracy of our own Government that means we cannot look at all of this in the round and come up with a rational set of rules that do not put law-abiding retailers at a disadvantage while allowing those who are not regulated free rein?

I have to accept the ruling of the Chair, so I am not going to argue about Standing Order 42. However, I have to make the point that this is a partial measure and that a more appropriate regulatory regime is needed. This kind of incremental approach is crab-like. It is nibbling at the edges of a problem.

While it is slightly outside the scope of this legislation, I want to say this; as a former Minister for justice and as a liberal, I have always wondered whether arguments made in magazines like *The Economist* that the personal consumption of drugs should be decriminalised and left a matter of personal behaviour have any merit whatsoever. If you say that a 19-year-old can legitimately have cannabis in the house, how can you ensure a 14-year-old does not have access to it? We need a debate in this House on that report. I believe that the great majority of Senators are against that report even though Senator Ruane and others are passionately in favour of it. I believe that the great majority of people who have looked around a few corners do not agree with the decriminalisation of cannabis. I am particularly conscious of the fact of something I read in a newspaper the other day, which is that 30% of acute psychotic episodes are directly related to cannabis consumption. This is personality-destroying material. It is wholly unacceptable for us to say that it is up to individuals to deal with this and that it should be available to 19-year-olds without consequence and that, if it ends up in the hands of a 14-year-old, it is parents who should be trying to stop it rather than the police.

I have said as much as I can say, even if it was a bit outside the scope of the Bill. I accept that the Minister of State's Department looks at things from a health perspective, but if we are not clearly willing to stop drug pushers from facilitating personal consumption of drugs - I fully accept that is a matter of criminal law and a question for the Department of justice - it will result in deep-seated confusion. In my view, that report from the drugs committee is going in the wrong direction and needs to be debated in this House. The public needs to be very clear that it is not going to be public policy or Government policy that the possession of controlled drugs for personal use will be decriminalised in the manner suggested.

Senator Teresa Costello: I sat on that drugs committee and I would welcome a debate in the Seanad. There was not unanimous agreement. People did voice concerns. I have similar concerns to Senator McDowell's. It was not the case that everybody said we should make it legal; it certainly was not like that. There were differing opinions. I came into the group late because I was elected later. I would 100% welcome a debate on the report.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: It is important to state today that it is illegal to take drugs. I will certainly speak to my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. It is important to have the conversation Senator McDowell suggested with the Minister in here.

On amendment No. 3, which has been ruled out of order, I will just say that the licensing system was introduced in 2023. It only came into full operation in August of this year. To accept this amendment would mean starting a whole new EU notification process. It is important that we get the Bill through so that children are not able to go into shops and legally buy pouches or similar products. That is what this is about.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State and fully support what she has just said. I understand the significance and importance of getting this through today but perhaps, in the future, the Government could look separately at linking the licence for pouches to the existing licence.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Yes, we certainly will.

Senator Maria Byrne: Pouches are being sold in the corners of shops - I will not say "back rooms" - and people are getting access to them. It is not only adults who are buying them. It is about trying to regularise what is happening out there.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Michael McDowell: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 5, between lines 27 and 28, to insert the following:

“(4) Notwithstanding *subsection (3)*, any provision of this Act that introduces new obligations or restrictions relating to—

- (a) the retail sale,
- (b) advertising,
- (c) display,
- (d) packaging or appearance, or
- (e) product presentation,

of nicotine inhaling products or nicotine consumption products shall not come into operation earlier than 12 months after the date of the passing of this Act.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 1 agreed to.

Sections 2 to 4, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 5

Question proposed: "That section 5 stand part of the Bill."

Senator Michael McDowell: On section 5, I just want to indicate to the Chair that the Standing Orders of this House and of Dáil Éireann require reviews at the end of every year after any legislation is passed irrespective of any requirement for a three-year review, as provided for here.

I am not letting that slip.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: That will be taken into account and the Minister of State is in agreement.

Question put and agreed to.

Sections 6 to 16, inclusive, agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Amendment No. 3 in the name of Senator McDowell has already been ruled out of order.

Amendment No. 3 not moved.

Section 17 agreed to.

Sections 18 to 20, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 21

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Amendments Nos. 4 to 6, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 28, to delete lines 8 to 39 and substitute the following:

“Flavour names and descriptions of nicotine inhaling products and nicotine consumption products

32F.(1) A person shall not sell by retail a nicotine inhaling product or nicotine consumption product with a flavour name or variant name unless that name consists exclusively of one or two words specified in the Schedule.

(2) Subject to subsection (3), the Minister may, by regulation, add flavour words to the Schedule or remove flavour words specified in the Schedule.

(3) When making regulations under subsection (2), the Minister shall, having regard to public health and to the objectives of reducing harm from tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products and prioritising the protection of health of children, take the following matters into account:

- (a) the need to limit flavour names that may disproportionately appeal to children;
- (b) evidence relating to flavours for nicotine inhaling products and smoking cessation, initiation and continuation of nicotine inhaling product use, or harm to health relating to nicotine inhaling products;
- (c) the prevalence of smoking of tobacco and use of nicotine inhaling products in both children and adults, and the demographics of children and adults who smoke tobacco or use nicotine inhaling products;
- (d) evidence of the effectiveness, and other impacts, of the restrictions concerning flavour names for nicotine inhaling products contained in this Act.

(4) A person who contravenes subsection (1) commits an offence.”.

I wish to speak to amendments Nos. 4 and 5. Before I go into the specific mechanics of these changes, I feel compelled to express a deep, fundamental scepticism about the entire architecture of section 21 as it is currently presented to us. When you read through the text of this Bill as initiated, it becomes increasingly clear that there are some glaring structural holes here that risk making the entire exercise completely ineffectual. It seems to me, looking at the wording of the proposed section 32F, that the entire scope of this regulation concerns product labelling alone, not the physical product itself. We are spending hours meticulously policing the commercial vocabulary, the text assets and the marketing names printed on the piece of cardboard. What does the Bill do to regulate the chemical liquid inside the tank?

If a manufacturer conforms to every single packaging rule, wraps its product in a plain, Government-prescribed drab box and legally labels the text as flavour name "unflavoured" or flavour name "tobacco", but fills that physical liquid with high-intensity synthetic sweeteners or strawberry or banana flavours, has the manufacturer committed an offence under the text? I do not see how it has. We are passing a law that polices the dictionary by leaving the chemical formulations completely untouched. You could argue that restricting the flavour names is basically restricting the flavours, as arguably you cannot sell a menthol-flavoured vape under a tobacco-flavoured label. However, companies could readily work around this by putting the actual flavour name in the description or the variant name.

If we look closely at the wording of subsection (5) on page 28, the Bill states that a variant name cannot imply a sensory characteristic or an unpermitted flavour. What happens if a retailer or manufacturer completely abandons abstract wordplay and hints? What if, instead of implying a taste, it prints a literal, overt statement of manufacturing fact? What if the box explicitly reads, "This product contains a 2% synthetic berry additive"? In Irish statutory interpretation, explicitly stating a fact is the exact opposite of implying it. Maybe I am missing something here. Perhaps the Government can point to something, a cross-cutting section, some other law or general precedent, that completely plugs this gap. If it can, I will happily stand corrected and withdraw my scepticism. As the text reads on the page today, it looks like a wide-open invitation for the industry to bypass the spirit of the law using neutral, literal declarations.

To be clear, I support the retention of flavours, as others have rightly stated in the Chamber today. These variations play a vital role in helping adult smokers permanently quit cigarettes. We must draw a line when it comes to predatory marketing. The combination of garish, bright packaging and a complete free-for-all in names such as candy twist or bubblegum bliss goes entirely too far. As other Members have accurately mentioned, these tactics make vapes uniquely alluring to children. My support for flavour availability does not mean we should tolerate a marketing landscape designed to attract minors.

That brings me directly to why I believe my amendments are so important if this labelling regime is to have any functional teeth at all. If we are legally bound to a framework that can only police commercial naming conventions, we must ensure that those naming rules are comprehensive enough to incentivise compliance. We cannot pass a flawed, toothless ledger. Amendment No. 4 completely rewrites section 32F by adopting the successful operational model recently enacted in New Zealand. Instead of embroiling our health officers in endless subjective courtroom debates over whether a vague marketing word implies a fruit or an oral sensation, amendment No. 4 creates a flat, absolute rule: a flavour name or a variant name can only consist of words drawn directly from a standardised, permitted list in the Schedule. If a word is not sitting inside the specific statutory table, it is automatically illegal to print it on the box. It encourages the industry to avoid semantic workarounds and instead to work within a frame that will limit the more absurd excesses of our flavour free-for-all. This is paired directly with amendment No. 5, which expands the Schedule table from the Minister's current, highly restrictive two-word cap into a comprehensive, plain-text list of basic botanical and standard fruit terms such as mint, menthol, apple, berry and citrus.

Capping the list at only "tobacco" and "unflavoured" is a dangerous policy that will instantly trigger a massive, uncontrollable black market in illicit sweet vapes smuggled from abroad,

completely blind to age verification. By expanding the list to basic, plain descriptors, we allow adult smokers a versatile path to cessation. Because the rest of the Bill's plain packaging rules apply, these products will be sold in ugly, uniform boxes, completely stripped of silly titles like bubblegum bliss or cloud 9.

Amendment No. 4 explicitly retains the mechanism for ministerial adjustments by regulation, empowering the Minister for Health to add or remove words from the Schedule as the public health evidence base evolves. This is a pragmatic compromise. It protects our children from predatory marketing language while protecting our regulatory framework from embarrassing industrial loopholes. I urge the Minister to accept these amendments. This one is a practical amendment, which the Minister of State may not even have thought of.

Senator Maria McCormack: I thank the Minister of State for coming in as we progress through this Bill. I support 99.9% of this Bill. It takes a fantastic, health-led approach. I support banning disposable vapes. I support 100% banning products, packaging and advertising designed to appeal to children. I have two children and I would not want to see them vaping. No one wants to see children vaping. I support getting rid of all the vape shops from our town centres and main streets. They have taken over, which is not fair on other businesses around them, and it is making vapes readily accessible to children.

However, I have concerns about banning every flavour. I will speak particularly to our amendment, to research I have done and to studies of what has been done in other countries. The Healthy Ireland survey in 2025 found that, among people who vape, 59% use fruit flavours, 25% use mint or menthol and 17% use tobacco flavours.

Why are we banning every flavour except tobacco? This is a Healthy Ireland survey that was done here. I will move on to the research I have done with other countries. That is why I am urging the Minister of State to look at accepting the amendment so it is not punishing adults for trying to protect our children.

A 2026 British survey found that fruit flavours were preferred by 60% of former smokers who are now vaping. Many adults are using vapes as an alternative to stop smoking. We know that vaping is not risk free but evidence indicates it is substantially less harmful than smoking so we need to understand whether removing the preferred flavours can lead to former smokers returning to flavours or having to purchase them on the black market. I compare it to an off-licence. It is like telling an off-licence that it can only sell Guinness because it is black and it cannot sell WKD because it is brightly coloured and it may appeal to children. We do not tackle underage drinking by telling adults what they can drink or what they are allowed to have. We can regulate who buys it, how it is advertised and how it is sold, but if we are looking more seriously at how we approach it here, we have to look at evidence from other countries. There are certain parts of this that are going too far.

Menthol and fruit flavours are very common, even if there was only one of each and they were in black plain packaging, behind closed doors or whatever it is that needs to happen. In Estonia, they introduced vape flavour restrictions in 2019. In 2020, they went back and then they subsequently allowed menthol flavour. In Denmark, they allow tobacco and menthol flavours. This demonstrates that tobacco-only is not the sole regulatory approach. The Netherlands introduced a tobacco-only flavour restriction in January 2024. A 2026 survey found that 47.2% of the surveyed people who continued vaping were using prohibited products

so they went to source them on the black market. It raises the question about enforcement, cross-border purchase and informal supply. Has the Minister of State looked at what other countries are doing? Estonia subsequently permitted menthol. Is this something that we can look at?

I do not want to delay this legislation coming in. I understand there are massive health benefits, but for the likes of a 50-year-old man or woman who managed to give up smoking successfully and is using this as a nicotine replacement therapy, we are now going to tell them that they must only smoke tobacco flavour or else they will not get any other flavours ever again.

Have we looked at plain packaging for vape products, locked cabinets, behind doors, as I said, and no colourful displays? None of those things are needed and they appeal to children. An adult does not care about what colour packages they are coming in. A lot of people are vaping for cost reasons and then other people are doing it for health reasons.

The important points I need answered are as follows. The Irish proposal permits tobacco flavoured and unflavoured vape. The strongest argument is that if we are banning all the flavours of vapes, where are we going to end up with this legislation? Are we going to have to revisit it in a year's time because we see the detrimental impact it has? If we want to continue with a health-led approach, we do not want to see ex-smokers having to return to smoking. We also want to see that we are not punishing adults. If adults choose to drink, they choose to smoke or they choose to vape, we have to be able to provide that they have an option to do it. I would like to see an approach where vape products in menthol flavour and fruit flavour would be put behind closed doors, but let us not punish adults who are choosing to do this for health reasons.

Senator Joanne Collins: The Minister of State will know my stance on this. I do not agree with it. I would be of the exact same view as Senator McCormack. This Bill is overreaching. It is turning towards the nanny-state policy.

The Minister of State keeps mentioning children. Nobody wants kids to vape or to smoke, to do drugs or to drink alcohol, but you are going to punish every single person that uses a vape, whether to give up cigarettes or because they are over the age of 18 and they figure they have the legal right, they are over 18, they can use a vape if they want, and they can use it with a flavour in it. It took nearly 20 years from vapes coming out to bring in a Bill to say that under-18s should not have them, which I thought was complete madness. I assumed, because there was nicotine, under-18s should not have them, but they were being sold. It is as if the next Bill that comes along is going to have to be for a one-flavour alcohol, because it is not fair to say to somebody who is vaping that there is one flavour and that is it, that if they do not like it, they do not get it. I do not see why you could not do it with alcohol as well. I do not see why you could not do it with cigarettes.

Cigarettes have been around for so many years, well before my time. The Minister of State will know exactly, and can probably pinpoint, when we realised that cigarettes were not good for health. Never once did this State say that it would ban cigarettes or it would ban every single brand of cigarettes except for Silk Cut Ultra because it has the least amount of damage in it, apparently. There was never anything like that. The most the Government did was introduce the smoking ban in public areas, in pubs and restaurants, which I completely agree

with. There is nothing worse than being a non-smoker and being stuck inside in that smell, with it on your clothes or the health effects of passive smoking. The Government also changed the packaging. However, none of that is being done for vapes. There is so much money being made on cigarettes. In 2025, there was €841.7 million in tax on cigarettes, and the Government is estimating €17 million a year on vapes. It is as if the State does not care if people go back on cigarettes, and that is what is going to happen. I have heard from so many people. With the Dutch model that Senator McCormack mentioned, two years in they found that youth vaping more than doubled after the ban.

The Minister of State will push this through. We do not have a hope in hell of stopping it but I want it on the record when I stood up and told her so, and she can look back and see exactly when I told her so because that is what is going to happen. Nobody is listening. The Minister of State is not listening to any of the vaping companies. She is not listening to any of the retailers. The Minister of State is not listening to the people who use vaping. I do not mean that the Minister of State is not listening to the children because they should not be getting them in the first place. Shame on any retailer who sells to under-18s, the same way they should not sell alcohol to under-18s. This is a collective punishment and it is not right. I see it sometimes in schools where one student is misbehaving and the whole class gets punished. That is exactly what is happening with this Bill because the Minister of State is taking the option away from people who gave up cigarettes. They will not be able to vape. They will go back on cigarettes.

I will be adding to that tax of €841.7 million because, when the flavours go, I will not be vaping tobacco flavour because I tried that at the start. I will go back on cigarettes because I enjoyed smoking when I smoked and I am not going to lie about it. I only gave them up because of the cost, but if I cannot get something that is cheaper, I will have to go back to something. It sounds awful, but it never affected my health. I enjoyed smoking and I am not going to pretend, stand up here and say I did not, or pretend to be holier than thou and I am not going to do something I am not supposed to do, but I was never told I was not allowed to smoke because it was not illegal. It was not banned, it was never restricted and so I do not understand why the flavours are the big bugbear.

There is still never going to be a mention of an outright ban on cigarettes. Eventually, the Government will look at phasing it out, but it is 100 years, or probably more, since cigarettes were around and before that there was something else that was bad for your health. If it will take that long to bring a phasing out of cigarettes, how is it only taking this length to get rid of the flavoured vapes? I will put it down to money. I think it is that the Government is not getting enough tax on it. It is very unfair to do something because of tax revenue.

Senator Teresa Costello: I listened to what Senator Collins said. I respect her decisions and that she wants to smoke, but I understand why the flavours are being restricted. You only have to drive past kids going to school and they are vaping.

The health implications are huge. Senator Collins spoke about tax and getting the tax income but what are we paying in our health service for the damage done because of cigarettes and vapes? What is that costing the State? It is costing a huge amount of money. The misery and the pain people go through with a lung cancer diagnosis is horrific. I would love it if nobody smoked. It is a horrible thing to see. I understand that people have the habit and that it is their

decision. I respect that but if there is any way we can stop younger people from developing an addiction to it, and if that means removing the flavours, then I am all for it. I actually do not like the smell of vapes. I can get the smell of a vape a mile away and I do not like that kind of smell. I empathise with the Senator because I would probably be the same if somebody told me to give up my gin and tonic. I get what Senator Collins is saying but I do not think she appreciates the impact the smoking ban had. The Senator kind of brushed over that when she was talking. I think the smoking ban was one of the best things ever brought in to our country, without a shadow of a doubt. When I worked in a pub around that time, people were so resistant to it. There was a huge amount of resistance to it but it was one of the best decisions ever made for Ireland. I keep going back to costs. That ban saved us an awful lot of money. A lot of people gave up cigarettes at that point and cigarettes became quite unfashionable. Vapes, however, are fashionable and they are everywhere. They have all got them. It is just unnecessary for kids to be doing it. I understand that Senator Collins is trying to stop smoking and move on to them, but do we really know the full health implications of vapes, even now? I support the removal of the flavours but then I look at the Senator in the knowledge that I do not vape, so I respect her for standing up and voicing her opinion.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank Senator Keogan and our Sinn Féin Senators for amendments Nos. 4 to 6, inclusive. I will take them together. The first piece, which we have spoken about, is the flavours. Research from other countries has shown that existing users respond to flavour restrictions in different ways. We have been monitoring this. These ways include switching to permitted flavours; sourcing flavoured e-liquids elsewhere; quitting vaping; quitting all nicotine products, including tobacco; or switching to other nicotine products, including tobacco. The most relevant evidence for Ireland comes from the Netherlands, which found that the ban on all flavours except tobacco led to overall decreases in both vaping and smoking. This is working with other countries.

There are two amendments that seek to increase the range of flavours in the Schedule. Amendment No. 6 refers to menthol. We had this amendment in the Dáil. I did not accept it there and I will not accept it here. The amendment was brought in there as well. I appreciate that the intention behind the proposal is to ensure that we do not discourage smokers who wish to switch from cigarettes or tobacco to these products. Tobacco flavour and unflavoured are the flavours we have chosen because they are the least likely to appeal to our younger people. We are going by the data and working from all the different surveys. The data from Healthy Ireland shows that tobacco is the least popular flavour among 15- to 24-year-olds but the most popular for those over the age of 45. This data makes it clear that tobacco flavour is more important for our adults, some of whom smoke or used to smoke, but it is not likely to attract our younger people. The position is different with menthol. Our Healthy Ireland survey data shows us that it is the second most popular flavour category from ages 15 to 24 years, with one in four purchasing them. Again, apologies to the Senator but I cannot accept that.

We are looking at a tobacco-free generation. Tobacco is a product that causes lots of illnesses. It causes almost 100 deaths and 1,000 hospitalisations every week in Ireland so there is no age at which it becomes safe to consume tobacco. I really believe that this is what we are trying to get out here today. This is what we are saying. It does not matter how old you are; it is not good for your health. We are health led. Our national tobacco control policy for a tobacco-free Ireland is currently being reviewed. We are reviewing that as it is. One of the

central goals would be to set out a pathway to end tobacco-related harm in Ireland. My officials and I are considering all measures to fulfil this objective, including a generational ban. That is the other one too.

Senator Keogan brought up a lot of the flavours. Our Bill restricts flavours by controlling the flavour names that are used. This is the most efficient approach to enforcement. Other countries have regulated the ingredients of vaping liquids or other flavours. Again, it is all down to experience.

We are very mindful of people who smoke. We are not forgetting people who smoke. This law is taking place. We are looking at the free stop-smoking medicine, which we have spoken about, and the nicotine replacement therapy for anyone who wants to use it. There is also the free We Can Quit programme to help people to stop. Flavours are banned in cigarettes. We do not have flavoured cigarettes.

I can see the commitment from all the Senators here today. They understand it is so important now with the pouches, the colours, the flavours and the packaging that we get this Bill enacted as soon as possible. I will not be accepting amendments Nos. 4 to 6, inclusive. I thank all the Senators for their work on this. It is very important that we try to move this Bill as soon as possible.

Senator Shane Curley: I thank the Minister of State. Before we move on, I welcome the guests of Senator Eileen Lynch from the Macroom Active Retirement Association. You are all very welcome to the Seanad.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I wish to comment on the Minister of State's remarks. If they fill the product - the physical liquid - with synthetic sweeteners such as strawberry or banana flavours, will they have committed an offence under the text of this legislation? If companies can readily work around this by putting an actual flavour name in the description or in the variant rule, will they have broken the legislation?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: My understanding is that they will have broken the law. There is no EU law or regulations yet, but it is something we are looking at. I need to check. Again, this is about enforcement and how we do this. It is something I will definitely come back to the Senator on. There is no EU law or regulation on ingredients-----

Senator Sharon Keogan: Very simply, this legislation is basically policing the labelling of the product, not the actual product itself. Therefore, what is in the tank can be whatever - it can be flavoured - but the labelling could say something different.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: That is just other jurisdictions. Remember, we are separate here. At the end of the day it is like online-----

Senator Sharon Keogan: We are not separate. This is our legislation.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Yes, but with what we are doing here it is important that we do not break any rules or regulations, again through enforcement. This Bill is just about selling pouches or other products to under 18s. That is it. What the Senator is asking me-----

Senator Sharon Keogan: I get that but I honestly believe-----

4 o'clock

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: -----is something that will have to be addressed through other-----

Senator Sharon Keogan: I believe we will be revisiting this because the manufacturers out there will look at every trick in the book to keep people addicted to these products.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: It is a worry to think that we are saying that these are bad for you and that they are looking at this. This would be the worry from our point of view as legislators. I compliment the retailers. Senator McDowell spoke about them in his amendments. The bulk of the retailers are very good, in fairness. What I am saying is-----

Senator Sharon Keogan: I am not worried about the retailers; I am worried about the manufacturers.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I know but that is what we are regulating.

Senator Sharon Keogan: It is the manufacturers.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): I will let Senator Keogan back in but can we allow the Minister of State to finish first?

Senator Sharon Keogan: I am sorry. I appreciate what the Minister of State has said, but I am not worried about the retailers. I am worried about the manufacturers. This is really what I am worried about. What it says on the label is one thing, but what is actually in the product itself is another. The Minister of State is legislating for the boxes and the packaging, but not for what is actually in the product. Is this correct?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: That is something totally different. I know what Senator Keogan is saying but why would a manufacturer want to put something different on the box? Why would they do that?

Senator Sharon Keogan: To sell it.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The EU is looking at addressing flavours and ingredients. We are working with our EU counterparts. As I said, our legislation is about health and well-being and making sure that young people are not able to go into a shop and buy pouches or other similar products. Unfortunately, we will have to work with our EU

counterparts on this. We are very well ahead of other EU counterparts on pouches and vaping. I see what Senator Keogan is saying but this is an EU law matter and not part of the remit of the Bill. However, I will absolutely look into it for her. I would not like to think that there is inaccurate labelling.

Senator Teresa Costello: I understand Senator Keogan's point. The packaging aspect is very important because it is the packaging that attracts younger people to the product. I would not be dismissive of the strong focus on packaging and flavouring because these are what attract younger people. The nicotine is in the product itself and, having been taken in by the flavour and the packaging, people become addicted. It is imperative that this proposal is passed today. Handing out nicotine products for free at festivals is deplorable and is aimed at young people. I have had it up to here with products that are damaging to young people being aimed at them. I have been raising the issue of nitrous oxide since 2020. It is only in the past year or so that we have come to understand the drastic impact on health that nitrous oxide abuse has. Again, the packaging is designed to appeal to people aged 18 and under. It looks like a fun product to try. As a non-smoker, I look at vapes and think they seem quite harmless and pretty and not as dangerous to health as they are. I fully understand where Senator Keogan is coming from on the harmful product being sold but I do think it is the packaging of the product is what attracts people.

Senator Joanne Collins: I am disappointed that the Minister of State is not accepting the amendment, even just to open the door to flavours. I would like to think that down the line, when this goes belly up, the Minister of State would open the door and add in some flavours. It is great for those aged over 45 who like tobacco flavour but it is unfortunate for those aged under 45 who do not. I am sure they will find something else, perhaps from outside the State. I am sure they will figure it out. Will the Minister of State give us a timeline? I am thinking not only of people who will bulk buy and stock up on flavours but also of vape shop owners and the staff they employ with regard to giving them some idea as to how long they will be employed. This will shut down a lot of businesses. By no means am I saying that I feel more sorry for one sector than another but it will close an awful lot of shops. Will the Minister of State give us a timeline as to when this will be finalised and fully enacted? I am disappointed that the entire measure is being centred on not selling to kids when it is already against the law to sell to kids. It is being dealt with wrongly, using the idea of not getting kids vaping as a mask. There is already a law whereby they should not be vaping. Having a flavour should not make a difference.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Senator Keogan's amendment does not regulate ingredients. This was not part of the amendment so when she brought up the ingredients, I was thinking that it was not part of the amendment. The Bill has nothing to do with the ingredients. We are working with our EU counterparts and expect some updates on ingredients from the EU by December. I will know more for Senator Keogan then. I thank her for raising the issue of ingredients because it is something we know we need to address.

On the timing, the main purpose of passing the Bill is to have the restrictions on the pouches and other products quite quickly. Within a few weeks we could have a prohibition on selling pouches or other products to those aged under 18, which is very important. The Minister for

Health will then decide on a lead-in period of perhaps six or 12 months. There is no question but that there will be a lead-in period. The main thing is to deal with the pouches and other products first, as quickly as possible, and have a legislative measure to prohibit selling them. There will be a lead-in period for the other measures and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, will sign off on this. I will come back to the Senators on this but it will be at least a few months, if not longer.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 21 agreed to.

Sections 22 to 29, inclusive, agreed to.

SCHEDULE

Senator Sharon Keogan: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 34, to delete lines 2 to 8 and substitute the following:

SCHEDULE

PERMITTED FLAVOUR WORDS FOR NICOTINE INHALING PRODUCTS AND NICOTINE CONSUMPTION PRODUCTS

Tobacco	
Unflavoured	
Mint	
Menthol	
Apple	
Banana	
Berry	
Cherry	
Citrus	
Coconut	
Grape	
Lemon	
Lime	
Mango	
Melon	

Amendment put and declared lost.

Senator Joanne Collins: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 34, between lines 5 and 6, to insert the following:

Menthol	
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Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 7; Níl, 28.	
Tá	Níl
Collins, Joanne.	Ahearn, Garret.
Craughwell, Gerard P.	Blaney, Niall.
Keogan, Sharon.	Boyle, Manus.
McCarthy, Aubrey.	Brady, Paraic.
McCormack, Maria.	Byrne, Cathal.
McDowell, Michael.	Byrne, Maria.
Murphy, Conor.	Casey, Pat.
	Comyn, Alison.
	Costello, Teresa.
	Crowe, Ollie.
	Curley, Shane.
	Daly, Paul.
	Davitt, Aidan.
	Duffy, Mark.
	Fitzpatrick, Mary.
	Flaherty, Joe.
	Goldsboro, Imelda.
	Harmon, Laura.
	Kelleher, Garret.
	Kennelly, Mike.
	Lynch, Eileen.
	Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.
	Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.
	O'Donovan, Noel.
	O'Reilly, Joe.
	Ryan, Dee.
	Scahill, Gareth.
	Stephenson, Patricia.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Joanne Collins and Maria McCormack; Níl, Senators Cathal Byrne and Paul Daly.

Amendment declared lost.

Schedule agreed to.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported without amendment.

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

Senator Garret Ahearn: Now.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Bill received for final consideration.

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

Senator Garret Ahearn: Now.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

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

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.22 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.32 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.22 p.m. and resumed at 4.32 p.m.

Fuel Costs: Motion

An Cathaoirleach: The time limit for the combined speeches of the proposer and seconder shall not exceed 16 minutes. All other Senators will have six minutes. I call on Senator McCormack to move the motion.

Senator Maria McCormack: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

notes that:

- workers and families continue to face severe cost-of-living pressures, with rising petrol, diesel and home heating costs placing an enormous strain on household finances;
- petrol and diesel prices have reached over €2 per litre in parts of the State, placing significant additional costs on workers, families, commuters and small businesses;
- hundreds of thousands of workers and families, particularly in rural Ireland, depend on their cars for work, education, childcare and essential everyday journeys, with limited or no access to reliable public transport alternatives;
- approximately 700,000 households rely on home heating oil, with the cost of filling a home heating oil tank reaching as much as €1,600;

- Budget 2027 extended existing temporary reductions in excise duty of 27 cent per litre on petrol and 32 cent per litre on diesel until the end of February 2027 but failed to introduce any further reduction in the price of fuel at the pumps;
- the Government intends to begin restoring these excise duties from February 2027, with full restoration by the end of June 2027, exposing motorists to further increases in fuel costs;
- Budget 2027 reduced carbon tax on home heating oil from €63.50 to €48.50 per tonne of carbon dioxide, delivering an estimated saving of €43 on a 1,000-litre fill, while families continue to face substantial heating bills;
- despite the strength of the State's finances, Budget 2027 failed to deliver the level of immediate relief required by households struggling with the cost of fuel and home heating;
- Sinn Féin proposed an additional 10 cent per litre reduction in petrol and diesel prices, the removal of carbon tax from home heating oil, and a reduction in the price of green diesel at the pumps to support sectors such as agriculture and construction;
- people who rely on the fuel allowance will be worse off this winter despite the €5 increase due to the fact that the fuel allowance season will be short this winter;
- despite commitments from the Tánaiste on budget day that there will be no increase at the pumps this winter, the reintroduction of the National Oil Reserves Agency levy at the end of December means that people will face higher prices this winter;

recognises that:

- access to affordable transport and home heating is essential to the daily lives of workers, families, older people and communities across the State;
- high fuel costs disproportionately impact rural households, lower-income workers, people with disabilities and those who have no realistic alternative to private transport;
- temporary extensions of existing fuel tax reductions provide some relief but do not address the immediate financial pressures caused by persistently high fuel prices;
- the transition to cleaner and more sustainable energy must be fair and must not leave workers and families carrying unaffordable costs;

calls on the Government to:

- introduce an immediate additional 10 cent per litre reduction in the price of petrol and diesel through further reductions in excise duty;
- commit to maintaining existing reductions in petrol and diesel excise duty and not proceeding with their planned restoration while fuel prices remain exceptionally high;
- remove the carbon tax from home heating oil to provide further immediate relief to households facing substantial heating bills;
- introduce additional targeted supports for households experiencing fuel poverty, particularly older people, low-income families and those dependent on home heating oil;

- provide the maximum reductions in the cost of agricultural diesel and support measures for hauliers, farmers and other sectors particularly exposed to high fuel costs;
- publish an assessment of the impact of high fuel prices on workers, families, rural communities and small businesses, together with proposals for further targeted relief; and
- develop a long-term strategy to reduce household dependence on expensive fossil fuels through investment in affordable public transport, home energy upgrades and renewable energy, while ensuring that workers and families are protected from excessive costs during the transition.

An Cathaoirleach: Is the Senator sharing time with Senator Collins?

Senator Maria McCormack: I am.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Maria McCormack: We have brought this Sinn Féin motion to the Seanad because we recognise the frustration for families and workers. They know that the budget two weeks ago did not do anything to help with the costs of petrol, diesel, gas, electricity bills or home heating oil. Petrol, diesel and home heating oil costs are placing an enormous strain on household finances. Petrol and diesel have reached well over €2 per litre in some places. Ordinary people, particularly in rural Ireland, depend on their cars for work, education, childcare and everyday essential journeys, with limited or no access to reliable public transport alternatives. Approximately 700,000 households rely on home heating oil, with the cost of filling a home heating oil tank reaching as high as €1,600.

This motion calls for a number of things the Government could do to ease the burden as the cost-of-living crisis continues. I am not happy with the amendment put forward that basically wipes out the full motion we have put forward but I am still going to speak to the motion we have put forward. One of the measures in our motion would have introduced an immediate additional 10 cent per litre reduction in the price of petrol and diesel through further reductions in excise duty. Another measure we are calling for is to remove all carbon tax from home heating oil to provide further immediate relief to households facing substantial heating bills - basic heating bills.

This Government told us its budget is about making work pay. I ask the Minister of State one very simple question: how is work supposed to pay when people can barely afford the diesel to get there? Recently, a good friend of mine who is a nurse sent me a picture at the petrol station with a photograph of the pump. She had just filled her car and the diesel cost €138. The caption under it read, “Beans on toast for me for the next month.” That is €138 to fill her tank. I looked at that photograph and thought this is exactly what is wrong with the cost-of living in this country. Here is a woman who goes out to work, looks after sick people, contributes to our health service and pays her taxes. Before she can even earn a day’s wages, she has to find money to get to work. This is what the Government is failing to see, the struggles people are under. This woman is not driving around for the fun of it or living some extravagant lifestyle; she is going to work. That €138 has to come out of the same wages that pay her mortgage, electricity, groceries and everything else, and she is not alone. There are

thousands of nurses, healthcare assistants, carers, factory workers, retail workers and tradespeople facing the exact same thing. We saw them on our streets last week. It is shameful how the Government is responding to this.

I come from County Laois and I can tell the Minister of State that, for many people living in rural Ireland, a car is not a luxury, it is a lifeline. People need a car to get to work, bring their children to school, get to hospital appointments and do the weekly shop. They do not have a bus outside the door like they do in the big cities, we do not have a train that gets us to work, and we certainly do not all have the option of leaving the car at home.

When the Government representatives talk about making work pay, I want them to remember my friend, the nurse, standing at that diesel pump, putting €138 into her car and having that disappear from her bank account. Before anyone across this House criticises this motion, I want them to think of my friend, who is a nurse, putting €138 into her car. How is she supposed to make work pay? That is the reality of working life for so many people.

There is something else that happened in the budget that I am particularly angry about: the fuel allowance. I want people listening to understand exactly what happened here. On budget day, the Government proudly announced a whopping €5 increase in the weekly fuel allowance - €5 extra a week. I am sure there were pensioners and families watching at home thinking at least that is something. However, what the Government did not talk about is that, last season, the fuel allowance was extended by four weeks. People received €1,216 in total. Under this new budget, the weekly rate goes from €38 to €43 - sounds like an increase, does it not? - but the payment goes back to 28 weeks. You really tricked the people, but they see it. Minus those four weeks, people will now receive €1,204. You actually screwed the people by trying to tell them you were increasing the allowance by €5 but you cut the four weeks off. That is €12 less than they got last time. The Government will tell us that last year's four-week extension was temporary. Fine, but that does not change the reality for the person trying to heat their home, and things have not got better since last year, they have got worse. You cannot heat your home with a headline, and that is what the Government was trying to do. You cannot fill an oil tank with a budget announcement, and you certainly cannot tell people they are getting more money when the total going into their pocket is actually less than they received last year.

We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in our society who receive the fuel allowance.

They include older people living alone, people with disabilities, families already struggling to put food on the table and people who are watching the oil in their tank drop and are genuinely frightened about how they will afford to fill it again. We have approximately 700,000 households depending on home heating oil. The Government tells us that it has reduced carbon tax on home heating oil, with an estimated saving of €43 on 1,000 litres. Does the Minister of State know how much it is to fill a tank in Laois at the moment? It costs €1,600. Does he really think that getting €43 off that will make any difference to an elderly couple or someone living with a disability? What about the €5 increase they were tricked into thinking they were getting but they are not getting because the Government has really taken it away from them?

There is then the price at the pumps. The Government has extended the existing excise reductions until February but it has refused to deliver the additional ten cent per litre reduction that Sinn Féin proposed. From February, those existing reductions are due to start being

reversed. By the end of June, the Government plans to have restored them fully. What happens then? What happens to my friend who is already paying €138 to fill her car? What happens to the farmer trying to keep the machinery running, the haulier transporting our goods, the small business owner who depends on a van? Let us not forget the reduced rate of the National Oil Reserves Authority, NORA, levy that is due to expire at the end of December. The Government needs to explain how that fits with its assurances about protecting motorists from further increases in winter because it does not make sense.

I fully support moving towards cleaner energy but the transition has to be fair to the people who live here. You cannot tell a family in rural Laois to stop driving when there is no reliable public transport available to them. It is different when you are in a big city but people forget about us in rural Ireland where things are very different. You cannot tell a pensioner to spend thousands of euro upgrading their heating system when they can barely afford to put oil in the tank that they already have. We need investment in public transport, home energy upgrades and renewable energy before we think of doing these things.

People need help now. That is why we have moved this motion. It is about something very simple, namely, giving ordinary people some breathing space by reducing fuel costs at the pumps and taking the carbon tax off home heating oil so that people do not get sick in their homes this winter and can actually afford to heat their houses. It is about supporting farmers, hauliers and working families and making sure that older people can heat their homes without fear.

The Government said that this budget was about making work pay. Work should do more than just about pay the bills. People should be able to work hard, provide for their families and have something left over. That is something very few people living in this country can do any more. Older people should be able to heat their homes without worrying about what they will have to sacrifice to pay for it. People should not have to make sacrifices in order to survive. We need to stop announcing increases that leave people with less and stop telling families how well the economy is doing when they cannot see any prosperity in their own bank accounts. We need to start giving people the relief they actually need.

I am so angry with how the budget has left people. I was only talking with my elderly aunt and trying to explain the budget to her. I was explaining the disability payment of €500 but because she turned 66 in July and moved onto the pension, she will not get this disability payment. The Government believes that when you have a disability in Ireland, it disappears when you turn 66. There is all this tricking that has gone on out there on the people and it is just not fair. I am not happy with the proposed amendment. We will be opposing it. I would like some serious, proper discussions about how we can help the likes of my friend who is a nurse putting €138 of fuel in her car and how she is supposed to sustain life in Ireland like this? Will she go to Canada like my other friends?

Senator Joanne Collins: I completely echo everything Senator McCormack has said. The cost is scandalous at the moment. It is not just the cost of home heating oil, but also the cost of petrol and diesel on top of the everyday costs that everybody has, particularly someone from rural Ireland. The cost of groceries, electricity and everything else has gone up. On top of that, you get smacked with going to the pump and having to put that amount of money into your car, truck or van. It is scandalous.

We have moved motion, which makes very reasonable calls on the Government. They include further reductions in the excise duty on petrol and diesel and removing carbon tax on home heating oil, given that it is a punitive tax. These people have no choice but to put home heating oil in their homes. Their homes were built with boiler systems and cannot be upgraded to heat pumps because they are not insulated or airtight enough. It will cost an absolute fortune in electricity if they change from boilers right now. There is so much that has to be done to those houses to be able to move away from home heating oil.

Those people are being punished every single day by having to pay that much money. It is the carbon tax that is raising it. The Government could very easily take the carbon tax off the heating oil. We have been calling for that since February, but until the budget's €43, not one cent came off home heating oil. When the €43 came off, the cost went up again two days later by €150. That €43 was swallowed up within two days.

We looked for the maximum reduction in agricultural diesel. This is huge. When it comes to agricultural diesel, you are looking at taxing the production of food. When you tax the production of food, that eventually lands on the customer. The farmer cannot absorb every bit of that cost. The contractor cannot absorb all of that cost. It eventually goes into the supermarket and it is the customer paying for it, pushing up the cost of food. This is hitting every single house.

Affordable public transport was another request. That is not a big ask. Surely, affordable public transport should be in the programme for Government. We have public transport in County Limerick and I am trying to get a route extended by one stop to help college students go from County Limerick down to Munster Technological University, MTU, in Kerry. I have not got a reply yet. Students from Newcastle West actually dropped out of college last year because they could not get public transport and could not afford to drive. The Government is not helping the transition away from cars and fossil fuels. It is hindering it and stopping people from making this transition, given that there is not public transport.

On home heating upgrades, the Government talks about the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grants. Yes, some of them are great. If you are on a certain social welfare payment, they are fantastic. However, I know someone who is not on a social welfare payment and is getting insulation in their house. It costing them €24,000. They are getting a grant of €6,000. Where do they come up with the other money? It is great if they can afford it, but most families cannot afford to take out a loan. The bank would laugh at them. Every penny they make is literally going on living. They cannot do anything outside of their everyday. It is work, home, heat their home, put diesel in their car, back to work and home. Nobody is getting to properly live in this country.

I find the amendment and its requests of the Government quite pathetic. It says that the Government "will continue to keep the situation under review" and "will continue to respond in a way that protects those most vulnerable". What is protecting the most vulnerable? is it the fuel allowance that the Government cut by weeks? The fuel allowance has barriers in the way because if you are not on certain social welfare payments, you do not get it. If there is a husband or wife out working and the other parent stays at home, they are staying at home because they cannot afford to go to work, given that childcare is too expensive. They are not on a social welfare payment, so they do not get the fuel allowance. They are still low income

but they do not get it because they are not on social welfare. There are deterrents everywhere when it comes to any bit of protection against the cost of fuel.

The amendment says that the Government "remains deeply concerned about the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and Gulf". Ireland is putting tax on petrol and diesel. I know that the Government cannot bring the price of the barrel down but it can reduce the taxes on it. The Government cannot keep saying that the situation in the Middle East is doing this. The Government of Ireland is doing it. The Government is putting tax on petrol and diesel. Every time the price of petrol and diesel goes up at the pump, the Government makes more money. The Government can take five cent off it and then, when it goes up by 15 cent, it gets more money. I cannot understand why the Government does not see this. I cannot understand how its members offices are not filled with people. I am around a lot of hauliers and every single one of them tells me that there are businesses going out of business. There are farmers who cannot afford to work the land. They cannot afford to produce food. There are contractors selling their machinery, yet the Government is sitting on its hands. I am sorry but what was given in the budget was sweet "F" all. It was nothing compared to what people needed. However, the Government gave something to the banks and private developers, but it did not give it to the people. The Government never gives it to the people. They just have to suffer on.

Let them pay the taxes so the banks can have a lower rate and no wealth tax is being put on the elite. The problem is the Government surrounds itself with the elite and does not speak to the people this is affecting. It does not see the damage that is being caused in this country every single day. Shame on the Senators with that amendment.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all the words after "That Seanad Éireann:" and substitute it with the following:

"recognises that the Government:

- remains deeply concerned about the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and Gulf and recognises that de-escalation will have the single greatest impact on reducing prices on home heating oil and other oil-based fuel products;
- continues to monitor increased energy prices that are felt across Europe and the globe;
- fully understands the pressures on households that have arisen due to rising petrol, diesel, and home heating costs and has continuously acted to allay these pressures;
- notes that successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with cost-of-living pressures and re-affirms that energy affordability is a priority for this Government;
- remains committed to decarbonising our society, increasing investment in renewable energy sources and recycling carbon tax revenues to protect those most vulnerable to fuel poverty through targeted welfare interventions;

- recognises Ireland's obligations in respect of EU legislation pertaining to fossil fuel taxation and that abolition of the carbon tax may result in Ireland losing a derogation under European law;
- recognises Ireland's obligations in respect of the EU Energy Taxation Directive;
- continues to use the funding from carbon tax to help farmers, businesses and households with increased energy prices;
- continues to monitor the economic impacts carefully, having already taken actions to mitigate energy increases, and provide certainty for families and businesses against the backdrop of global instability;
- continues to invest in retrofitting, boiler scrappage, wind energy and many other measures to help alleviate costs in the medium term;

notes that:

- the Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the EU per head of capita, amounting to over €1.7 billion in supports from March 2026 to June 2027 to assist households and businesses;
- excise reductions have been extended until end February 2027 thereby maintaining, until then, a 30 cent per litre reduction in diesel and 25 cent per litre reduction in petrol;
- Budgets 2026 and 2027 have expanded fuel allowance payments to 50,000 more households and increased the weekly payment;
- the trajectory of the carbon tax has been altered to ease pressure on households with the rate on home heating oil and gas reduced and paused for the lifetime of the Government;
- a series of new schemes have been developed to help people make the transition away from fossil fuels;

confirms that the Government:

- will continue to keep the situation under review in the time ahead; and
- will continue to respond in a way that protects those most vulnerable to fuel poverty."

We could nearly call Private Members' motions from Sinn Féin the Marvel section of the Seanad. It is almost CGI economics at this stage because they are literally making it up as they go along. It is highly disrespectful. Nothing is grounded in facts. I am going to take issue with all of it. The Senators said they made respectful asks but they asked for nothing respectfully. They came in here and threw out every slur and every argument against the Government. The most hurtful thing of all is that they have set themselves up as the experts on fuel. In fairness, they have tradition in fuel. They laundered fuel for years. They terrorised the Border - the Senator need not smirk. They terrorised this country; small retailers like my family were terrorised.

Senator Pauline Tully: Chairperson, can we stick to the motion, please?

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am accepting the Senator's capacity to speak to the fuel issue but what is the most hurtful of all-----

Senator Pauline Tully: On a point of order, he is not discussing the motion.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am discussing the motion.

Senator Pauline Tully: You are not.

Senator Joanne Collins: He is not. He does this every single time he comes in here. He is not discussing the motion.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Same as Sinn Féin came in with a diatribe about the Government, I am going to give it.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Flaherty without interruption, unless Senators want to use the Standing Orders.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I accept the Sinn Féin Senators' bona fides to speak about fuel but I cannot accept that they move a motion this week, the anniversary of the week that Paul Quinn was battered to death. That was 20 years ago yesterday by the Senators' cohorts, the fuel smugglers who are still associated and affiliated with their party. Even to this day they will not put their hands up and say what happened to that man, beaten mercilessly to death.

Senator Pauline Tully: On a point of order, that is untrue. He should withdraw his comments now.

Senator Joe Flaherty: There is nothing to withdraw.

Senator Pauline Tully: Yes, there is.

Senator Joe Flaherty: It is a statement of fact that young man was murdered and murdered in your heartland.

Senator Pauline Tully: Are you accusing Sinn Féin of being involved in that murder?

Senator Joe Flaherty: Murdered in Sinn Féin's heartland and they know he was murdered.

Senator Pauline Tully: That is a very serious allegation.

Senator Joe Flaherty: You know he was murdered.

Senator Pauline Tully: Are you accusing Sinn Féin?

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am taking nothing back. It is a statement of fact. The audacity of the Senators to mention fuel in the week of his 20th anniversary.

Senator Pauline Tully: Oh, my God.

Senator Joe Flaherty: What about his family? What is he going to think of the Senators this week? And they set themselves up as the experts in fuel. They know a lot about fuel, all right, and they know an awful lot about terrorising.

Senator Pauline Tully: Would the Senator speak to the motion? For God's sake.

Senator Joe Flaherty: They tell us we are the demons and we are the people who are wrong but we are not. We can stand proudly over our track record and what we did. We do not hide behind anything as Sinn Féin does.

Senator Pauline Tully: Yeah, destroying the country.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Sinn Féin hides behind everything and tries to pull out a mask. Its position is slipping as the Opposition party. Its Members see everybody eating away at them and they are panicking. They are reaching out now to populism and anything that will help them regain ground.

Senator Pauline Tully: That is why Fianna Fáil went into government with Fine Gael. Your popularity is slipping too.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Flaherty without interruption, please.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Sinn Féin has no concept whatsoever of global commodity markets. It is oblivious to them and does not take any account of them at all. The Senators fail to recognise that the driving forces of home heating oil price increases are global in nature and accordingly it is not possible for us or any nation in Europe or elsewhere to fully absorb the impact of fuel increases. Sinn Féin also fails to take into account the obligations set out in EU legislation. I can accept why it does not because it did not believe in the EU for a long time and did not want it.

Senator Joanne Collins: If other EU countries can go against the regulations then we can do it.

Senator Joe Flaherty: It was only when those in Sinn Féin realised the benefits it was giving to Ireland that suddenly they decided the EU is great and they would join it. For a long time they were going around in their woolly hats and their balaclavas, saying Europe is the big bad enemy. It was not and they knew well, but they have accepted it now. However, I can see that they still do not want to take account of some of their legislation.

Senator Pauline Tully: He is such a gobshite.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am not a gobshite. Chair, did you hear that? Did you hear what she called me?

Senator Pauline Tully: That is a fact.

An Cathaoirleach: As Senators are aware, the Standing Orders only allow interruption when the Senator in possession allows it. I ask Senators to respect the Standing Orders and allow the Senator in possession-----

Senator Joanne Collins: He is supposed to speak to the motion.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am speaking to the motion, very eloquently and very competently.

Senator Joanne Collins: He is spending his time bashing Sinn Féin. It shows what he thinks of the public.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am not reaching out to populism or making a diatribe as Sinn Féin usually does. The problem is that the Senators are getting lessons in facts.

An Cathaoirleach: Senators are not allowed to interrupt the Senator in possession unless he allows them.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Nor is she allowed to call me names. If I called one of them names there would be hysteria over there - hysteria. There would be a social media pile-on.

Senator Pauline Tully: He is making false allegations here that have nothing to do with this motion.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am not making false allegations. It is a well-known fact that Paul Quinn was battered to death in your heartland.

Senator Pauline Tully: Excuse me, my heartland?

Senator Joe Flaherty: The Sinn Féin party's heartland.

An Cathaoirleach: I remind Senators-----

Senator Pauline Tully: We have representatives from all over this island.

An Cathaoirleach: Senators, please. Personal charges are not appropriate in this Chamber.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am not making personal charges. I am making a statement of fact.

Senator Pauline Tully: No, he is not.

An Cathaoirleach: Political charges are part of debate.

Senator Joe Flaherty: What I am speaking most vociferously about is the audacity, the sheer nerve and the sheer disrespect for the Quinn family that Sinn Féin moves a motion on fuel in the week of his 20th anniversary.

Senator Pauline Tully: I doubt they would even know.

An Cathaoirleach: I remind Senators not to interrupt the Senator in possession unless they have the permission of the Senator, as per Standing Orders. Senator Flaherty, please, without interruption.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Sinn Féin does not give any account of the cost of €128 million; they just plucked it from the sky. Deputy Pearse Doherty was driving down from Donegal one day and he decided €128 million had a ring to it and they would go with that. The motion makes no allowance and does not tell us how this is going to impact on the Exchequer at all. The motion would actually negatively impact those households most at risk of fuel poverty. That is a fact but Sinn Féin ignores the facts. It does not deal in the facts and never did. All it dealt with down through the years was hatred.

The Sinn Féin motion does not reflect the range of measures introduced in budget 2027. According to the Senators, nothing happened. It was probably one of the most progressive budgets this country has seen. Nor does the Sinn Féin motion take into account the Government's decision earlier this year to pause the carbon tax on home heating oil at 2025 rates, or that the Government has delivered on a reduction of €43 in the price of a 1,000-litre fill of home heating oil. I know they are experts on the prices because they were at it down through the years. They drove the prices down and put loads of small retailers out of business as well because they were selling the contraband stuff. The reality is that we have a progressive approach to the property tax and we are tackling the property tax.

The Sinn Féin motion does not state that further increases in the carbon tax rate on home heating oil has been paused at 2023 levels because Sinn Féin does not like the facts. It is not convenient to state the facts, or to measure, announce or even support the steps we are taking. No matter what is done in this country, if it is in any way progressive, helpful or of assistance to the public, Sinn Féin will rally against it because it does not support its narrative that it is one for Sinn Féin, all for Sinn Féin. That does not work. They are seeing in the polls that people are kicking back at them and they do not like it. They can stay on the phone and text head office, and text them in Belfast and tell them they are having a problem down here, but I am telling them the facts. They came in here 20 years to the day that Paul Quinn was murdered over contraband fuel in Northern Ireland in the heartland of Sinn Féin. On the week of his anniversary, Sinn Féin has the audacity to come in here and move this motion. I respect the Senators' right to move the motion but for God's sake, have some conscience, some sense of responsibility and some respect for a family that lost their son in the vilest of circumstances.

Senator Mark Duffy: I second amendment No. 1.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the supports the Government has introduced to benefit the hard-pressed and those most in need of support. Over the past years and particularly the last 12 months, we have seen a pronounced shock in the price of fuel. It has affected home heating oil, the haulier industry and every single one of us, in particular those most hard-pressed and most vulnerable in our society. That is why earlier this year, the Government introduced a reduction of 27 cent per litre of petrol and 32 cent per litre of diesel, which has caused a marked improvement in reducing the cost of fuel for those who need help and support the most.

As a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy and spokesperson for climate, energy and environment for Fine Gael here in the Seanad, I was very pleased to lead a Private Members' Bill a few weeks ago just ahead of the budget that called for specific measures, which were listened to by Government. I would like to acknowledge the support that we received on it. It is important to be clear with everyone that this fuel crisis has originated because of war in the Middle East, the Strait of Hormuz, the ongoing Russian aggression and war in Ukraine.

5 o'clock

They have caused a shock to prices across the globe and Ireland is no different, but because of strong fiscal management as an economy, a Government and a country, we have been able to introduce a range of supports. That must be acknowledged on the public record. The warmer homes scheme is a 100% funded programme that provides retrofits, and supports full upgrades, for those who are most vulnerable and in receipt of the fuel allowance. That same fuel allowance has been increased in this budget and benefits 470,000 homes across the country. The most vulnerable, who are feeling the pinch because of the increase in costs, are eligible and will benefit from those improvements.

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, earlier provided a briefing in the audiovisual room here. It has received €654 million. That will allow people to become more energy independent and be less exposed to the shock of increases in electricity costs through residential battery storage, PV panels, improved grants for insulation and other measures that can make sure households are not exposed to high energy bills. This needs to be acknowledged and recognised across the House by all parties because these targeted measures and effects can reduce electricity and home heating bills and benefit those most in need.

A Senator mentioned her friend who is a nurse and complained about the high cost of a fill of petrol. It is very high. No one disputes that cost, but the Government has introduced measures and interventions to reduce the cost of that bill. For that nurse, who is obviously under pressure, the budget has made a marked improvement with tax band changes. While I do not the full circumstances of that nurse, she could stand to benefit by at least €700 because of the tax band changes. It is not all one-way traffic. There definitely has been a huge challenge and crisis in the costs of electricity and fuel, but the Government is proactively responding from a position of strength.

I too call for more support for public transport as a way to allow people to be better connected and reduce their reliance on their car, if they have the ability to do so. The NTA has introduced 140 routes and different proposals that will connect towns, villages and cities, which can afford more options for those using public transport. There is an investment in public

transport. This morning, at the Joint Committee on Transport, representatives of Irish Rail updated us on how it has increased passenger numbers by 20% in the past two years, with 55 million passenger journeys, which is an incredible uplift in connectivity. It is important to recognise on the public record that it is not all bad news and that a lot of improvements are being made. Many governments and jurisdictions would love to be in the economic position we are in to be able to respond and help those most in need. It is the most vulnerable and most in need who have schemes and measures to help support them, and long may that continue.

Senator Pauline Tully: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. The motion calls for both short-term and long-term measures. The price of fuel, petrol, diesel and home heating oil has skyrocketed in the last year or so, and I acknowledge this is because of wars that are outside the control of this Government. We obviously could not have stopped President Trump imposing an illegal war on Iran, which has driven the cost of oil sky high, but more should have been done before now to insulate the country against such terrible shocks. We are reliant on fossil fuels that we have to import very expensively and when something that drives up the cost of them happens, all of the people in this country feel the pressure of that. We should be doing far more, and should have done far more, to look at more sustainable energy sources over the years. Fine Gael has been in government since 2011 and Fianna Fáil has been supporting them in government, or has been in government with them, since 2016, yet very little work has been done. I acknowledge some things have been done, and there are some great grants and so on, but a lot more needs to be done to have foresight and planning around our energy sources. We should be looking at wind, solar, hydrogen and wave energy, for example, and battery storage. We should be improving all of those systems to make sure people in this country will have the pressure taken off them and will have cheap energy, which, in turn, will reduce the cost of food because the cost of producing food is affected by the cost of fuel, as is the cost of the transportation of food. We should be doing this anyway to play our part in reducing carbon emissions and addressing climate change, and even to avoid possible hefty fines being imposed on us by the EU if we do not reach our set targets by 2030.

In rural areas in particular, people have no choice but to use their cars and the public transport system needs to be improved. It is not reliable. We need far more investment in both bus and rail, and greater connectivity using Local Link. In Cavan, for example, we have no rail service. The bus service from Cavan to Dublin is regular but unreliable. It is regularly late and sometimes buses do not show up. People have to be able to rely on a service that will get them to work or wherever they are going on time every day.

There has been a lack of ambition and foresight by successive Governments in preparing the country to absorb the shock caused by rising fuel prices. We propose that we introduce some immediate measures. As well as improving energy sources and re-examining the public transport system, we need immediately to introduce a 10 cent reduction in the price of diesel and petrol at the pumps. Last January or February, at one petrol station in Cavan, petrol cost €1.60 per litre. It now costs €1.94, and that is at one of the cheaper petrol stations. They all charge different prices. In this instance, there has been an increase of at least 30 cent per litre and people are having to absorb that increase along with any reductions the Government has already made in the excise duty.

We have also called for the removal of carbon tax from home heating oil. This measure does not have to last forever but just while the cost of kerosene is so high. If you ordered 1,000 litres of kerosene today, you would pay €1,646. If you had ordered that in May, it would have been €1,440. In January, it would have cost €936 and this time last year, it would have cost €906. That is an increase of 55%. How are people supposed to absorb that? Anything that was given in the budget has been minuscule and will not put a dent in that price. Again, a lot of people rely on using kerosene to heat their homes and are not in a position to change over to heat pumps and so forth at the moment because the cost is so high. The warmer homes scheme is brilliant but not everyone qualifies for that. There are also other grants but a lot of money has to be invested upfront and that is not always affordable for people either. We need to look at some ways to help people get through the current situation. It cannot, we hope, last forever.

I want to discuss the road transporters support scheme. I recently talked to a businessman who told me that he has ten vans on the road, but he does not qualify for the scheme because each van has to be 3.4 tonnes or 3.5 tonnes in weight. His vans are 2.9 tonnes. He is a food producer and he delivers the food. He cannot avail of the scheme, which means his fuel costs have gone through the roof. He is paying thousands of euro extra every month for fuel, even since the beginning of this year, and he is looking at possibly having to lay off people. That is how serious this is. If the cost of fuel, including the cost of green diesel, could be reduced at the pumps, everybody will benefit.

We are just asking for a number of measures to be introduced for the moment to absorb some of the shock that ordinary people are facing in trying to pay the increased cost of petrol, diesel and kerosene. We also need to look at introducing longer term measures that will prevent that form of shock from ever occurring again.

Senator Tom Clonan: The Minister of State is welcome to the House. I support the Private Members' motion set out by Sinn Féin. It is an opportunity for us to discuss and rehearse what is likely to be a difficult winter.

Some things are outside of the Government's control. The unilateral and illegal action taken by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu in their attack on Iran contradicted all the laws of international armed conflict and all the conventions and laws of war. While I do not lament the passing of the ayatollahs or members of the Iranian republican guard – I have no sympathy in any way for them – I lament the passing of the international rules-based order. Members will recall Colin Powell pleading in front of the UN Security Council for a resolution to sanction the declaration of war on Iraq. Twenty-three years later, we have moved to a point where full-spectrum powers no longer make any reference to international law.

What has happened in the Strait of Hormuz is completely outside of the control of the Irish Government. I accept that 100%. It is difficult to navigate or predict what is going to happen next, given the febrile and disinhibited nature of the US Presidency. Directly connected to that, the Iranians have decided to pull back somewhat on their support for Hezbollah and Hamas and concentrate all of their support on the Houthis, who have come out of the northern highlands and moved down into the coastal plains along the Red Sea, where they are in a position to deploy direct-fire weapons at shipping in that area. We have a perfect storm.

What is in the Government's control, however, is how it reacts and responds to this crisis. The principal reason I rise to speak is to ask, as a veteran of the Defence Forces, that the Army

not be deployed in an aid to the civil power role in the event of renewed civilian protests. I wish to make a clear distinction in this regard. I have served and commanded aid to the civil power operations, which are armed support operations to An Garda Síochána involving arrests, surveillance, escort of prisoners and guard duties at Portlaoise hospital. I have had command of those operations. They have their place. Thankfully, with the ceasefires and the Good Friday Agreement, they are much less frequent, but aid to the civil authority is an entirely different matter. That involves unarmed troops providing support, for example, during disputes involving the fire service. In the late nineties, I was involved in one such operation in the Ballymun towers when the lifts were no longer functioning and we spent weeks carrying buggies and people with mobility issues up and down the stairwells. That is a different matter. It is called aid to the civil authority.

I was concerned to note that during the fuel protests earlier this year, the various Ministers involved tasked the Defence Forces under an aid to the civil power mandate. We have never done that in the history of the State, not during the burning down of the British Embassy, the riots that accompanied the H-Block protests or at the height of civil disorder and disruption throughout the Troubles. The Government of this Republic has never ever set our troops against civilian protests in an aid to the civil power role. It has never happened. Across Europe, other European Union powers have a graduated level of force. They do not put their troops on the street against civilian protests. If we look at France and the appalling civil unrest there, troops are not put on the street.

In Ireland, what differentiated the Twenty-six Counties from the Six Counties was the concept of police primacy. At no point in the Troubles were people stopped by members of Óglaigh na hÉireann and asked for their name, address and date of birth or questioned about their business. In Northern Ireland, however, the British army, in a very provocative deployment posture, was allowed to carry out checkpoints and cross-examine, question and, indeed, detain people. What happened earlier this year was a revocation of our long-held tradition of police primacy. No matter how tough things get over this winter – the things outside of the Government's control are outside of its control - I implore the Government not to use the Defence Forces in an aid to the civil power role in relation to fuel protests or any other civil disturbance. A country that deploys the army against its own citizens is a failed state.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank Senator Flaherty for moving the Government's counter-motion. The Government is fully aware of the challenges facing households in light of increased energy costs. As a small, highly open economy and a net energy importer, Ireland is naturally exposed to movements in international energy prices. Crude oil is the globally traded benchmark commodity that serves as the main input into refined products, such as petrol, diesel and home heating oil, which we all use. The disruption to commodity flows through the Strait of Hormuz has had a particularly large impact on some of these refined products, particularly diesel and kerosene.

Sinn Féin's motion, however, does not reflect the reality of global commodity markets, nor does it fully recognise that the drivers of energy inflation are global in nature and, accordingly, it is not possible for this State or any state to fully absorb all of these costs. Having said that, the Government is acutely aware of the impacts increased prices have had on the basic need to heat one's home. That is why, in budget 2027, the Government reduced the carbon tax rate to

2023 levels on the two main home heating fuels, at a cost of €130 million; increased the fuel allowance by over 13% to protect those most at risk of fuel poverty; introduced a €1.3 billion personal income tax package to put money back in people's pockets, which was completely ignored by Sinn Féin contributors; and extended the temporary excise reduction in petrol, diesel and green diesel in full until the end of February 2027. This is why we cannot accept the Sinn Féin motion and are proposing a counter-motion.

The Sinn Féin motion does not fully take into consideration the array of supports implemented by the Government due to increased energy prices as a result of the conflict in the Middle East. As the Opposition knows well, although it usually chooses to ignore it, the Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the European Union *per capita*. The package totals €1.7 billion and is targeted at households and businesses. By the way, it has been possible for the Irish Government to deliver and support people through these measures without having to borrow, unlike other European countries. With this €1.7 billion targeted package, Ireland's fuel prices have fallen from being one of the highest in the European Union to the middle-to-lower end.

The changes proposed in today's Sinn Féin motion would cost an additional €540 million on an annual basis. Some of what is proposed is also in direct contravention of the EU energy taxation directive, to which Ireland must adhere. I presume that is either because of Sinn Féin's historical disregard for the EU or Deputy Pearse Doherty has simply decided he is no longer interested in observing the things to which Ireland must adhere.

Since the beginning of this crisis, the Government has not been found wanting. We committed to monitor the situation and act where possible to reduce the pressures on households and motorists caused by increased energy prices. On 1 May, the Government paused the carbon tax increase to home heating fuels to 2025 levels, reduced the NORA levy and extended the winter period by four weeks to ensure those in receipt of fuel allowance were protected. This built on measures introduced last year to shield households from rising energy costs. Budget 2026 provided an extension until 2030 of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity bills; enhanced social protection payments, including the fuel allowance rate; expanded the fuel allowance eligibility rules benefiting approximately 50,000 households; and there was a €400 income tax disregard for households involved in microgeneration, which was extended for a further three years up to 2028.

Two weeks ago, in budget 2027, we took further decisive action. As a result, the fuel allowance will increase by €5 to €43 per week from January 2027, meaning a payment of €1,204 for some 463,000 fuel allowance recipients in 2027. This is an additional €140 in the fuel season. It should be noted that over the past two budgets, this Government has increased the weekly rate of fuel allowance payable by 30%. From January 2027, the income limit for a single person aged 66 or over will increase from 50% to 60% of the income limit for a couple, allowing more older people to qualify for the fuel allowance. In addition, means thresholds for those aged 66 and over will increase in line with core social welfare payment budget increases from January 2027. This means that a couple's means threshold will increase to €1,088 and for a single person aged 66 and over, it will increase to €653.

Two weeks ago, in budget 2027, we also announced the living alone payment will increase by over 13%. It should be highlighted that previous expansions to the fuel allowance have resulted in a significant increase in the scheme spend. In the past six years, this expenditure

has nearly doubled, rising from €290 million in 2020 to over €557 million in 2026. The result is that thousands of more families are now benefiting from this important support.

Budget 2027 also recognised that it is those on low to middle and middle incomes that can often feel the squeeze - earning too much to qualify for State support but too little not to notice the rising cost of living. Through budget 2027 and future budgets, we want to change that. That is why budget 2027 included a personal income tax package of €1.3 billion. The budget increased the standard rate cut-off point by €2,500 to €46,500, with proportionate increases for married couples and civil partners; increased the main tax credits - the personal, employee and earned income credits - by €125; increased the home carer tax credit by €100; and increased the entry threshold for the USC 3% band by €1,600 from €28,700 to €30,300.

The Government also further extended the full temporary excise reductions until the end of February 2027, saving motorists 30 cent per litre of diesel, 25 cent per litre of petrol and green diesel users 5.4 cent per litre. The further reduction of the National Oil Reserves Agency Levy, NORA, levy until the end of the year is an additional 2 cent per litre saving on each of those fuels. We must also acknowledge that the primary role of the NORA levy is to provide funding to maintain and replenish strategic oil reserves, helping safeguard against supply disruptions, geopolitical instability and global market shocks. The cost of maintaining adequate emergency reserves is small relative to the economic consequences of fuel shortages, disruption to transport and industry or difficulties securing oil during an international crisis.

As the Members of this House will be aware, fuel taxation in the EU is governed by the energy tax directive, ETD, to which Ireland must adhere. The ETD sets minimum tax rates for fuel products. The minimum rate for diesel is 33 cent per litre. The current rate of mineral oil tax on diesel is around 37 cent. Were Ireland to introduce a further reduction on diesel of 10 cent, we would be well below the stated minimum rates, thus breaching EU law.

We are liaising with the European Commission to renew our derogation in respect of those hauliers and bus operators that receive a diesel rebate via the diesel rebate scheme and thus are currently paying less than the stipulated minimum rate. This is a relatively small cohort that is receiving a state aid in accordance with the EU's general block exemption regulation. A derogation to go below minimum rates for the whole country would not be permissible. We and the Opposition need to be realistic and honest about what is and is not possible.

Budget 2027 was about putting money back in people's pockets to ease the burden of cost-of-living pressures. This Government will continue to do that. Our need for society and the economy to decouple from fossil fuel dependence is even more apparent in recent times given the levels of volatility in international fuel markets. The best way to achieve energy security and insulate our economy and society from fuel price shocks is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. The carbon tax is an important long-term policy tool in helping to achieve energy security. This Government remains committed to decarbonising our society, increasing investment in renewable energy sources and recycling carbon tax revenues to protect those most vulnerable to fuel poverty through targeted welfare interventions.

Between budget 2020 and budget 2026, additional carbon tax revenues have been allocated incrementally each year to programmes to insulate the most vulnerable from the increases in the carbon tax and to support decarbonisation and energy efficiency programmes across buildings, agriculture and transport. As part of budget 2027, a total of €1.114 billion from

carbon tax revenue is being allocated to climate measures and to ensure the most vulnerable are protected. This approach maintains the important principle of applying carbon tax revenues to areas that prioritise just transition spending. Budget 2027 also includes a record capital allocation of over €650 million, with €647 million being allocated from carbon tax receipts for the SEAI home energy upgrade schemes. This means that more funding than ever will be available to make homes warmer this year.

In examining changes to the carbon tax system, it is the job of Government to take into account our obligations under EU legislation and the conditions of the derogation from the emissions trading system for buildings, road transport and additional sectors, which this Government negotiated with the European Commission. Sinn Féin's motion completely ignores these EU obligations. Any changes must be carefully calibrated.

The Government has listened and we have responded in the most comprehensive way possible. While no Government can fully shield all households from all the impacts of this crisis, this Government has acted to mitigate the impacts of the crises time and again. The Government proposes to adopt the counter-motion we have tabled.

An Cathaoirleach: Regarding the earlier exchanges in the Seanad, we expect robust debate but we also expect respectful debate. Standing Order 40 allows people to intervene in a debate. It allows the person in possession to give way. While political charges are part of what politics is about, when they drift beyond that, that is obviously a concern and is not part of what is allowed in the Seanad. Personal charges should not be made and there should be no unparliamentary language. I want to make sure we do not drift into that. I did not hear it because there was so much going on but if unparliamentary language was used, I ask people to be mindful of not using unparliamentary language in the House. I ask Members to adhere to the rules of the House. Standing Order 40 allows a Member to intervene in a debate. The Member just has to ask the Member in possession to give way, which the Member can do if he or she wishes. Members do not have to give way if they do not wish to. I ask Members to adhere to the rules of the House and refrain from drifting from them.

I welcome the CEO of Siemens Ireland, Joe Walsh, to the Public Gallery. He and his team are very welcome to Seanad Éireann. Siemens has a long relationship with Ireland, starting with Ardnacrusha. I thank the company for the electricity for the past 100 years and for all it has done for Ireland over those years. I thank Mr. Walsh and all those from Siemens Ireland for being here today.

Senator Joe Flaherty: If I may, I will make a point of order. I know the Cathaoirleach addressed the issue of robust debate but it was very clear that unparliamentary language was used. There are very clear rules in this House and the Lower House regarding what language can and cannot be used. I have no issue with what I am called but I do have an issue when a party that has always played fast and loose with the rules breaches those rules. It is very clear that there was a breach of the rules. It was heard and Members here can substantiate that it was heard. I am no water lily. I can take anything but I will not take it from Sinn Féin and I expect it to be withdrawn and an apology given.

An Cathaoirleach: If the Senator is asking the Member to withdraw, it is up to the Member to do so.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I am asking the Cathaoirleach to ensure that it is withdrawn. It is very clear that unparliamentary language was used in the House today. This House is the bastion of democracy.

An Cathaoirleach: Could we have one Senator standing at a time?

Senator Joe Flaherty: This House is the bastion of democracy. I know Sinn Féin played fast and loose with democracy for many years and does not fully accept it but today, the Senator besmirched the reputation of this country through the language she used in this House. I expect that, at the very least, the Senator would withdraw it and apologise because, believe it or not, there are people who do listen in. She did speak and it was quite clearly heard. It will be on the record of the House. I expect the Cathaoirleach to pursue this robustly.

Senator Pauline Tully: Some very serious allegations were made by the Member across the floor. Will he withdraw those allegations?

Senator Joe Flaherty: I most certainly will not because those allegations are well-founded and substantiated.

Senator Pauline Tully: Then I will not withdraw.

Senator Joe Flaherty: The Senator knows that her own leader already had to issue an apology in relation to Paul Quinn-----

Senator Pauline Tully: I do not want another lecture.

Senator Joe Flaherty: -----for saying he was a criminal. I am not lecturing the Senator; I am telling her the reality. Today, the Sinn Féin Senators let themselves down.

Senator Pauline Tully: You do not have a clue.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I do have a clue. I know plenty and there is plenty out there that knows Sinn Féin's track record as well.

An Cathaoirleach: Anois-----

Senator Joe Flaherty: We know what they did and we will not forget what they did.

An Cathaoirleach: I ask Members to use the Standing Orders. Standing Order 40 is the one that should have been used on that occasion. If they do not do so, we will spend a lot of time in the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight and at meetings here talking about

the use of language and debates in the Chamber. That is not what we are about. We are about respectful debate. I ask people to take notice of that.

Anois, I call on Senator McCormack to reply. She has five minutes.

Senator Maria McCormack: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus an Aire Stáit. I will end where I started, talking about my friend, who I will not name. She is a nurse who is putting €138 in her car just to get to work. I am going to leave people in the House with that one.

I want to explain that Sinn Féin put forward a fully costed alternative budget, which is available for everyone to see on the Sinn Féin website. It sets out clear proposals to cut fuel costs, support working families and put money back into people's pockets. It allows people to see for themselves rather than listening to sometimes untrue things spoken in the Chamber. They can actually look at the budget for themselves. I urge people to do it so they can see our alternative budget and how different life would be under a Sinn Féin Government. That is the reason we brought forward this motion today. We are listening to the people. We understand the pressure they are under, even if people in the Government fail to realise that.

All I heard in the Minister of State's speech was an announcement of what she did in the budget. It was like Groundhog Day. That is not what today's debate is about. It is about supporting struggling people with fuel, which the Government has failed to do. We have tried our absolute best.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 7.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Clonan, Tom.
Blaney, Niall.	Collins, Joanne.
Boyle, Manus.	McCarthy, Aubrey.
Byrne, Cathal.	McCormack, Maria.
Byrne, Maria.	Murphy, Conor.
Casey, Pat.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Comyn, Alison.	Tully, Pauline.
Conway, Martin.	
Costello, Teresa.	
Crowe, Ollie.	
Curley, Shane.	
Daly, Paul.	
Davitt, Aidan.	
Duffy, Mark.	
Flaherty, Joe.	
Goldsboro, Imelda.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Lynch, Eileen.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	

Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Donovan, Noel.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Maria McCormack and Joanne Collins.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to".

The Seanad divided: Tá, 27; Níl, 7.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Clonan, Tom.
Blaney, Niall.	Collins, Joanne.
Boyle, Manus.	McCarthy, Aubrey.
Brady, Paraic.	McCormack, Maria.
Byrne, Cathal.	Murphy, Conor.
Byrne, Maria.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Casey, Pat.	Tully, Pauline.
Comyn, Alison.	
Conway, Martin.	
Costello, Teresa.	
Crowe, Ollie.	
Curley, Shane.	
Daly, Paul.	
Davitt, Aidan.	
Duffy, Mark.	
Flaherty, Joe.	
Goldsboro, Imelda.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Lynch, Eileen.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Donovan, Noel.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Scahill, Gareth.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Maria McCormack and Joanne Collins.

Question declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Garret Ahearn: Tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 5.53 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 22 Deireadh Fómhair 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 5.53 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 22 October 2026.