

BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

SIXTY-FIFTH PLENARY SESSION

Monday 23 October 2023

The Assembly met at 9.44 am.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Audio recording unavailable for six minutes.

As Brendan said, I am the Minister for Finance in the Irish Government. Just two weeks ago, we announced the Budget for 2024, so I will take the opportunity to say a quick word about that and about the economic outlook.

We anticipate continued growth in the Irish economy in the order of 2% to 2.5% for the next couple of years. We do not use GDP as our preferred measure of economic activity. We have other measures, such as modified domestic demand, or a construct that we have designed that strips out some of the distortions that are created by multinational activity. We call that gross national income (Star), (GNI*). In effect, it shows a growth forecast for the next number of years of between 2% and 2.5%. We believe that inflation will continue to moderate. For the current year, it will average at around 5.3%, falling to just less than 3% in 2024.

The labour market here remains very strong. Unemployment stands at just over 4%, which is close to a historic low. The public finances are broadly in good health in that we are in the fortunate position of being able to run budget surpluses of around 3% of national income, although much of that is driven by receipts that we are collecting from the corporate sector and that we regard as potentially windfall. That means that we need to be very careful about the decisions that we make in using those receipts. That is why, on Budget day two weeks ago, we set out our plan to set up two new future-focused funds. One is a savings fund, called the Future Ireland Fund, which, in a sense, is a sovereign wealth fund that has been designed to help us mitigate some of the costs of the structural changes in our economy and population.

The demographic changes are going to happen really quickly over the coming years, so it is not a rainy day fund; it is a fund to meet costs that are definitely going to arise in pension care, home care, healthcare, housing and so on.

The second fund is the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund, which will, in effect, ensure that we can continue to invest at a high level in our public infrastructure so that, in the event of an economic shock or downturn, we will have the resources put aside to maintain a high level of public capital investment over the next number of years. Part of that fund will help us to achieve our climate targets in that the investments will be focused on projects that help us on our journey towards carbon neutrality over the years ahead.

Of course, we face many risks, including inflation remaining higher for longer, which will have an impact on monetary policy decisions. We are seeing the impact of those decisions on households, businesses and the sovereign wealth fund as well in the costs of borrowing. The international environment within which we all operate is now characterised by tension, conflict and considerable geopolitical uncertainty. That can and does act as a drag on the global economy, and it is a real risk in the impact that it could have on energy prices, for example, which have such a bearing on the people whom we represent and on the business communities. Housing is one of the main domestic challenges that we face. We are doing all that we can to increase housing supply, because the Irish population is growing very quickly. Our economy is growing, and a lot of people view Ireland as a very attractive place to live and in which to work, avail themselves of economic opportunities and rear a family. We need to continue to increase the supply of homes in our country in the period ahead.

I will say a word about the centrality of the economic relationship between our islands at this time. Two-way trade for goods and services between Ireland and Great Britain is now at a value in excess of €100 billion per annum. Ireland is the UK's sixth-largest trading partner, with more than the UK's trade with China and India combined. We are the UK's fourth-largest export

destination. For Ireland, the UK is not the dominant trading partner that it was 50 years ago when we first joined what became the European Union, when the UK accounted for over 60% of our trade. Today, it represents 11% of our goods exports and some 14% of our services exports, but, make no mistake about it, the UK remains an extremely important trading partner for us in Ireland. Four out of five Irish companies do business in the UK, and it is the first target export destination for most up-and-coming businesses as they seek to grow.

Some 60,000 UK company directors are Irish, and, as you will all know, in the city of London alone, we are on something of a roll by having Irish or Irish-heritage Lord Mayors in recent years. In Ireland, the value of cross-border trade is at least €10 billion, and that figure is growing. It is already three times greater than where we were at when the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998. I commend all those in commerce and politics who have helped create the conditions in which the all-island economy and cross-border trade can continue to flourish. I have no doubt that that will continue in the period ahead. Yes, the change to the trading environment as a result of Brexit has had an influence, but it has always been a fact that North/South trade has great untapped potential, with benefits for us all. I will pause on giving economic figures for a moment, but I want to underline the extraordinarily valuable economic interaction at this time, of which all the businesses on this island and all these islands continue to take maximum advantage.

Where do we, as elected politicians, fit in? What are we getting right, and where can we do better in those relationships? Mercifully, the debate on Brexit is not where it was at five or so years ago. We now have the Windsor framework, which has stabilised the UK/EU relationship and is now operational. Indeed, some in this room contributed to its agreement and its ongoing application.

The full economic effects of the UK's exit still cannot be known, but, thanks to extensive contingency planning and a large-scale response across government, its impacts on Irish

business and trade are not what they otherwise would have been. They are certainly not what was once feared. What we at least have now is a degree of certainty and predictability, which people so badly craved. We have seen other positive steps being taken, such as the agreement in principle for the UK to connect again to the EU's Horizon Europe research programme. That is a pathway that I hope will continue to be followed in the period ahead. In my area of work, we have the hugely welcome EU/UK memorandum of understanding (MOU) in the area of financial services.

Beyond EU/UK relations, we have the set of relationships within the island and, indeed, between the islands. Here, our guiding light and central framework is and remains the Good Friday Agreement. One strand of the agreement is working well: strand three on east-west relations. Its institutions are working and functioning, while links between Dublin and London are getting stronger again. For my part, I have an excellent working relationship with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Jeremy Hunt. My Department and the Treasury have formal links at senior official level, and we exchange staff on an ongoing basis. That is as it should be, not least because, given the economic numbers that I outlined earlier, there are mutual economic benefits to be had from a close working relationship.

10.00 am

Broadening things out, we have frameworks for cooperation in place now with the Scottish and Welsh Governments. The Tánaiste was in Wales a few days ago with the First Minister for the annual Ireland-Wales Forum, and we see that now going from strength to strength.

Plans are well under way for expanding and relocating our embassy in London, led by Ambassador Martin Fraser, who, I believe, was with you last evening. That was something that I was very proud to support in my former role in the Irish Government as the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

As you know, we have reopened our consulate in Cardiff and opened a very active new

consulate general in Manchester. Our trade and tourism agencies have grown, too, as have our cultural supports. I know that Ambassador Johnston and his team have their own plans here in Ireland, some of which I discussed with him when we had the opportunity to have a good bilateral discussion in Cork on Friday just gone.

Work is well under way in other areas, too, notably energy. That will feature on the agenda of your discussion later today in a considerable way. It is great to see the deepening relationship in the memorandums of understanding in respect of key energy issues.

Of course, Ireland and the UK will co-host the European soccer championships in 2028 — a moment when, I hope, sport can work its magic and bring our people together in a most positive way.

Alas, the same positive words cannot be said of the other two strands of the Good Friday Agreement in terms of the continued absence of a Northern Ireland Executive and the consequent effect on North/South work, especially at ministerial level. That is something that I feel in my work every single week. This is where, as politicians and neighbours, we can do better. I, for one, look forward to the day when I can pick up the phone to my counterpart in the Northern Ireland Executive in the same way that I can to my counterparts in Great Britain or, indeed, elsewhere in Europe.

The Tánaiste and the Taoiseach are working closely with their British counterparts to facilitate the return of the Assembly and Executive. I certainly join them in urging progress on that as soon as possible. It is timely, therefore, that, following the 25-year anniversary, earlier this year, of the Good Friday Agreement, in the next number of weeks, we will mark the 30th anniversary of another key milestone, that of the Downing Street Declaration. John Major and Albert Reynolds stood beside that Christmas tree on a winter's evening at Downing Street, and each took big political steps — indeed, big political risks — as they set out what was the blueprint for the peace that would follow in the subsequent years. The declaration is well worth re-

reading. Indeed, towards the end, it states:

“It would allow the process of economic and social co-operation on the island to realise its full potential for prosperity and mutual understanding.”

As the Finance Minister of the Irish Government today, 30 years on, I fully subscribe to those aspirations. We all have a collective duty to continue to pursue those objectives and, indeed, to do better.

Fellow parliamentarians, my message today is that the British-Irish relationship is, after some turbulent years, which we have to acknowledge, back on a positive trajectory. However, we have work to do, and, in many ways, we always will. In that context, a close, equal and respectful partnership between London, Dublin and all our respective centres of power will always be crucial. Your relations as parliamentarians are, in turn, crucial to that.

We should never understate the importance of the formal and informal gatherings, just getting to know each other, learning to talk about the common issues and challenges that we face, and building closer relationships. We know that much can grow, evolve and develop from that. I will certainly do all that I can, in my role as Minister for Finance, to invest in those relationships on and across these islands because I recognise how important those relationships are to all the people whom we serve to represent every day in our working lives.

Co-Chairs, I leave my opening remarks at that for now. I very much look forward to the Q&A. Thank you all so much for your attention, and I look forward to meeting many of you over the course of the day. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Minister, thank you sincerely for your positive and comprehensive address to the Assembly. You have provided us with some fascinating figures with regard to economic development and trade between our respective jurisdictions, and you outlined clearly the huge partnership between this island and our neighbouring island across all jurisdictions. That is very positive,

and it is very important that that message be put out there, despite the daily challenges that are faced. Minister, I offer sincere thanks on behalf of Co-Chair Karin and our colleagues. I invite questions for Minister McGrath.

Senator Victor Boyhan:

I welcome the Minister here today. Minister, you touched on the EU's Horizon Europe programme and its significance and importance. We know that it is unrivalled, and we know the great potential of the opportunities that are available. It was my understanding that the European Commission was in discussions with the UK Government as recently as September to reach agreement on the association of the UK with the Horizon Europe programme. Are you in a position to share any of that dialogue outcome? Clearly, it is a very important institution and programme, with a very important function. You may be in a position to share some details with us on the negotiations and what the outcome of them is.

Mr Michael McGrath TD:

Thank you very much, Senator Boyhan. It is good to see you here. I do not have further details, except to warmly welcome and acknowledge the fact that the UK has decided to re-engage with and rejoin the Horizon Europe programme. I do not have any further details on the negotiations with the European Commission, but we can follow up on that and perhaps get back to BIPA in the period ahead.

Senator Victor Boyhan:

Thank you, Minister.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

I am an MLA for South Antrim. Minister, it is good to see you sitting beside Steve Baker, and I really liked your comments about what we are trying to do for the Euros. You will be aware,

however, that to build Casement Park in time will cost in the region of £160 million, approximately £65 million of which we have from the Northern Ireland Budget. Is your generosity going to enable us to finish building Casement Park in time? Your friend beside you, the Minister of State, has said that it will be built on time. I would be delighted if you could make a commitment to us now that you will find the €100 million.

Mr Michael McGrath TD:

I did not bring the cheque with me today, Steve. *[Laughter.]* I did, however, have an opportunity to have a quick word with Minister Baker earlier and, indeed, with Ambassador Johnston in Cork on Friday. It is great news that we are going to co-host the Euros in 2028, and we are very familiar with the project at Casement Park. It is important that we have clarity on who the project sponsor is and what the process is for advancing the project.

It is true to say that, based on our experience of major public capital projects, including stadia projects, until one goes to tender, one does not know exactly how much they are going to cost. We are willing to have a discussion and be positive in order to play a part in helping to ensure that the project comes to fruition. I know that it is a really important project and is sensitive for many people, which we acknowledge. It is important, however, that we understand who is in charge of delivering the project and what exactly the costs are.

We have the Shared Island Fund, and we have committed up to €1 billion up until 2030 as part of that. The Member will be familiar with many of the cross-border projects that have already benefited from those investments. We have committed of the order of €250 million of that fund so far, so we are positively disposed to helping and to making a contribution. We will enter into those discussions in the period ahead, once there is more clarity about the project.

Ms Sarah Jones MP:

Can you say a bit more about your Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund? We are all in the

same place, whereby we are trying to reduce energy bills and increase our own national security by providing energy from our own countries to meet the climate challenge. We are, however, up against the like of America, of course, with its Inflation Reduction Act and huge quantities of investment going into other parts of the world. I am therefore interested in hearing more about what kind of energy you think that you will be investing in and how you think that the fund is going to work.

Mr Michael McGrath TD:

Thanks very much, Sarah. We have an annual public capital programme anyway, and it is separate from the new fund that we announced. The annual capital programme is part of our national development plan (NDP). We have set out, between now and 2030, exactly how much we will spend every year on our public capital programme. Next year, for example, it will be over €13 billion. The NDP is already climate-proofed, in that the projects that are funded from it have to meet certain climate tests. What we announced on Budget day is an additional fund that will enable us to go further. It will sit within an overall infrastructure fund, which, as I said in my remarks, is designed to ensure that we can invest in infrastructure even in a downturn or a shock, because, following the previous crisis, the first cut that was made was to the public capital programme. In fact, it was reduced from peak to trough by about 60%, and we all know the long-term negative effects of reducing capital spending.

The primary purpose is therefore to make sure that we can continue to invest through the economic cycle. We all know that one gets better value for money in many respects when there is a shock or a downturn. As part of the fund, there is separate access criteria to just over €3 billion. Based on the various reports, if we believe that we are falling behind on reaching our climate action targets — we know how challenging those targets are up to 2030 and, ultimately, to 2050 — just over €3 billion of that fund can then be accessed for specific projects that will help us achieve our targets and reduce our emissions. Such projects could be a public transport

project, investment in a renewable energy project, retrofitting public-sector building stock or supporting enterprises on their retrofitting and carbon emissions reduction journey.

Those are the kinds of projects that will potentially benefit from the fund, which is just over €3 billion of an overall infrastructure fund. We intend to build it up to a figure of around €14 billion, which would be the average annual spend on our public capital programme over the coming years.

The second fund, which is the much larger one, is essentially the savings fund. We will put 0.8% of GDP into that fund every year between now and the mid-2030s. With a fair wind, which we will need, and by making certain assumptions that we can achieve a return of between 4% and 5% on that fund, we believe that it has the potential to reach in excess of €100 billion by the middle of the next decade. It will be for future Governments to decide how to spend that fund or what to do with it, but it is intended to help us address the demographic changes that will happen really quickly over the coming years.

In Ireland at the moment, we have about four people of working age for every pensioner. That will change to about two people of working age for every pensioner in the next number of decades. We all know the costs associated with supporting an older population.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Minister. Darren Millar MS is next, to be followed by Cathal Boylan MLA.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your speech this morning and your statements of confidence about the relationship between the UK and Ireland. I was struck by your reference to Wales. I was delighted about that, because the relationship between Wales and Ireland is very important to us in the Senedd. The relationship between the Welsh Government and the Irish Government is underpinned by the shared statement and joint action

plan, much of which revolves around the EU's INTERREG programme. That shared statement and joint action plan is to expire in 2025. I wonder to what extent the Irish Government have thought about the relationship beyond when that period comes to an end, because we have seen some excellent progress as a result of the shared statement's being in place.

We are delighted to have Denise McQuade as the Consul General of Ireland in Cardiff. The Irish Government have offices there, and the Welsh Government have invested in offices in Dublin as well, but there is some concern that we are getting towards the end of the period and that so much of the relationship is underpinned by the INTERREG programme. The question is this: where do the Irish Government see that relationship going beyond 2025?

10.15 am

Mr Michael McGrath TD:

Thank you, Darren. As you know, we had the Ireland-Wales Forum towards the end of last week. We will get a full read-out from the proceedings at that forum in the days ahead. I have no doubt that there is an acute awareness of the impending deadline in 2025 and a shared determination to ensure that new arrangements can be put in place to foster, over the years ahead, the partnership that has been developed. We will get an update from our colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs in particular in relation to that, and we can report back to BIPA.

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I thank the Minister for his comments. If I may put it to you, where do you see the challenges for the business community in relation to the introduction of the green and red lanes arising from the Windsor framework?

Mr Michael McGrath TD:

Thanks, Cathal. The business community has craved certainty and the need for settled

arrangements to be put in place. The business community, North and South, is well able to adapt to arrangements once it knows exactly what the terms of those arrangements are. We know that when it comes to doing business, particularly on a cross-border basis or between the island of Ireland and Great Britain, uncertainty has created huge challenges. There is no perfect solution when it comes to the arrangements that have had to be negotiated painstakingly and which have now been agreed. Those arrangements have been put in place and are operational. I have no doubt that specific operational issues and challenges will arise, but, with goodwill and a spirit of cooperation, those can be addressed and ironed out in the period ahead. At least now, we have arrangements in place. They are operational, and I believe that, with the goodwill of all sides, any issues that arise from them can be worked through.

Mr Stephen Doughty MP:

Thank you, Minister. As you will know, Ireland, through the EU, and the UK have imposed extensive sanctions packages against Russia and Belarus. I was in Kiev a few weeks ago, and there is a lot of concern there about sanctions avoidance and the need to crack down on anybody trying to circumvent the regimes. There is also a strong desire for Russian state assets that are held in the EU, the UK and elsewhere to be seized and repurposed for Ukrainian reconstruction. What work is being done in Ireland to tackle avoidance and to look at those other issues? I know that the president of the Commission spoke recently about EU-wide efforts to seize and repurpose those assets.

Mr Michael McGrath TD:

Thanks very much, Stephen. That issue is very much under active discussion and consideration at EU level. Just last week, I was in Luxembourg for the Eurogroup meeting of Finance Ministers and the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) meeting of the 27 Ministers. The US Secretary of the Treasury, Janet Yellen, attended that meeting. That issue

would have been discussed in relation to immobilised Russian assets and what can be done. It is important that the EU generally respects international rules and that we have absolute clarity on what the legal position is. We have to recognise the importance of currency stability while, in principle, of course, being agreeable to accessing any resources that are there in order to assist the people of Ukraine in the enormous reconstruction task that lies ahead.

We also discussed the circumvention of sanctions. We have faithfully implemented all the different sanctions packages that have been agreed at an EU level. I am satisfied that Ireland has played its part and is fully implementing all those sanctions. However, there is evidence of, let us say, unusual trade flows between certain countries and Russia, and I believe that there is some evidence of circumvention taking place. The best way to deal with that is through the institutions that are established within the European Union, and they are actively working on that issue at this time.

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

Thank you very much, Minister, for your presentation; it was excellent. Your Department expects to receive about €23.5 billion in corporation tax this year, and the new rate of 15% is coming in next year. You mentioned the word “windfall” in your speech. There are approximately 1,600 multinational companies in Ireland. Do you think that that increase will cause a problem for those multinational companies? Also, your Department of Finance is expecting a record €25.6 billion in 2026. Ireland depends a lot on corporation tax: you said that almost half of your income comes from it. Will you explain what your plans are for the next number of years to ensure that Ireland keeps those multinational companies here?

Mr Michael McGrath TD:

Thank you very much, Peter. As we have long acknowledged, there are significant concentration risks regarding the level of receipts that we are collecting from the corporate

sector. The percentage of our overall tax revenues that come from corporation tax has increased significantly. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council (IFAC) estimates that the top three companies could account for up to a third of all corporate tax receipts. There is therefore a level of dependence. It is a risk that we are very much alert to. It is important that we continue to refresh and renew and reinvest in the offering that we have for the foreign direct investment community, because it provides highly valued employment here in Ireland. Over 300,000 jobs are provided by IDA client companies with real, substantive operations in Ireland. As you know, in the Budget we provided for improvements to the research and development tax credit regime, increasing the tax credit rate from 25% to 30%. That will ensure that the largest companies that are impacted by pillar 2 of the OECD base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS) agreement will maintain the full benefit of Ireland's R&D tax credit regime. That is important. We are also doing other things in our taxation code to seek to help.

Ireland is fully committed to the OECD international agreement on corporate tax. Of course, there is agreement on pillar 2, which, for Ireland, means moving to a 15% rate from January of next year, as you mentioned, and the Finance Bill that we have just published provides for the transposition of that EU minimum tax directive. That will become law once the Oireachtas legislates for the Finance Bill. The extra revenues that will come from the additional 2.5% will not flow until mid-2026, so there will not be any short-term benefit to Ireland.

The other pillar is the one that will come at a cost to Ireland, but I hope that agreement can be reached, because it is in the interests of us all that we have a settled position in respect of international corporate tax. Pillar 1 relates to the reallocation of taxing rights, which will benefit larger countries where larger markets exist. There is no agreement on that yet. We anticipate that, when that does come into being, overall the combined effect of both pillars will have a negative impact on Ireland to the tune of around €2 billion a year. However, that remains under continuous assessment.

We must ensure that we do not build up any unhealthy dependencies on receipts that could prove to be volatile. As you have acknowledged, my Department estimates that about half of the corporate tax receipts that we collect could, potentially, be windfall in nature, so we cannot rely on them into the future. Those revenues could prove to be temporary; that is why we are not spending them on current expenditure commitments. We are using some of them to enhance our public capital programme, and we are using the balance to provide for the Future Ireland Fund and the infrastructure fund. That is the best way of protecting Ireland into the future, as well as seeking to have an appropriate balance to our overall economy. That is why I set out a range of measures in the Budget, two weeks ago, that are designed to improve the environment within which SMEs and indigenous enterprises in Ireland operate. I announced changes to a whole range of taxation schemes to make sure that Ireland is an attractive place for an entrepreneur to start a business and, for businesses that are in existence here and which have chosen Ireland as their location of choice and base, somewhere where they can scale up.

Mr Stephen Hammond MP:

Thank you, Minister; thank you for your speech this morning. May I ask two things? Do you have initial thoughts on the review of the trade and cooperation agreement (TCA), and do you think that it is likely to include anything on economics and trade, or are you expecting a de minimis review? Building on the memorandum of understanding on financial services, do you see any scope for that to be extended?

Mr Michael McGrath TD:

Thanks, Stephen. To be honest, our focus is on stability now and on the implementation of the agreements that were hard-won and hard-negotiated over a long number of years. Brexit goes back to 2016, and here we are in 2023, still discussing important consequences of Brexit. I would not like to talk up or give the impression that there will be any fundamental changes to

the arrangements that, in many respects, have been agreed only recently. We will, however, always be open to opportunities for improvement and to opportunities that can make trade flows easier and simpler in any way that means that we can reduce the amount of bureaucracy or compliance that has to be achieved. Of course, that has to respect the different arrangements that are in place now in the UK and the European Union.

Similarly, the MOU on financial services is a very significant breakthrough that we were very anxious to achieve. That will remain under review, but I am not aware of any specific changes to it that are planned in the short term.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister. Are we all OK, colleagues? There are no questions.

Again, Minister, we very much appreciate your wide-ranging opening address and the comprehensive manner in which you dealt with all the questions across myriad issues. Your participation in the Assembly this morning gets us off to a very good start. On behalf of all the Members, we are very grateful for your attendance. I know that you hope to spend some time with us. We really appreciate your presence at and support for the work of our Assembly. Minister Michael McGrath, thank you sincerely. *[Applause.]*

ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF STATE, UK NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

We will now move on to the address by Steve Baker MP, Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office. Members, I remind everybody that Minister Baker's address will be live-streamed by the broadcasters. We are delighted to see you again, Steve, and we are very appreciative of your time and your commitment to the Assembly. We will hear your opening address, and then there will be some time for questions.

Mr Steve Baker MP:

Karin, thank you very much. Minister McGrath, ladies and gentlemen, Mr Ambassador and Brendan, thank you all very much indeed for the opportunity to be with you. It is a real pleasure to be at the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly for the third time. You have brought me to Cavan, St Helier and, now, Kildare. My goodness, you choose some amazing venues. I wish that I had discovered this institution many years ago. I thank my Conservative colleagues in particular for all the hard work that they have done over many years, because BIPA is a very important institution. I am grateful to all of you for the investment that you have made. I am delighted to be with you. As ever, I thank the Co-Chairs, Brendan and Karin, for their kind invitation to speak today, and I thank the K Club for the terrific venue.

I really appreciate the opportunity to engage. As Michael said, it is really important that we have the opportunity to engage in not only formal settings but informal settings. I have really appreciated personally the welcome that you have extended to me. It certainly marks a dramatic change from where we might have been a few years ago. I am very grateful to you all. BIPA is an opportunity for us to come together to sometimes agree and sometimes disagree gracefully. It is, however, above all, an opportunity for us to talk about our shared ambitions and how we might move forwards together.

Turning to British-Irish relations, the UK Government regard the relationship that we have with Ireland as fundamental. It is not only an economic relationship but a social and cultural one. As Ireland's ambassador to London once memorably said, it is a family. The disagreements that we have had have been like family disagreements; at times, they have been fierce, but we have chosen to put them behind us and move on.

When I spoke to BIPA in Jersey, I mentioned the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and said that we would have a "bumper period" of bilateral and multilateral events, and so it has proved. In addition to the two meetings of this Assembly so far in 2023, we have held two British-Irish Intergovernmental Conferences, a British-Irish Council summit and two

meetings of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, with more gatherings planned before the year is out. Each has allowed us to set out our respective goals, better understand one another and set out points of principle in a forthright but respectful manner. I am a passionate believer in the importance of listening to others and trying to understand from where everybody is coming, and it is through that listening that we can build the bonds of understanding that allow us to make progress.

10.30 am

The frequency of our UK/Irish engagements, through formal structures such as this and regular informal meetings, bear testimony to the strong emphasis that the UK Government continue to place on promoting cooperation with our Irish partners, and I very much welcome the positive comments that Minister McGrath made earlier. They are entirely reciprocated. We are grateful that this relationship is on a new footing.

I turn to the subject of energy. It is wonderful to note that that spirit of collaboration has been very much in evidence when it comes to energy policy, which, I understand, the plenary sitting will cover in greater depth later today. Just last month, following on from agreement between UK and Irish Ministers at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, we agreed to intensify energy cooperation. The UK and Ireland signed two memoranda of understanding to formalise joint working on energy security. The memorandum of understanding on gas security will facilitate both countries' exchanging of information on supply and risks to winter gas security and agreeing clear protocols for cooperation in case of a gas supply shortage. The second MOU focuses on future energy ambitions, including onshore and offshore renewables, low-carbon hydrogen, maritime spatial planning and transmission infrastructure. That, to me, is what an effective bilateral relationship looks like: cooperative; forward-facing; and focused on delivering shared aims that put the well-being of our citizens front and centre.

In a similar vein, we can point to the success of the common travel area, which is now 100

years old. It was a landmark open-borders agreement in 1923 and remains so today, ensuring freedom of movement and protecting the reciprocal enjoyment of rights and entitlements to public services. Our joint commitment to the common travel area was reinforced through our 2019 memorandum of understanding, which reaffirmed our arrangement, and again in an MOU on education arrangements in 2021. More recently, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 maintained the important reciprocal rights and entitlements conferred on British and Irish citizens by the common travel area. The Act also provides for the establishment of an electronic travel authorisation (ETA) scheme, which will apply to those wishing to travel to the UK who do not currently need to obtain a visa or do not hold valid UK immigration status before travel. The scheme will not apply to British or Irish citizens. In recognition of the unique position of those living near the Ireland/Northern Ireland land border, we made a decision to provide an exemption to the ETA requirement for non-visa nationals who are legally resident in Ireland when travelling to the UK from Ireland or from elsewhere in the common travel area.

From Wednesday of this week, the UK begins implementation of the ETA scheme, starting with Qatar. The scheme will continue to be rolled out in a phased manner, nationality by nationality, through 2024.

I recognise that the introduction of an ETA scheme is a substantive change for millions of travellers. That is why the UK Government are taking a phased approach to implementation, as it will allow ample time to ensure that those who are impacted on are acquainted with the changes. We remain committed to working with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that the ETA requirement is communicated effectively through targeted messaging and a variety of channels and to mitigating any risk of its being seen as an increased barrier to travel to the island of Ireland.

I turn now to football, and I first make a confession. In my home, I am afraid that all questions on sport are referred to my wife. It is an area in which I have to come alongside my electors

and members of the public and recognise that sport is incredibly valuable to us all. We are in a period of shared mourning over the rugby, but we can look forward to the Euros in 2028 with great enthusiasm.

In many ways, different sporting codes in the UK and Ireland epitomise a vital element of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and, indeed, a principle that BIPA so ably promotes and embraces: the totality of relationships between people on these islands. In football, we can really celebrate our ability to host the Euros together. Our joint bid will see matches played in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland, and it has the potential to bring us together for one great sporting event that can unite us. It will also help us to showcase what the UK and Ireland have to offer to tourists and investors around the world.

I will turn to the recent investment summit in Northern Ireland. There is absolutely no doubt that Northern Ireland has a lot to offer to attract investors. As Minister of State, my job is, of course, to cheerlead for Northern Ireland, and I am absolutely delighted to do so. The summit was described by the Federation of Small Businesses as a remarkable gathering and a beacon of positivity. It showcased Northern Ireland's unique opportunities, innovation and technological strengths to around 200 global investors. Our Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, alongside our colleague Kemi Badenoch, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, hosted the summit for a star-studded audience that featured the Tánaiste, Joe Kennedy III and Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal.

At the investment summit, we saw just how far Northern Ireland has come. Already established as a world leader in key growth sectors, the place is brimming with creativity, enterprising people, entrepreneurship and people who want to keep pushing forward in their fields for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. Especially encouraging is the expansion into industries with enormous future growth potential, such as cybersecurity, where we now have over 2,700 cyber professionals working in over 120 companies. In fact, Northern Ireland is home to some

4% of the UK's cybersecurity workforce despite representing only 2.8% of the population. That, together with fantastic progress in fintech, health and life sciences and advanced manufacturing, is one of the reasons why Belfast is ranked in the top 25 tech cities in the world and second in the UK after London.

The green shoots are there for us all to see. Following the summit, the US fintech business Symphony indicated its strong interest in opening a Belfast office, and, at the summit, Ernst and Young (EY) announced that it would create 1,000 jobs in Northern Ireland over the next five years. Given Northern Ireland's unique economic opportunities under the Windsor framework and evergrowing international reputation in growth sectors, I expect that more and more businesses from around the world will come alive to the possibilities in Northern Ireland over the coming years.

Ultimately, the summit showed the huge potential that Northern Ireland now has to grow and develop, providing prosperity for all its citizens. However, the UK Government want to be clear that, in order for those opportunities to be realised, we need a fully functioning Assembly and Executive so that locally elected representatives can take the important decisions that allow that huge potential to be harnessed. I made that point the last time that I addressed BIPA, and I make no apologies for repeating it today. We believe in devolution. We believe that Northern Ireland works best when it is governed locally, and, once again, I urge all parties to return to power-sharing. The Secretary of State's core priority is the restoration of the institutions, and he is relentless in his efforts to get Stormont back up and running so that the necessary decisions can be taken to improve public services, boost businesses and deliver for working people. My goodness, every time I visit, I see how necessary that is.

In conclusion, coming back to what I said at the beginning, we are less than a month away from the next meetings of the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. The bilateral relationship remains strong, and a dialogue will continue. As we

approach the 30th anniversary of the Downing Street declaration, which, as Michael set out, was a landmark agreement between the two Governments, we can see that that paved the way for the success of the peace process and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. I know that all of us here will work hard to keep in sight what we can achieve when we work together. Who better, then, to quote than our Co-Chair Brendan Smith, who said, after the declaration's 25th anniversary, that it was the "tenacity, commitment, leadership and courage" of political leaders in the UK and Ireland that brought that declaration about. Those qualities are in abundance in this room.

I want to finish by again thanking you all for the investment that you put into the relationship between the UK and Ireland, and across all the people of these islands. It is really valuable. This relationship is fundamental to all of our success. Thanks very much. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Minister.

Mr Frank Feighan TD:

Thanks to both Ministers. Thank you, Minister McGrath, for an interesting financial assessment, and you, Minister Baker, for coming here today. I just want to say on the record that we were very thankful for your involvement in Jersey. You took two days off, and it did not go unnoticed among the Irish Members, so thank you.

The common travel area, as you said, is 100 years old. It is based on a common history that is written into legislation. It enables us to travel and gives us the right to live, work and study. I think that you answered my question, but it was great to see the memorandums of understanding and things like that.

I look forward to the Euros as well. It will be 40 years when it takes place in Northern Ireland since I ran a double-decker bus to Germany in 1988, and we beat a big team called England 1-

0. *[Laughter.]* One thing that it brought was huge confidence to our country, and they reckon that it started the Celtic Tiger and things like that. That is what football can do, and I really look forward to Casement Park and many other places where we can work together to enjoy football and what it can bring.

Again, thanks very much for coming here today, but you answered my question, so thank you.

Mr Steve Baker MP:

Frank, in that case, I shall give a short answer. Thank you very much for your comments. We are fully committed to the CTA, as you know. Although I have confessed to my incompetence in the field of all ball sports, I certainly recognise the value of football, rugby and other sports. If you want to put on a bus to go around and whip up support for football, I shall see whether I can join you. I should certainly be glad to consider it, but thank you for your kindness and your welcome.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

There's an outing.

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA:

I thank the Minister for his comments. Just two points, Minister. I asked the previous Minister about the introduction of the green and red lanes. Come challenges, come opportunities. Will you expand on that with regard to the business world in the North and how the whole island can benefit from that?

My other point is about the electronic travel authorisation (ETA). Seventy per cent of the people who travel to the island of Ireland travel through Dublin. For those who require an ETA, how are we going to ensure a smooth transition for them to visit those beautiful sights in the north of the island? I recognise that we are sitting in a beautiful part of the country today, but the ETA is a barrier to those who are going to travel to the beautiful counties in the North. I

appreciate that you brought up the issue today, but there needs to be a serious conversation about those who will travel to the island of Ireland, land in Dublin and will now be inhibited from travelling to the north of the island, the Giant's Causeway and some of the other sights that are up there. Some commentary on that, please.

Mr Steve Baker MP:

In relation to tourism, we have worked closely with the Government of Ireland and other stakeholders who have expressed concern, and it is the Government's decision that we will need people to have a travel authorisation. That is in line with our long-standing policy that UK migration law applies to everyone, although, clearly, it does not apply to people within the scope of the common travel area.

We are going to need to have that serious conversation that you refer to. We have been having a serious conversation about it. At the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, we agreed that we would work towards common communication across a wide range of channels to communicate the requirement, but we will keep the situation under review. Like you, I want to make sure that tourists can enjoy the whole island, and I recognise the statistics that you gave about people arriving through Dublin.

Your first question was about taking advantage of the red and green channels. People will know that I spent quite a lot of political capital to get us onto a more stable footing, so I am grateful that it worked. So many people have come together to make a success of the more stable, new arrangements. I recognised that we could not go on any longer with instability and the stone in the shoe of our relationship. I am grateful that things have been reset, and I echo Michael's comments that businesses need certainty.

10.45 am

It is true that there is going to be some additional work for businesses to do, but we now have a unique opportunity in Northern Ireland. Of course, goods market access to the EU and the

UK was available in the EU, but we now have, as of right, access for Northern Ireland to GB, access to the EU on a privilege basis, but, crucially, with UK services regulation and in combination with access to our free trade agreements, there is access to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and that is not available anywhere outside Northern Ireland. It is a unique set of institutional arrangements, and that is why we held the investment summit.

Forgive me for not getting into the detail of the paperwork on the green lane/red lane system, but, taken as a whole, it means that Northern Ireland has an amazing opportunity in front of it. I want to see that opportunity absolutely seized, because when I go to the Falls, the Shankill and many other places, I can see that there are communities that have been passed by, and I want to create the maximum number of good jobs for everyone and lift those communities up. Forgive me, but the overall benefit that Northern Ireland now has outweighs the marginal inconvenience of the arrangements. Now that it is stable, as Michael has indicated, people can get used to it and move forward.

Senator Emer Currie:

Thank you very much, Minister Baker. I echo what Deputy Feighan said and completely agree with him. This is your third time at BIPA; we really appreciate it, and I hope that you come to all the BIPA sessions because, even if we do not agree on everything, the exchanges are worthwhile.

There is a theme to some of the questions that have emerged today. It is great news that we will see Euro 2028 in venues across Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. How will that work when an electronic travel authorisation is being introduced? People will not be able to travel freely as tourists, and that is a big problem. Some of the figures have been mentioned today, but if 70% of visitors to Northern Ireland come through Ireland, that is a big problem, not just for Northern Ireland but for the north-west. Ninety percent of Donegal's land

border is with Northern Ireland. I do not see the focus on that issue that there needs to be: it is going to affect a million people annually. My question is more direct: you mentioned that you are considering mitigation measures, and an exemption for legal residents in Ireland is a positive one, but what other mitigation measures are being looked at, if the British Government are determined to bring it through? It will undermine all-island tourism. Is a seven-day waiver for travel to the North one of those possible exemptions?

It is also an opportunity to highlight the poor condition we are in when it comes to all-island bodies. The North/South Ministerial Council has not sat since 2021. It has been disrupted since 2017, and there has been a very real effect on cross-border cooperation, not just in Tourism Ireland but for InterTradeIreland. Waterways Ireland is another example, as it cannot hire staff or make the budget decisions that it needs to make, and that is having a very real effect. My question therefore is this: if there is talk of an east-west council, what implications does that have for the cooperation, North and South, that we have not been able to pursue?

I have one last point to make. I know that you have said that this is a great forum for discussion and for us to move on from issues. I will just remind you that, with the introduction of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, the victims of Northern Ireland cannot move on. I hope that the Irish Government will not move on either and will take an interstate case about that legislation.

I say again that I really appreciate your coming and our having the opportunity to speak to you directly in this forum, and I hope that you will continue to attend.

Mr Steve Baker MP:

You raise a few issues there. First, thank you for your kindness in welcoming me. You personally have always made me very welcome, and I appreciate it.

The suggestion about the seven-day waiver is welcome, and I will certainly undertake to discuss it with Home Office colleagues. We will particularly contextualise it for the Euros. I

note your assertion that the ETA scheme will harm tourism, and the point has been frequently raised. Overall, however, the Government have taken the decision to introduce the scheme and seek, first and foremost, to mitigate it by communicating the requirement to people. You have raised quite a lot of points, but I will certainly undertake to discuss the idea of a waiver for seven days with the Home Office and will be glad to do so.

On the North/South Ministerial Council, I do not think that Minister Smyth will mind my saying that, when we met earlier, we discussed some matters that would be for that Council were it up and running. You are right to highlight another shortcoming of the Assembly and Executive's not being in place.

I hope that you will understand that I have to be a bit careful on the subject of Executive restoration. Although I am regularly briefed, the matter sits first and foremost with the Secretary of State, and I dare not make comments that could put a foot out of place during such a sensitive time. I know that the Secretary of State is very optimistic that the Executive will return. I will just say that we are all very much hoping that they return as soon as possible, and sooner rather than later. In order to serve the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland, its return is overdue. The North/South Ministerial Council is extremely important. If we are not able to get the institutions back, we will have to take some steps to make those institutions, and the cooperation that follows from them, work.

I look forward with interest to discovering what the DUP proposes on an east-west council and to going through that. As I say, that lies first and foremost with the Secretary of State. I am very conscious that we already have this extremely good Assembly in which to discuss matters across the whole island. As one would expect, I am rather sceptical of instituting duplicates, and I would not want to do that. We will, however, have to take the DUP's concerns seriously. On victims and legacy, I recognise, I hope with humility, that I do not know what it is like to be one of those families. My colleagues and I have engaged with stakeholders, and we are

absolutely apprised of the strength of people's views. Nevertheless, the Government decided that we needed to have a new approach, as you know. You do not need me to rehearse the Government's position in this forum.

On the interstate case, we would urge people to take time to engage with the chief commissioner designate, who has offered to come over and brief the Government of Ireland, and hear from him how he intends to take those matters forward. Sir Declan Morgan is a man of unimpeachable qualification for the role, with a great deal of experience around the issue of legacy. Bearing in mind the various cases that have come up over time, the vanishing prospect of convictions, and the fact that there is only a conditional immunity, the commission will still be able to refer people for prosecution.

If you take matters in the round, given the circumstances that we face and what the commission will be capable of delivering, I would urge the Government of Ireland to take enough time to consult the commission and think seriously about whether it could work. We believe that it can work and are acutely aware of its sensitivity. In good faith, we would like it to work, and we would like to be able to collaborate to make it work on the cross-border issues that arise. I am sorry that we have disagreed on this one, but I encourage engagement with the chief commissioner.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

I have down to speak Victor Boyhan, followed by Peter Fitzpatrick, Niall Blaney and Steve Aiken.

Senator Victor Boyhan:

I will not go into great detail, because Senator Currie has more or less raised the issue that I intended to raise, which is the legacy and reconciliation legislation. You can ask people to forget, but you cannot always ask people to forgive, and vice versa. It is a challenge. I listened,

Minister, to what you have said about the Irish Government taking time to consider it. The Irish Government have taken considerable time, and, indeed, yesterday, I took the opportunity to look at the parliamentary questions answered by various Ministers in the Dáil. It is clear that the Irish Government have given it very considerable review, and, indeed, the Co-Chair has extensively asked parliamentary questions about the issue, and I also had a look at them.

The approach pursued by the UK Government is, in my personal view, simply not compliant with the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Court is a place, a vehicle and a mechanism that is open to the Irish Government and others to use to take a case to vindicate people's human rights. It is my view that we should pursue this. It is regrettable, but "sorry" is a very simple word. "Forgiveness" is another word, as is "forget". On all sides of the divide, people lived through great pain, agony and loss, and that is a legacy. When we talk about legacy, we have to emphasise reconciliation as part of that. That is my view, and I would not want to have come here and gone away without saying to you that the legislation is something that deeply troubles people on the island of Ireland. It deeply troubles people in the UK. I have many family members who choose to live in the UK who are Irish and and are very successful in their life and commercial life in the UK.

That is the kernel of justice and reconciliation, so, Minister, all that I will say is that it is being pursued and that, among parliamentarians of all shades and sides in the Oireachtas, there is a view that the Irish Government cannot just walk away. I share that view, and I want to share it with you, because it is an important message that I would like to leave with you and this forum today.

Mr Steve Baker MP:

Victor, I hear you very clearly. You are right, of course, that the Irish Government have seriously considered the legislation as it has gone through. What is new is that the chief commissioner is in place and is setting up the institution and establishing the policies that will

make it work — we respect the independence of the commission — and there is the opportunity to engage with the chief commissioner, a man who is impeccably qualified for the role. When I reflect on some of the documents that I have read about legacy and on the lessons learned from various inquiries, I think that we need a new approach and a new institution.

I would not begin to presume to get into forgiveness, because I do not know what people have been through. I am absolutely sure that everybody in the room has suffered loss and hurt in their life and has had to move on, but far be it from me to presume to speak to victims about how they get through it.

The commissioner is in place, developing the institution and putting policies in place, and doing so independently of Ministers. That creates a new space and opportunity for the Irish Government to engage with the chief commissioner and perhaps consider the possibility that the commission might work satisfactorily after all. There is time to do it. I know that the Secretary of State has spoken to the Tánaiste about timings, and I am sure that that conversation will continue. In good faith, we just want this to work, but I hear your message very clearly.

11.00 am

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

I met you last night for the first time, and, to be honest, I found you open and very friendly. I have a lot of family and friends who live in Northern Ireland, and they are worried. I always use the saying that “your health is your wealth”, and they are concerned about the fact that one in every four people living in Northern Ireland is on a hospital waiting list. That is only one of the many topics of concern. At the moment, Northern Ireland is being run by civil servants, which is not too good. You have been quoted recently as saying:

“We’ve got investors converging on NI in a spirit of goodwill wanting to invest”.

Goodwill lasts only so long. Minister, is every stone not being left unturned to get the Executive back up and running? Can you please tell us the latest? When do you expect the Executive to

be up and running?

Mr Steve Baker MP:

Peter, thank you very much. No stone is being left unturned to try to get the Executive back. I want to be honest with you because I prefer honesty and openness. As I have said a couple of times in the House of Commons, the Windsor framework is a hard compromise for unionists and for Eurosceptics because it leaves in place some EU law in Northern Ireland. I am sure that we in this room all wish to be pragmatic and to compromise where we can, but every compromise loses some people from the edges. Some people in the community of Eurosceptics and unionists will never be reconciled to some EU law still being in place. That is at the heart of the difficulty in why it has taken so long, but I think that everyone can see the desperate need to deal with the issues that you raise, healthcare in particular. That is not, of course, related only to this period of the Executive's being down. For many years, health reform has not taken place in Northern Ireland but should have. In my constituency, the centralisation of services that has followed from the specialisation of clinicians has caused immense public outcry, but it is necessary in order to drive up the quality of care and improve people's lives. That has not happened in Northern Ireland. A number of reports have been issued, and they need to be followed through. It is a matter of great frustration to me that I cannot do that. Unless we have direct rule, I cannot do that.

You make the point about civil servants governing. I really want to take this opportunity to put on record again my thanks to civil servants. They have risen to a task that they should not have to rise to. Ministers should be taking the decisions. In a sense, it is reassuring, as a politician, to discover that the Civil Service does need us after all. It really does. Again, I appeal to the DUP. However hard the compromise is, I am afraid that this is what the deal is going to be. There is going to be stability, as Michael set out. Everybody needs to evaluate the situation from their strategic point of view and ask what is best. If one is a Northern Irish unionist and

wishes to keep Northern Ireland in the union, the best way to do that is to make the Government work because, if the Government do not work, in a nutshell, the public will vote for change.

No stone is being left unturned. The matter is, first and foremost, with the Secretary of State. I hope that you will forgive me; I dare not try and give you the latest in case I put a foot wrong and disrupt the process. I hope that you will forgive me for that, but I assure you that we are all absolutely seized of the imperative to serve everyone in Northern Ireland, including your friends. You can, by all means, assure them that my heart is with them. Whether it is on schools, hospitals or the environment, there is much to be done very urgently.

Senator Niall Blaney:

In the same vein, I wish to say a few words on the legacy Act. As someone who met Lord Caine on three occasions over the last year or more, I have to say that, as a public representative, I very much felt ignored on all the issues that I raised over the period when the Act was a Bill. I am my party's spokesperson on Northern Ireland, so I spend a fair bit of time in Northern Ireland. I do not think that the British Government understand the trauma that the legislation has caused, first and foremost, for the families of victims in Northern Ireland given the re-traumatising that they are experiencing, how much they are losing faith in you as a Government and how much they are not willing now to work with you. Legislation of this nature should, first and foremost, be built around the victims and victims' families, but that never happened. It should also have been done in the flavour of the Good Friday Agreement, where new relationships were set up and understandings and agreements were put in place. To introduce that legislation without proper consultation with and the agreement of the Irish Government was another serious step back. It is part of the reason why relationships on this island have not been good over the last period, but I am glad to see that they are now improving. I concur with my colleague Senator Currie that the Irish Government need and have to take this case to the European Court of Human Rights, because there is nobody else to stand up for

the victims in Northern Ireland. They really feel at a loss. Many are at the point of giving up, having spent their lives fighting for justice. Some were on the brink of having their cases heard. We are in an awful predicament, and one that the British Government should consider pulling back from, coming to the table with all the actors around it, including the victims and the Irish Government, and starting afresh.

I wish to raise an issue in relation to Lough Neagh, which represents the source of nearly 40% of Northern Ireland's drinking water. The algae bloom that was created over the summer affected the quality of the water and is a cause of massive concern across Northern Ireland. In the absence of an Executive, I ask the Minister whether he can give assurances to the people of Northern Ireland in relation to addressing the bloom and the water quality. Are there plans to take this water source, over the next five or 10 years, and address it from the point of view of stakeholders such as the farmers who exist around the lough? Is it possible that raw sewage is being discharged into the lough? Is there a plan to deal with those issues and get the lough back to a sustainable level?

Mr Steve Baker MP:

I am so sorry. I did not catch your name.

Senator Niall Blaney:

Senator Niall Blaney.

Mr Steve Baker MP:

Senator — Niall — I am very grateful for what you say and the measured way in which you say it. Again, in the spirit of openness, I am at a slight disadvantage in considering the story of how we come to be here over a number of years. The Bill finished its passage through the House of Commons before I was appointed a Minister, so you will understand that I necessarily was not closely involved in the formulation of policy prior to its introduction and therefore I

necessarily was not involved during its Commons passage or in the engagement with families, so I am at something of a disadvantage. Although I have done some engagement, it has mostly been with Lord Caine during the Bill's passage through the Lords. I hope that you understand that it is difficult for me to dissect the passage in the way that you can.

You use the term "an awful predicament". I will be honest and agree with you. It is an awful predicament that so many people should be so unhappy with what we are doing. You make a plea that we start afresh. That is not going to be the Government's policy; I have to be honest with you. The best way forward is to give the chief commissioner the space and time, as he hires his staff, to show that he is going to be victim-centred, has learned from other inquiries, notably Operation Kenova, and to show that the commission is going to be capable of satisfying families. I realise that that is a very, very steep uphill path from the awful predicament that we are in at the moment. All I can say is that I hear you, and the Government are absolutely committed to supporting the commission, operating independently, to try to climb that path. I am acutely aware of the sensitivity and hear clearly everything that has been said today.

On water quality, this is another one where, I am sorry, it is tearingly frustrating for me, as it is for you. I would absolutely love to have a plan for sorting out water quality in Northern Ireland, but it is devolved, and we remain firmly committed to devolution and devolved government working. That is why we are working closely and intensively with the DUP to meet its concerns and make it possible for it to return to the institutions.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

In the interests of time, I will group the last four questions together. Is that OK, Minister, if you are happy to take those?

Mr Steve Baker MP:

Yes.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

We have Steve Aiken, Kate Nicholl, Rose Conway-Walsh and Diarmuid Wilson. Does anyone else want to say anything? OK. Let us take Steve Aiken MLA, Kate Nicholl MLA and Rose Conway Walsh TD first, and then we will take Diarmuid and Seán afterwards. We have 20 minutes, so we would be very grateful if you could be concise with those questions to the Minister.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

Thanks very much indeed. Steve, you are a friend, but words matter. You say that installing an internal border in the United Kingdom is a marginal inconvenience; it is not. You and other people need to understand that, particularly for my community, putting a border down the middle of the Irish Sea is not a marginal inconvenience. I ask you to think carefully about how you use your words and address those issues, because it is a substantial problem. An internal border in the United Kingdom is not a good thing.

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA:

Minister, in your statement, you said that your job was to be a cheerleader, and I think that you have been for Northern Ireland. We all very much enjoyed your holiday photos from the north coast. I think that your interest in Northern Ireland is authentic. You have answered this, so I do not expect a particular response to it, but today is the 30th anniversary of the Shankill bombing, and the scars and the pain are still very much felt. There is not much that unites people and politicians in Northern Ireland, but our opposition to the legacy Bill was something that we all came together on.

My question is about funding. You will be aware of the work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, which indicates that the level of government funding provided for Northern Ireland is not reflective of the underlying relative need. It found that relative need is 124% of that in England. That is really important given the current financial pressures, which

you will be aware of. What consideration have the Government given to providing a floor under the block grant in line with relative need, as is done in Wales?

Ms Rose Conway-Walsh TD:

I have to use my time for the legacy Bill as well. You are both welcome. It is good to see you both here this morning. Steve, the number of people who have opposed the Bill all along include: the Irish Government; all political parties on the island of Ireland; members of the US Congress and Senate from both main parties; the British Labour Party, which has said that it is committed to repealing it if it is in power after the next Westminster elections; the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; the Law Society of Northern Ireland; the Association of European Lawyers; the UN rapporteurs; and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights.

My question is around the international impact of it. Notwithstanding your confidence in the chief commissioner, Britain is a member of the UN Security Council and the G7. The Bill will set a deeply concerning international precedent, signaling to other states that they can ignore their human rights obligations, considering that this Bill violates domestic and international human rights obligations. Right at this moment, there is huge global volatility. Are you not concerned at all about the international consequences? Is there not an onus on the Irish Government, aside from the impact on victims and their families, to take an interstate case in that regard? Surely other countries will look at what Britain has done and think that it is OK to break international, legally binding commitments.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Do you want to take those three, and then I will come back to the other two?

Mr Steve Baker MP:

Obviously, the matters that are raised are all very serious. Steve, I apologise. You remind me

of the importance of every last word. People may remember me standing up in the House of Commons demanding that we change the protocol. I think that I demanded that Northern Ireland should not be treated as an enclave within the European Union because it is part of our country. I said that with great force and, as someone else said, authenticity. I only ever try to be authentic, and I want to apologise to you. I used the terms relating to businesses and once businesses are in the green lane and registered and trading. That is what I was referring to with those words, but I recognise that, for you, those were the wrong words to have used, and I am sorry.

11.15 am

Over my career, I have been one of the most headbanging Euroceptics and unionists, albeit from a Great British perspective. Unionism in Northern Ireland is different. I recognise that. However, I have compromised because I recognise that we have had so much trouble. To talk to you very practically, I faced a choice when the Windsor framework came through. I could have resigned, but what would have happened if 100 rebels had gone through that Lobby? It would still have gone through on Labour votes. We talk about international consequences. The reputation of the United Kingdom and the Conservative Party for being capable of reaching a sensible agreement with a compromise would have been in the gutter. It would have wrecked the country for generations. Our international reputation for being capable of sorting out international affairs would have been in the gutter, so I did not do it. The reason why I was capable of not doing it was that I looked carefully at what had been achieved and thought, "This is massive practical progress". I recognised that the DUP would continue to have criticisms, but we are all politicians: we know that we can choose only from the available futures. I felt that, on balance and given the available futures, the right thing to do was to back the Windsor framework as hard as possible. So I did. I have not been through the same stuff that you guys have been through, but, goodness knows, history records my work in getting the UK out of the

EU. We have all been through quite a lot of trouble, and we all have to soberly reflect on where we are and on what is possible and then do what we think is best for the people whom we represent. At the moment, I earnestly believe that the best thing to do is to implement the Windsor framework.

We heard Michael's tone in what said. He said that there would be some implementation problems and that we needed to work through them in a spirit of goodwill and then solve them. My goodness, that is different from where we were. I am afraid that we need to accept what is possible and get on with it, take advantage of this new spirit of cooperation and try to work out the implementation details, such as making the most of the green channel and trying to enlarge it. I absolutely recognise your criticism, and people need only look at social media to see what many unionists think of me for making the compromise. I have said enough on that, however. Perhaps we could have a drink later and talk about it.

Kate, thank you for recognising my authenticity. I am being authentic. I like being in Northern Ireland, and I like being Minister of State for Northern Ireland. It is a great opportunity and a real privilege. It is a privilege to be here with Michael and all of you. You mentioned the united opposition to the legacy Bill; I am acutely aware of that.

You also mentioned the Fiscal Council. We are clear that we are not going to put a large sum of money in to restore the Executive, but, plainly, there is a conversation to be had along the lines, you suggest, as that had with Wales. It took seven years with Wales. If we were to open that conversation, we would need to do it somewhat faster. That is a conversation that needs to happen once an Executive are back. I am acutely aware of the need in Northern Ireland because I see it every time I visit. It is difficult to say this, but I am also acutely aware of the fact that 20% more per head is spent here compared with equivalent government spending in GB. Since 2014, we have put in £7 billion extra on top of the block grant. Those are enormous sums of money. We have to keep very respectful our conversation about how that money is spent and

what needs to change, but there has to be change in Northern Ireland. There has to be revenue raising and reform, and, yes, possibly, we need to open that conversation about the Fiscal Council. However, we cannot go on with unreformed public services, because, in the long run, that is not going to work for people.

Rose talked about international consequences. The United Kingdom is a rule-of-law nation state. We absolutely believe in human rights, and we go to very great lengths to preserve human rights. If international actors are listening to voices say that the UK is doing something terrible on human rights, they will start to think that they can get away with things because people tend to hear what they wish to hear. I encourage everybody to be realistic in the language that they use to describe what we are doing. We are trying to navigate some extremely difficult waters. Twenty-five years on, it is the unfinished business of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. I would love for everybody who deserves justice to get it — of course I would — but that is not going to happen at this late stage. There are not the resources, there is not the time and the evidence is not forthcoming. Everybody here knows better than I do how difficult it has been to get justice.

Am I concerned about the international consequences? Yes, but, honestly, I am more concerned about the way that others present what we are doing than I am about what we are actually doing. What we are actually doing is for a noble cause, and we can justify it. We believe that it is compliant with our obligations. I appreciate that there is disagreement in the room about that, but we believe that we are complying with our obligations and doing something that is noble and right, even though it is extremely difficult. I ask everybody not to overstate their concerns about what we are doing, because that could have highly adverse consequences, and everyone here is acutely aware of the problems in Israel, Gaza and, indeed, Ukraine. Those are matters of the most acute interest to us all.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you. I will take two final questions, if they are brief. We can all then have coffee, which I know is important to everybody. I will take a question from Senator Diarmuid Wilson and then Seán Crowe TD.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I welcome both Ministers. Thank you, Minister McGrath, for your comprehensive outline of the financial situation in our country. I think that we will all agree that our economy is very safe in your hands. I welcome you, Minister Baker, and I thank you for attending yet again and for staying so long with us.

Before I come to my question for Minister Baker, which he partially answered, I will point out to the conference that this is a very small island of 5.6 million people, plus almost 2 million in the North of our country, yet this is the first time that we have had two people from County Cavan as Co-Chairs of our Assembly. They are both named “Smith”, but they are not related. I want to make that point clear. I am delighted to see two Cavan people as Co-Chairs of the Assembly, and they have conducted the business in such an orderly manner. By the way, one of the Co-Chairs, Brendan Smith, says that there is a drink on him for everybody in the main building if they get there within the next two minutes.

Minister Baker, I will ask you a very brief question. You have partially answered it. You described yourself as a “headbanging” unionist, and it is reported that you joined the Conservative Party with one aim in mind: to get Brexit done. Have you any regrets about that? Maybe you will briefly outline to the Assembly what those are. Given your role in the North of Ireland and the Administration there, have you any regrets in campaigning for Brexit, bearing in mind the chaos that it has been responsible for on the island and how it has undermined the Good Friday Agreement, which, as you referred to on a number of occasions, has been 25 years in existence?

Mr Seán Crowe TD:

I want to be associated with the welcome and the comments to Steve. We appreciate the time and energy that you put into Jersey and that you are repeating that today, Steve.

We started off with Frank Feighan talking about sport. In the few minutes that I have, I want to say this: there was a criticism from the Coroner's Court in relation to the inquest into Sean Brown's death. Sean Brown was killed probably because he was a Catholic. He was also a member of the GAA. There was criticism of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs about his case. The coroner was looking for whatever files the Irish Government had in relation to that. I am told that that information is going to be forthcoming and that they are looking at a legal way to pass that information on. I raised it because some of us, including Brendan and me, were in the victims' group in the Oireachtas. Next year, it will be 50 years since there were three explosions in Dublin and another in Monaghan. Thirty-three people were killed, including an unborn baby. Next year will be the 50th anniversary of the bombings. The families have called on the British Government to release whatever information they have on those bombings. There has been agreement on that in both Houses of the Oireachtas: motions calling for the same thing have been passed on a number of occasions. Successive Irish Governments have looked for the same thing, and I am told that Taoisigh have met with Prime Ministers and asked for it. I accept what you are saying about legacy and so on and its being before your tenure, but, again, I appeal to you to use whatever influence you have to secure the release of those files. The Irish Government have released whatever files they have on Sean Brown, and, similarly, you might do the same on Dublin/Monaghan, particularly as next year is the 50th anniversary of the bombings.

Mr Steve Baker MP:

Diarmuid, thank you for inviting me into a confessional in this private company.

First, on the investment of time, you have all been very generous to me. By all means, take it

as read that you are grateful that I am here; I am grateful to be here. The reason that I invest the time is because it is an important institution, as Michael said, and I am glad to do it. Please, I know that we are all glad I am here. I am glad and grateful.

What are my regrets? The reason that I got into politics was not only because of Brexit but because Ireland had to vote twice on the Lisbon treaty, the constitution of France was changed to avoid a referendum and the whole thing was brought forward only to avoid the rejection of the constitution for Europe. To me, the whole thing was a scandal. One regret is that I did not adequately persuade the public to be as outraged as I was that democracy was being steamrollered to try to get a constitution through. At this point, I am likely to start a conflagration in here before getting out [*Laughter.*] I am amazed that you are not all outraged at the treatment of the constitution through the Lisbon treaty. That is my biggest regret: I was a pro-European federalist until the Lisbon treaty. I would have voted against it in a referendum; I did not think it was very good. However, my biggest regret is failing to persuade everyone that the fragile idea that political power rests on the consent of the governed really matters. The handling of the Lisbon treaty and the constitution was a disgrace. You can tell that I still feel somewhat passionate about it all these years on, but I failed to persuade people of that.

On Ireland and the chaos, difficulty and heartache that was caused, I regret that a decision was taken by the Conservative Party, which headed the Government of the time, to race towards a referendum as quickly as possible. I am speaking to you personally and not as a Minister. I believe that the Conservative Party leadership at the time of the 2015 election intended to bargain away the EU referendum in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. I have reason to think that the leadership was devastated when we were not in coalition, not least because it meant that it had to hold the referendum. One of the things that it did was to try to hold the referendum as quickly as possible in the hope that Remain would quickly win, meaning that it would be out of the way.

One of the consequences of that was that we could not properly prepare to have the conversation about what would happen on the island of Ireland. I formed a committee of Members of Parliament with experience of Northern Ireland, such as Theresa Villiers, Owen Paterson and others who were involved, deliberately to pre-empt those issues on the island of Ireland, but we did not have the customs and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) expertise that was necessary to come up with concrete solutions. It was too large an issue, and that was a refrain.

I will not go through all the details, but I can assure you that, since before the referendum, I personally was seized of the risks and tried to mitigate them. The Remain campaign raised the risks in Northern Ireland, and it had no effect whatsoever on the public debate. I asked one of its number, “Why did you not raise it in the campaign?”, and they said, “We did; no one cared”. That is a tragic reflection.

11.30 am

I will choose my words carefully, because you are all entitled to repeat them. Many things happened that I regret. I say personally, since that is what you have invited me to do, that I really hope that, in my time as Minister of State for Northern Ireland, I have somehow atoned for the difficulty that I caused. The apology that I gave caused a shockwave and caused me a lot of trouble, but it was worth doing in order to rebuild these relationships. If I say so myself, I do not think we would not have achieved what we have achieved if I had not done it. That is probably what I am proudest of.

Diarmuid, I hope that you will allow me to leave it there, but you may probe me a bit further later. I will say one thing that will give you a news item. One regret is that it probably should have been a supermajority. That is a huge thing for me to say, because, if it had been a supermajority, we would have lost and we would still be in. The reason why I say that is that, if we had had to have 60%, everybody would have abided by the result. It is inconceivable to

me that, if it had been a 60/40 result, we would have had all the political difficulty that followed, in particular from Members of Parliament refusing to accept the result. The reason why I raise it in this forum, which I am glad to do — please, those of you who want border polls and so on, hear me — is to ask whether anyone here would seriously want a 50 per cent plus one united Ireland result in Northern Ireland? I speak personally.

Mr Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD:

Yes.

Mr Steve Baker MP:

I deliberately said it like that, because I know that some of you would, but just reflect on the trouble that we had from running a 50 per cent plus one referendum in the United Kingdom and ask yourself whether you really want that trouble in Northern Ireland. I do not.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Do you want to talk about Seán Crowe's question?

Mr Steve Baker MP:

I beg your pardon. Seán, I cannot comment on the particular cases. I am sure you understand that I am not equipped to, but, on the general point about British Government information, all our institutions will be under an obligation to cooperate with the commission. It will be a matter for the commission to work through with the Government what will be released and how. We will need to continue to safeguard national security, obviously, but — again, this is why I encourage engagement with the chief commissioner; these matters need to be worked through — all the institutions will be legally obliged to cooperate with the commission, with a view to that information being discovered and released.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Minister Baker, thank you again for staying. In Cavan, we kept you at a very opportune moment, and I think that you appreciated the value of the different views of this body from the UK and the Irish delegations. We are grateful for that. You have covered a huge range of subjects. The CTA/ETA discussion is in one of our papers for tomorrow, and we will discuss that in more detail. You have exhibited your usual candour across a huge range of difficult issues in the questions this morning, and we appreciate that. Thank you for your time. Could we show the Minister our appreciation? *[Applause.]*

The sitting was suspended at 11.32 am.

The sitting was resumed at 12.07 pm.

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF STATE, IRISH DEPARTMENT OF
ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE AND COMMUNICATIONS**

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Colleagues, we need to resume. We are under a bit of time pressure, so I would appreciate it if all Members took their seats. We are delighted to have Ossian Smyth TD, Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform, with special responsibility for Public Procurement and eGovernment, and also Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, with special responsibility for Communications and Circular Economy. Ossian, I am very glad of the opportunity to invite you to give your address to our Assembly. *[Applause.]*

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

Thank you very much, and thank you for giving me my full title. The longer your title, the less important you are. I think that is the message for everybody.

I am very happy to be here. One reason that I am happy to be here is that I have had a lot of

meetings like this with European Ministers. Over time, I have met them on a number of occasions, and you get to the point where you have their phone numbers in your phone. I have the numbers of my equivalent Dutch, Danish, German and French Ministers, but I do not have that for Northern Ireland. I was happy that, at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference in Farmleigh, I got to meet Julia Lopez, my opposite number from Westminster, but I have had virtually no contact with anybody from Northern Ireland. I went up to Belfast and met Tina Black, the Lord Mayor, and Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, the former Finance Minister. Honestly, I have had so little contact with the North, and it makes no sense because, in a very practical way, I need to cooperate on very practical things that I am doing because they spread over the border. Sometimes the border cannot be a hard border. There are rivers flowing back and forth, and I am a Minister in the Department of the Environment, so it is important that we have this meeting. I am very happy to be here.

I heard earlier the question about Lough Neagh. Lough Neagh is the largest water body in Britain or Ireland. It is a source of drinking water in Northern Ireland. It is used for tourism and fishing. The idea that it is covered in stagnant algal bloom is shocking to all of us. It is horrific that that could happen. I heard Steve Baker talk about it. He feels that he is powerless to do anything about it. There is devolved power, but power has been devolved to people who cannot act because they are civil servants and they are not empowered to do so. I feel that the stagnation in that lake is reflected in the political system. I am glad to hear positive notes from the Democratic Unionist Party that they want to do something to move forward, but we really need to get the institutions back up and running. I need to be able to ring or meet somebody in the North who is working on the same practical issues as I am.

That said, I have a positive speech to make. I am going to talk about cooperation on electricity and gas; and about what we need to do to work together, as two islands, to deal with the problems of climate change. For a long time when we talked about climate change, the first

thing that you had to do was overcome the fact that there were many people who just did not believe that it was an issue. That is not a problem any more. All of us can see it around us. We do not need to see the statistics or reports. You can see that the weather is wrong, that it is unseasonable, that it is incredibly hot at the wrong times, that the seasons are changing and that something has to happen.

Our electricity system, North and South, is deeply interconnected. EirGrid owns the Northern Ireland grid. Electricity interconnectors connect our two islands. In fact, Ireland is not connected to anywhere else for electricity. Gas comes into Ireland from Scotland, and we have no other source of gas. Cooperation has to exist on a practical level, or we will not have any power or electricity. That is the reality. Working on this is an absolute necessity and not a diplomatic nicety.

Two very practical things have happened recently, both memorandums of understanding: one on electricity and the other on gas. They reflect progress in our cooperation. The relationship between Britain and Ireland has not been good in recent years. It went downhill. The fact that those two MOUs happened is proof that we are making progress. I will talk about those for a second. The first MOU is cooperation in energy transition, offshore renewables and electricity interconnection, and that facilitates increased information sharing on renewables as well as cooperation on opportunities for further electrical interconnection between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. That increased cooperation with offshore grids and enhanced interconnection is going to be productive and timely for Ireland because of the UK's status as a global leader in the development of offshore renewable energy and Ireland's considerable offshore renewable resource. The benefits of enhanced interconnection include increased security of supply, improved wholesale market competition and the possibility of exporting surplus renewable electricity during times of oversupply.

The second MOU is on cooperation for natural gas security of supply. That highlights the

increasingly constructive energy relationship between Ireland and the UK. While, in the future, most of Ireland's electricity needs will be met by renewable electricity, as we transition, natural gas will play a crucial backup role in our energy system. This MOU will provide the opportunity to reaffirm and strengthen our well-established arrangements and engagement with the UK as we work to enhance the security of energy supply while we decarbonise our economy.

The nature of renewable energy is that it is variable. There are times when the wind does not blow or the sun does not shine. It is vital to have a grid interconnection with a neighbouring country, so that we can balance out our electricity supplies. It is also vital that in a time when there is a shortage of gas — we know from the Ukraine war that that can happen suddenly — we can balance out our need to maintain security of supply between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. Crucially, the MOU on gas reaffirms at a political level that, if there is a future disruption to supply, it would be shared proportionately across the UK and Ireland. Those two MOUs are the latest in a series of developments, as we continue to accelerate our important mission of delivering offshore wind energy in Ireland over the coming decade at a scale and scope that we perhaps have not seen since the electrification of the country.

12.15 pm

Our strategy in Ireland is to move to 80% of our electricity coming from renewable sources. That means, in effect, that 20% will come from gas. At the same time, we are building more gas power stations. Some of you will know why that is. We are building an extra 2 gW of gas power. It will probably take between four and seven new gas power stations. Why are we building more gas stations for more gas power generation if we are moving to a point where 80% of our power is coming from renewable sources? The reason is because we will need it for peaking power. We will need it for those times when the wind drops for a long time and it

drops in the UK at the same time. Our broad strategy is to move away from gas and to have a great reduction in gas but an increase in our ability to generate power from gas as needed.

When it comes to Ireland's offshore wind ability, we have a huge area of sea. It is windy in Ireland on land; at sea, it is even windier. We have huge potential to develop offshore wind. We had a long period of roughly 20 years when we just did nothing. Our first offshore wind development, off the coast of Arklow in the Irish Sea, was one of the first in the world. Then, other countries went ahead and developed their offshore wind — I see it when I visit Germany, the UK or the Netherlands — but we really did not make progress. A couple of years ago, we finally began to realise that it was time to go. The price has dropped a lot, so we are in a good position to do it, but we are behind where the UK and other countries are.

Our ambition is to develop 5 gW of offshore wind power by 2030 and an additional 2 gW specifically for generating hydrogen. That will be 7 gW by 2030. A broader or longer-term ambition is to develop 30 gW of wind power by 2050. We want to move towards a point where we can generate far more electricity than Ireland itself can use and where we will export that electricity. We will, of course, export it by cable, although we have been in meetings with the German and Dutch Governments about memorandums of understanding to export hydrogen to those countries in the form of liquid ammonia. That is the future that is developing.

There is still a lot of uncertainty around hydrogen and exactly what it will be used for. There are not any large commercial electrolyzers of hydrogen in existence yet. In some ways, it is a simple technology, but a lot of risks and dangers are associated with it. We are planning for something even though it is not entirely clear where it will be in five or 10 years' time. I know not to bet the house on that. Hydrogen has a lot of potential, and we will work away on it, but what its uses will be is not exactly clear. We believe that it will be used a lot for long-distance trucking and for shipping, but it is highly unlikely to be used for home heating or cars, for example. I want to be clear that we are not entirely sure where hydrogen is going.

Our first renewable energy auction took place earlier this year. At that auction, we procured 3 gW of offshore wind capacity, which is huge. That is our first attempt at getting the worldwide offshore wind industry excited by or interested in Irish offshore wind. Coming next is the second offshore auction, which will take place in early 2024. It will be the first auction to procure up to 900 mW of capacity from a State-selected provisional designated maritime area plan of Ireland's south coast. That idea of a designated maritime area plan was published in July 2023. It provides clarity on where future offshore actions will take place, and it will act as a management plan for a specific area of our marine waters. It means that the state is designating particular areas in the ocean and saying, "This is where offshore wind is going to happen. This is where you need to direct your attention", rather than allowing all offshore wind companies to go out like the 1849 gold rush and try to put a stake everywhere and make applications all over the place. We decided that we were going to go for a plan-led approach rather than a developer-led approach, and I know that some people in the industry who were hoping that the system would work in another way were disappointed at that. However, that is our approach, and it is based on the experience that we have seen in other European countries. As well as developing our offshore wind, we are going to take into consideration the views of local communities and stakeholders, particularly those in the fishing and seafood industry, and we will determine the appropriate location for offshore renewable energy developments. As well as helping to meet our climate goals, those processes, along with subsequent offshore development, will have a transformational impact on investment, regional communities and sustainable job creation.

We are also developing our national spatial strategy and a long-term model for the offshore renewable energy sector in Ireland. The long-term model envisioned for offshore renewable energy in Ireland is called the future framework. The policy will be published early next year, and it will set out the pathway for reaching our 30 gW of wind by 2050. I know that is

ambitious, but I think that it is entirely doable.

As countries such as Ireland move towards future energy exports, increased electricity interconnection will be a key enabler in our growing use of renewable energy. It will also play an important role in our transition to become a net energy exporter, and it will make Ireland central to wider European energy plans. Irish interconnection energy policy needs to evolve in tandem with the expansion of the offshore energy sector and grid development in Ireland, the EU and third countries.

Our new interconnection policy was published in July, and it will see Ireland increase its electricity interconnection capacity and explore new interconnection opportunities with Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands. There are also plans for further connections with France and the UK, a development that also highlights the importance of the close partnership between the two states. That is five countries that we are planning to interconnect our grid to with subsea HV cables. That is something new. The electricity interconnections that we have at the moment are just to the UK. We have about half a gigawatt of interconnection. It is very useful for balancing out our grid, but our plan is that, with moving from one country's interconnection to five countries, we will increase our interconnection capacity tenfold in a decade. Our plan is that, by 2033, we will have five gW of interconnection. If we are generating huge quantities of renewable energy offshore and we need to move it between different grids in Europe, we need that type of interconnection. That is a huge subsea cable infrastructure going on.

At the same time, in the other Department that I work in, I am building subsea internet cables. In some cases, they will go along the same wires. The Celtic interconnector to France will be accompanied by fibre-optic cable as well.

I should like to talk about food waste and anaerobic digestion for a second. We are trying to cut our food waste by 50% by 2030, but we also have a new policy to develop the anaerobic digestion sector in Ireland, which hardly exists when you compare it with Germany or the UK.

We have a challenge there, which is that most of our food waste in the Republic of Ireland is moved across the border. It goes up for anaerobic digestion in the North, and we need to work that out. We need to synchronise or align our incentives. It does not make sense to take a containerload of food waste in Kerry and drive it to Derry, which is what happens at the moment. It does not make any sense. It is a low value, heavy product, which should be used locally. It absolutely makes sense to compost your waste or to turn it into biogas, but driving it all around the country in diesel trucks does not make sense. That is an example of the kind of practical thing that I would like to be able to pick up a phone to somebody in Northern Ireland and talk to them about, and I know that that will happen at official level, but it also needs some political input.

With regard to biomethane, one of the appropriate uses for it is for long-distance trucking, certainly for the distances that we have in Ireland. DHL tells me that it is converting its entire fleet of trucks to biomethane, but it has had to build its own biomethane plant, and the reality is that it is having difficulty getting the food waste to supply it. Ireland, Great Britain and Northern Ireland have a mutual interest in working out those issues of energy supply.

I did not touch on security of supply, but I can say that, if we are entirely dependent on connections to Scotland for our gas supply, that clearly puts us at risk. With renewable energy, there is variability, and changes in the weather mean that you are not getting the same supply that you would expect from one time to another. There is also huge variability in price for fossil fuels, however. You can say that you can always get fossil fuel and that it is always reliable, but what if it were to cost 10 times what it had cost previously? We have had 10-times variations in price. That is a real problem. To protect against the risk of a cut in our supply of gas, we need to have storage in Ireland. I expect that, in the coming weeks, a memo on what our gas storage strategy should be — in the short term and the long term — will come before Cabinet. That is something that we need to do. We also certainly need to avoid fracked gas, but

we need to find a way in which to make sure that there is gas storage for Ireland.

Finally, let me say that I am honoured to have been asked to come here today. It is significant, particularly given the recent difficulties that have existed in relations, between both North and South and east and west. It is encouraging to see that we can sit down together and meet. We have mutual interests. I look forward to your questions. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Ossian, for your comprehensive address. Your opening remarks regarding the lack of contact with decision makers in Northern Ireland reinforce the message that we are all very conscious of, which is the need to have the institutions — the Assembly and the Executive — back up and fully functioning and the North/South Ministerial Council operating across all sectors.

We will take questions to the Minister. The first offering will be from Lord Alf Dubs, and he will be followed by Senator Vincent P Martin.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and, Minister, thank you. We bumped into each other over coffee, and I gave you a bit of warning of my question. You said that you were happy that I ask it, and it is certainly complicated. Given the increasing proportion of energy that is going to come through renewables in Ireland, and given the likelihood that prices of renewables will become even more favourable compared with the those for the more traditional gas energy, what is the position on prices to the consumer? As I understand it, energy prices are determined by world markets. If, however, 80% of your energy production is going to come from renewables, that is not a function of world markets but a function of how efficiently offshore energy is working. Consumers will benefit from the environment being better, but at what point will they benefit from the price of energy as renewables increase their proportion of the total supply? I hope that

I have made that clear. I will not say it again, as I am sure that you understood.

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

Thank you, Lord Dubs. It is very nice to meet you. Yours is the only question that I have been asked in advance. I think that what you are asking is this: will consumers be charged for electricity at the marginal price? In other words, will they be charged at the price of gas, effectively, in 2030? Will they be charged high prices for electricity, even though there is a huge quantity of renewable energy on the grid?

You can see what is happening. Moving away from fossil fuel sources to a completely renewable system, or a nearly completely renewable system, is a massive transformation to make. It is a huge change. It needs to be accompanied by a transformation in the market mechanisms. By 2030, the EU has to have reformed the way in which it prices electricity. I cannot see how we can be pegged to the price of gas. There is obviously the chance that, by that stage, natural gas will have been mostly replaced by a combination of biomethane and hydrogen. There is therefore the possibility that we will, for the most part, have got away from using natural gas that is drilled out of the ground.

12.30 pm

On renewable energy pricing, I will take the price of wind electricity as an example. The way that that was originally organised in Ireland was that we gave wind farms guaranteed minimum prices. We said, “This is the minimum price you get, but you can sell it for whatever you can get on the day”. That led to wind farms making really excessive profits during the Ukrainian war — but only those wind farms that had been on the grid a long time. The recent wind farms had been given the opposite. They had been given maximum prices. The pricing mechanism has really changed for renewables, and a lot of that idea of very high prices has gone. You can also see that we use a windfall tax as a mechanism to recoup unfair profits from renewable sources, but that cannot be the practical way of doing it in the future. That approach was taken

because of what happened during the Ukraine war, but it is a sign that there is something wrong in the pricing mechanism, and I accept that.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister.

Senator Vincent P Martin:

It is good to see you here, Co-Chair. Brendan Smith has devoted his political life to achieving his goals by peaceful means. It is lovely to see this strand up and running and so seamless today.

What is not so seamless is, as others have referred to, the cooperation between North and South. Minister, are you still on course, as I hope you are, to deliver the reverse vending machines for plastic bottles and cans in the Republic of Ireland next February? You said very recently that you are. I hope that that is still on course. You said that there is no phone number for a Minister in Northern Ireland. Some of the cans will be in Northern Ireland. Is there any sign that it will happen there or in Great Britain or other places? It is a matter of frustration for me.

I currently have two Bills at different stages in the Oireachtas. One is to ban the importation of the non-native honeybee into Ireland. It hybridises the famous black native honeybee, of which we are one of the last strongholds in Europe. That Bill is advancing through the Oireachtas. I have no phone number for the devolved Parliament across the border to try to make sure. That is a great example of where the environment does not recognise borders. I also have a Bill for the safe disposal of that carcinogenic substance, formaldehyde, which is used in embalming. My Bill is to make sure that formaldehyde does not get into the water system but should, under very strict conditions, be disposed of in a certain way.

Minister, what are the plans? Scotland, they say, had varied success with the reverse vending machine system. Are you pleased that you are on course? Is there much cooperation? Did you

do any comparator studies with the rest of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? An all-island approach to that would be very positive.

Finally, to all here today in my home constituency, you are so welcome. You are very close to the scene of the Ryder Cup success in 2006, spearheaded by great people from Great Britain, Northern Ireland and Ireland, including Pádraig Harrington and the brilliant Ulster golfer Darren Clarke. Thank you, Minister.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks very much, Vincent P.

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

Thank you, Senator Vincent P. We are on your home turf, so thanks for hosting us here. You asked about reverse vending machines. These are the machines that you see at a supermarket where you bring back your bottles and cans, put them in a slot and get money back. It is part of the deposit return scheme that I will be launching on 1 February 2024. It is on target to launch on time. It will involve 2 billion bottles and cans being brought back, which is immense. These are single-use plastic and aluminium products.

Scotland's scheme has been folded in with the UK's scheme, as far as I understand. There is going to be a UK-wide scheme, and I would like to make sure that there is not some friction across the border with those schemes. For a start, I do not want smuggling. I do not want people getting a lot of bottles that have not had deposits paid on them and bringing them over the border. You can expect that that will happen if we do not take measures, so we are doing work on that. The body that we have set up to run the scheme has been in communication with its UK counterparts. Ideally, I would like you to be able to buy a bottle on one side of the border, stick it in a machine on the other side and get your credit back. Certainly, I would like to see cooperation between the two. I said to Steve Baker this morning that I am happy to share our

experience of deploying the scheme live, what worked and what did not, with the UK so that it can use the benefit of our experience. It is a positive thing, and the public will pay a lot of attention to it.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister. Deputy Brendan Howlin, to be followed by our colleague from the Isle of Man, Deputy Juan Watterson.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

Thanks, Co-Chair, and thanks, Minister Smyth. I continue to be very impressed by the ambition for offshore renewable energy, but I want to put a couple of specific questions to the Minister in relation to that. You rightly say that it has been a long time coming. Have we done the due diligence for the planning and implementation of it? I look at what is happening in Scotland, where there is a very detailed monitoring of supply-chain spend to maximise spend in their own jurisdiction. Is that happening in Ireland? In the servicing of offshore wind, we still have not designated a particular port. Is it the Government's intention to ensure that the targeted plants can be serviced from Irish ports? When will they be announced, and what sort of infrastructure will be required? It will obviously take years to put that infrastructure in place. My third question is about when we achieve our ambition and we are generating very significant wind electricity. You talked about generating 80% from wind, and then 20% still having to be generated from gas. Are there any plans to look beyond our own jurisdiction for energy storage? You can have very costly storage mechanisms. I am thinking of another Turlough Hill where, when wind is plentiful, you can store energy to be released later. Is there any dialogue going on for that sort of capacity across these islands in a cooperative way?

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

I will start with energy storage. Can it happen cross-border? We certainly have analysed that,

and there is a detailed report about it which is just about to be published. Think of Norway, which has huge energy storage in the mountain lakes that basically acts as a battery for their neighbouring countries. That is a clear example of energy storage happening cross-border. It is certainly possible, and it may not be in the jurisdiction of the Republic versus Northern Ireland and so on. It is an interesting thing.

You asked about supply chains and procurement. I am responsible for procurement policy, as you were. In fact, I think you set up the Office of Government Procurement originally. I am running that now; thank you. We have set up a cross-departmental working group to figure out our industrial strategy for the supply chain for wind energy. We absolutely need to do that. That strategy will be published in the first half of next year. We are talking to the Scottish about that, and the Oireachtas environment group went over to Scotland to visit wind farms and see how things are done. As I said, we had this long period where nothing happened in Ireland in offshore wind while it was happening in places like Scotland, so they are the people who have the expertise.

You ask about port strategy. A new port strategy is about to be produced soon. Your question is: can it happen in Ireland? It has to happen in Ireland. There are two aspects to that. There is the development, or rather construction, of the wind farms themselves, and then the operations and maintenance. Operations and maintenance for wind farms in the Irish Sea will run out of my own Dún Laoghaire harbour, but it will take deep-water ports for the other work. You are absolutely right: we need more detailed strategies for that.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Minister. We are way behind time. Quite a number of Members are offering so, if it meets with the approval of the Minister, we will group a number of questions. The next three contributors will be Deputy Juan Watterson, Speaker of the House of Keys; Annabelle Ewing MSP; and Stephen Doughty MP.

The Hon Juan Watterson SHK:

Gura mie ayd. It was interesting to hear the Minister's practical concerns about reverse vending machines. It brings a whole new meaning to "cross-border Coke smuggling". Thank you to the one person who got that joke.

You mentioned the British Gas pipeline between Scotland and Ireland several times in your speech. You will be aware that there is a spur line off that pipeline to the Isle of Man that is our single source of gas and that produces the vast majority of our energy. I notice, however, that the Isle of Man is not mentioned in the MOU to which you referred. I managed to find it while you spoke. Given that there are also 1,500 square miles of Manx waters between the Republic and the United Kingdom, I wonder what engagement there has been, or will be, with colleagues in the Isle of Man to make sure that there are some opportunities for some win-wins right on Ireland's doorstep.

Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP:

I am conscious that I am wearing my Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament hat when I ask this question. I thank the Minister for his very interesting overview of Ireland's ambitious plans. He will be aware that Scotland also has very ambitious plans on the renewables front.

In general terms, the Minister referred to a series of international engagements with other countries. I want to be assured that, given that the opportunities will be quite substantial, there is in fact direct engagement with the Scottish Government on the general issue of renewables, because, of course, many of those issues are happily devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

Mr Stephen Doughty MP:

I recall a visit with this Assembly to Belfast port a few years ago, where I saw piles of coal in the harbour. I asked where they were from and where they were going. They were from Russia, and they were going to Kilroot power station. I understand that Kilroot stopped using coal

generation last month, but other fossil fuels are coming into Ireland, such as gas, oil and refined products, and there are direct sanctions on Russia. I was with Ukraine's Minister of Energy a few weeks ago, and there are significant concerns that Russian products are going through third countries into the UK and the EU and into, for example, aviation fuel and generating fuel. What steps are being taken to deal with that and to look at supply chains? There is now clear evidence out in public that that is going on.

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

The first question was about the Isle of Man and its gas connection. We can also think about electricity and fibre internet connections. Mr Watterson, you said that the MOU does not mention the Isle of Man. If you want to talk to me directly about that afterwards, I am happy to enquire with my Department about what work, if any, we have done on those interconnections. It is important to make sure that we are properly connected to our neighbours in those three ways: electricity, gas and internet.

The next question was about direct engagement with Scotland on renewables. Scotland is far ahead. There are a lot of similarities with Ireland in many ways, culturally and everything else, but Scotland is just far ahead of where we are on its renewables journey. Scotland has a higher proportion of power generated in that way. It has offshore production. When I was walking through the Highlands, I saw a lot of hydroelectric power stations, a lot of which are probably quite old.

It is something on which direct engagement will be of more benefit to us than it is to Scotland, unless we are buying services from you, which is also highly likely. I am very much in favour of that. As I said, post-Brexit, there is a tendency now for it to be much easier to have more engagement with European countries than with the UK. That is what we are here for today.

The relevant Joint Oireachtas Committee made a trip to Scotland. I was not on it, but I hope that it was more than a junket. I absolutely agree about having direct engagement, and if you

want to directly engage with me, I am happy to chat to you about the issue later.

I will move on to sanctions on Russian fossil fuels and to people who are trying to avoid them or who use loopholes to do so. I think that Minister McGrath was asked about that earlier and said that we are complying with everything that we are supposed to. If you can give me a specific example of a ship that is coming in, carrying diesel, coal or whatever, and that was diverted, I will make sure that it is investigated and tracked down. We do not want to engage in supporting sanction-busting in any way. We certainly do not. We are flying the Ukrainian flag outside our parliaments, so we know which side we are on. Please contact me if you have any evidence.

12.45 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Minister. The next questions are from Deputy Paul Kehoe, Sarah Jones MP and Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh.

Mr Paul Kehoe TD:

Thank you, Minister, for your presentation regarding wind, solar and anaerobic digestion. In my part of Ireland, in the constituency of Wexford in the south-east, any time there are applications for solar farms, wind farms or anaerobic digesters, there is a huge number of objections. Does that concern the Government, and what can we do to educate people more on the importance of that type of energy?

My colleague Deputy Howlin has already spoken about offshore wind energy and the importance of it in my part of the country. Minister, I would be interested in your views, and — not the most popular one — do you believe it is time that we had a mature debate in Ireland on nuclear power?

Ms Sarah Jones MP:

Thank you, Minister. I have to declare an interest: I was recently appointed Shadow Minister for Industry and Decarbonisation, so I am looking at all your issues very carefully.

I have two quick questions. My first follows on from Paul's point about local people and objections. You are building lots of new infrastructure, so how are you hoping to take people with you on that journey, particularly in a climate where anti-net zero voices are coming out from the outskirts into a bit of the mainstream of politics as well?

Secondly, we have been quoting you in Parliament about your auction for offshore because this year's round did not result in any successful bids in the UK. I am interested in how you navigated the pricing problems there and managed to get some bidders.

Ms Rose Conway-Walsh TD:

Minister, I appreciate that this may be a question more for the Minister for Finance. It is about the report today from the EU Tax Observatory on global tax evasion. The report states that the race for green energy and subsidies results in much larger tax exemptions that could more than offset the gains made by the new 15% minimum tax rate. How concerned are you about that?

Also, on the market for green tax credits, the report states:

“To take a concrete example, JP Morgan could buy \$1 billion in tax credit from an electric vehicle producer with no tax liability ... JP Morgan would pay, say, \$950 million to buy these credits and could then reduce its tax bill by \$1 billion.”

What are we doing alongside all that we are doing to meet our targets? Obviously, we need some subsidies to meet our targets, but how are we going to keep control of all of that from being exploited and used in the way that it may be being used in that example?

Finally, in terms of the decoupling of gas and the timeline, you mentioned 2030. That seems an awfully long time to have a decoupling, bearing in mind that about 40% of our electricity comes from renewables at the moment. Is there anything we can do, as countries, to speed that up?

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

I think the first question was about opposition to anaerobic digestion, and that was also asked by another member. How do you bring people with you, I suppose, is the question. We are all politicians, or most of us are, and we know that you can propose the greatest project in the world and will still have people opposed to it. It does not matter what it is — it could be an apartment block, a social housing scheme, cycle lanes, a new road or whatever — you are always going to face opposition. Sometimes, people throw their hands up and say, “Wouldn’t it be great if everybody just went away”, but it is a democracy, and people are allowed to have their say. How do you get people to come with you on building new renewable energy? One way is by making sure that they have a stake in it: making sure that people have a sense that it is not about a foreign company coming in and building a thing, creating a bit of pollution, making a bit of profit and then heading off, with nothing in it for them. There should be something in it for you as a community, and also you should have some sense of ownership and belonging. Obliging companies to make sure that they are owned locally, at least in part, is part of it. Making sure that there is community benefit, that there is a substantial and not tokenistic payment for each additional megawatt that is put on to the grid, is part of it. Early engagement and making sure that you actually listen and talk to people, even though people might think that that is boring or difficult, is much better than to be stuck.

Can we have a mature debate on nuclear power? Yes, I would love to have a mature debate on nuclear power. In Ireland, nuclear power is illegal under the Electricity Regulation Act 1999. Clearly, it is not going to be a short-term solution for anything. If we started building a nuclear power station, I doubt that there would be power before 2040, but I am open to talking to anybody about nuclear power. It is certainly low-carbon, and I do not have any religious objection to it. I am happy to have a discussion on it. Generally, if you think that an anaerobic digester is hard to get over the line, it will be pretty tricky to get a nuclear power station over the line and bring people with you.

Rose Conway-Walsh asks about the exploitation of green finance, or people making money out of — greenwashed bonds and that kind of stuff is your angle on that. The important thing is to make sure that there is a good certification scheme and that it is very clear. It is really easy to sell it, and there are cowboys out there. It is a new area. People say, “Give us money, and we will offset your emissions”, or “Give us money to plant a forest”, and you find out that 10 other people are planting the same forest, and the forest gets cut down the year after. Making sure that that investment actually goes towards something green requires really high-quality certification, and those schemes do exist. The National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) recently raised €1 billion in borrowing. It put out a green bond. The bond had to be certified. It was certified to such a level that it was acceptable to international investors who wanted to borrow money to invest in green schemes. That bond is offered at 0.5% lower than market rates. Ireland is able to borrow money 50 basis points below the market rate by proving that we are going to spend it on green areas. There is an idea of a green premium or “greenium” whereby you have to pay extra if you want to do something in an environmental way, but, in fact, the world has changed to the extent that you can borrow money at a lower rate if you are going to invest it in a sustainable way. All that depends on having certification, which is how you avoid greenwashing.

We had that problem with health promises. In the health sector, people would say, “This food is good for you”. “Guinness is good for you” used to be the slogan. They had to stop doing that. Companies were given explicit rules about the health claims that they made for their products, based on labelling and laws. The green sector has to catch up with that type of labelling and information.

I was also asked about the renewable energy auction and how we get bidders. A renewable energy auction did not go so well in the UK recently, and we managed to get people in. It is getting harder to get people to take part in renewable energy auctions, because the price of

capital has gone up. Borrowing money costs more, and it is harder to get people in. We did a lot of early engagement, and we have huge demand and a great resource, so we are in a good position. I am happy that people attended, but each auction will be a challenge, and I would not count on it being the same experience every time we run an auction. Each time, the conditions have changed and it gets harder.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister. As we are running very late this early in the day, I ask the next contributors to make their questions as brief as possible. The next grouping is Martin Vickers MP, Ross Greer MSP, Steve Aiken MLA and Cathal Boylan MLA.

Mr Martin Vickers MP:

In the UK, we are finding it very challenging to meet the demands for new connections to the grid. Many of the developments that you described, Minister, involve new connections. How are you meeting that challenge here in Ireland? In respect of the renewables sector, do you have facilities for the construction of offshore wind turbines, or are you looking elsewhere?

Mr Ross Greer MSP:

Ossian, in your opening statement, you mentioned using gas as the backup to manage demand when supply from renewables is variable. I am interested in what you are doing with regard to the like of battery storage and pumped hydro options, referring back to some of your answer to Brendan, because that is an area that we are moving into, massively, in Scotland. Related to that, on the volatility of gas, how are you decarbonising your homes and buildings' heating network?

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

Thanks very much indeed, Minister. I have two points. First, one of the biggest issues for

renewables in Northern Ireland is connection to the grid and, particularly, Eirgrid and SONI's inability to do that. I understand from the offshore industry that its biggest concern is also about Eirgrid and its monopoly position. What are we going to do about that on an all-island basis? Secondly, we do not need another deepwater port: we have a very good one in Belfast — let us use it.

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA:

I thank Members for raising Lough Neagh. Minister Baker responded on it earlier. The Lough Neagh issue is an environmental disaster; we need to do all that we can. In light of the fact that the institutions in the North are not up and running, and this is the only forum that we have at the minute, I encourage the Minister to have conversations with whoever in the North to try to start some process to attempt to eliminate what is happening, because it is an ecological disaster. We need as much support as possible from our partners to deal with it.

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

I will start with the issue that has just been raised: Lough Neagh. The first thing to do is visit Lough Neagh. I am going to go up there and see with my own eyes what is going on. As many people as possible should highlight it; it is shocking. You do not have to be a Green Party person. Everybody has a deep connection with nature and understands that the love of nature is part of our identity in Britain and Ireland. To have our largest lake spoiled in that way is an outrage.

A couple of Members asked about grid connections. The grid connections issue is a concern, but it is not my number one fear — challenges around the planning system are my number one fear, but we are overhauling it. Grid connections is an engineering challenge. I am an engineer: I know that, if you put enough money and metal into it, it is going to work from a physical point of view. It goes back to the question about bringing people with you. The planning,

consent and implied consent of communities are the challenges there. We can do it, but billions will have to go into the grids. That has been recognised at an international level. Recently, Fatih Birol of the International Energy Agency (IEA) said that all countries have to pour loads of money into the grid. We certainly have to do that.

I do not think that there is a plan that wind turbines will be constructed in Ireland. I think that that is unlikely. I could be wrong — I would be delighted if I was — but I do not expect that that is going to happen.

Ross Greer asked about storage. He said that I had mentioned gas storage, but asked about battery storage and pumped hydro. Ireland does not have the mountain lakes that Scotland or Norway have. Our mountains are not as high, as I discovered when I tried to walk the Scottish Highlands. Scotland has more capacity for that. We have some pump storage, and we have 600 MW of battery on the grid. We will build more. Our capacity is often for quite a short duration. It is used for balancing, and we get a few hours out of it. There will be a lot more in batteries. Perhaps, there will be a breakthrough in battery technology and we will be able to do more there. However, we are going to need to store gas as well.

1.00 pm

We have two approaches to decarbonising heat. One is to put out 400,000 heat pumps. That is the domestic answer. That is replacing gas and oil. We are not forcing people to get rid of their gas and oil boilers, but we will strongly encourage and subsidise their replacement with heat pumps, where we can. The other approach will be district heating. Again, we are behind places such as Denmark. Recently, in Tallaght, we connected a data centre to a heating system. We have an incinerator in Dublin city centre that is ready to go for district heating. Unfortunately, district heating is very disruptive as it involves digging up the streets, but it is the right thing to do and it is simple technology.

On the deepwater port in Belfast, that is certainly a possibility. It would require cross-border

cooperation. It is certainly not ruled out, I can tell you that.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I call David Rees MS, Deputy Presiding Officer of the Welsh Senedd.

Mr David Rees MS:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I have two quick questions. On grid connectivity, you identified that you were possibly linking to five nations. Will the prioritisation be based on whether the grid connection in the other country is of a standard? I think that the point being highlighted was that the grid connections across the UK are not up to standard at some points.

The second question is on offshore wind. I have a constituency interest here, because we are keen on floating offshore wind. The link between Wales and Ireland, in the sense of coordination of offshore wind, is important. Have you had discussions with the Welsh Government and the UK Government on how you can work together on the different sitings of offshore wind, so that developers would be keen to come along if they saw a longer-term position of investing, not just in one site but in others? Sarah highlighted the failure to get any bids the last time, so we need to make sure that the bids come in. Working together, you might be able to achieve something along those lines.

Mr Jerome Mayhew MP:

First, if you are going to get your baseload from gas long term, there will be significant carbon emissions associated with that. What plans do you have to compensate for the long-term emissions from gas? Secondly, if you are going to be a very substantial electricity exporter through interconnectors, what plans do you have to protect those assets, given that they are geopolitically vulnerable now?

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

I will take the last question first. We are not going to get our baseload from gas. We are not going to have a baseload. The general idea of electricity grids in the existing or old format was that you had a proportion of your electricity running all the time from some type of baseload. Other things then came in as you needed them, but your minimum was always there. In some countries, that was nuclear, coal or something else. We are not planning to run gas power stations at 30% of load all the time. They are going to be there for peaking. Large quantities of the time, we will have 30 gW of wind on our grid and solar, biogas and everything else. Burning gas will be the last resort. We will do that when everything else fails. That is our approach.

You had a follow-up question. Will you put that to me again?

Mr Jerome Mayhew MP:

It was about the geopolitical vulnerability of interconnectors and how Ireland plans to protect them.

Mr Ossian Smyth TD:

You have seen what happened with Estonia and Finland. Their gas interconnection seems to have been interrupted for whatever reason. The Russian Nord Stream pipeline in the Baltic Sea was blown up. There is a lot of European cooperation now, from a defence perspective, on how to protect those vital subsea cables. Unfortunately or fortunately — one or the other — we are an island, which means that we need to interconnect and we need those cables. Cutting those cables is not a new idea. In the First World War, the first thing that the British did was cut the German telecoms cables, as they were then. They cut their telegraph cable to the US so that it had to go through the UK. Cutting cables is an act of war that is 100 years old. It will happen, and it is a difficult thing to protect against. It is not entirely for the Irish Government or the Irish Naval Service to protect every piece of subsea infrastructure that is in our waters, because

our waters are huge and that infrastructure is often owned by private entities and often interconnects with other countries that are not Ireland. Finally, our Naval Service would never be able to cover that volume of work or that mission. It has to be done in cooperation. That is why there is a lot of cooperation going on, and I point towards the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki as a place where a lot of that work is happening.

I will turn to the question about our grid connections not being up to standard for connecting in. I am not sure that I entirely understand the question. Huge investment is required in the grids all around Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland. A lot of money has to go into the grid, because our grid is changing from being a system of small number of generators with power flowing in one direction down to a large number of consumers, towards being more of an interconnected network with electricity flowing in both directions and with variable rather than baseload power. That is a transformation, and hundreds of billions will have to go into the grids around the world to fix that.

Have I had discussions with the Welsh Government on cooperation on a plan-led approach to offshore wind between Wales and Ireland? I have not, but it is possible that my political leader, Minister Eamon Ryan, has and has not told me about it. Again, if you want to contact me directly afterwards, I can follow up with you on that, and I am happy to do so.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Minister, on behalf of my Co-Chair Karin, me and all our colleagues in the Assembly, I record our appreciation of your very valuable contribution to this excellent discussion. You took a very wide range of questions, some of them not strictly within the remit of your role as a Minister in both Departments, but you answered them all very comprehensively. Again, we very much appreciate your introductory remarks and the way that you fielded all the questions.

I give sincere thanks to you on behalf of all the Assembly. *[Applause.]*

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FASTER PROJECT: FACILITATING A SUSTAINABLE TRANSITION TO ELECTRIC VEHICLES IN THE REGIONS

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

We will now look at an overview of the Faster project, which facilitates a sustainable transition to electric vehicles in the regions. I invite Pamela Arthurs, who is the chief executive officer of the East Border Region, to give her address. Hopefully, everyone can see the display in front of you. Can everyone see it? It is OK. Thank you, Pamela.

Ms Pamela Arthurs (East Border Region):

Thank you, Co-Chair. It is a privilege to be here today to address the meeting. I hope that I can maybe lift your mood a little by talking about practical cross-border cooperation in action. The Faster project facilitates a sustainable transition to electric vehicles (EVs) in the region. It is an EU-funded INTERREG Va project and has a total budget of almost €6.5 million. The regions in this case are the west coast of Scotland, Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. What are our targets? They are to develop and expand the cross-border electric vehicle public charging network and to install 73 rapid chargers in the region. Again, those targets go across those three jurisdictions. There is also a behavioural change element to the project. Obviously, public engagement and campaigns to raise awareness are also very important.

When it comes to our project partners, we at East Border Region are leading on the project, which means that we have the legal responsibility for it. I know that some of you will not be familiar with East Border Region, so if you give me two minutes, I will give you a very quick overview of the organisation. We are a local authority-led and genuine cross-border organisation that involves three local authorities on the east coast of Ireland and three in Northern Ireland. Our board is 100% made up of elected members from the six local authorities. We are almost

50 years old. When we look back to the 1970s, we see that it was those elected members who decided, “We have had our backs to the border for a long time. Let’s turn around and let’s face each other and see what we can do together. Maybe we will have mutual interests etc”. That is what happened. Back in the 1970s, the border region was very different from what it is today. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, there was very little cooperation, but elected members at that time were working together. They realised that that made sense and that the border regions, whatever side of the border you were on, had common problems.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it was probably a bit of a talking shop. There was no money, and there was no Government that was saying, “We like what you are doing”. It was the introduction of EU funding, in the form of INTERREG moneys that funded cross-border activity, that really helped the organisation to develop. The Good Friday Agreement and Peace moneys came on board as well. We developed and we grew. We made great strides. We have all of the political parties around the table. Despite recent events, those political parties are all around the table and working on practical cross-border cooperation.

Brexit obviously was a major challenge for the organisation, and we addressed it, as we have done with every other challenge, practically. We asked, “What can we do?”. We developed a cross-border charter, copies of which I have given you to give you a brief overview of the organisation. That is a synopsis of the East Border Region.

We are leading on this project, and it is just one of nine projects to the value of €110 million from INTERREG that we lead on. Louth County Council is our Ireland partner and is leading on the procurement there. The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS) is the Scottish procurement lead, and we are also partnered with Ulster University in Northern Ireland. For the behavioural change element, we have South West College, Strathclyde University in Scotland and Dundalk Institute of Technology, which has been invaluable in assisting with each of the sites. We have three associate partners in Northern Ireland and six in

Ireland, with Louth County Council leading.

We had the official project launch just a couple of years ago, on EV day on 9 September. Because of COVID, that was a hybrid event. This project has been beset with difficulties, COVID being one that took place in the middle of it. That was a very good day because it really highlighted to us the need for this network of chargers.

We began the project with a really long list of site selections. That was done following analysis and based on the range of criteria. We needed to situate these on local-authority-owned land. We needed 24-hour access. Proximity to the nearest transformer and other services was also important. Things such as safety were also very important for us.

We have a mix of double and single installations. The minimum for the rapid charger is 50 kW, and I am pleased to say that we have moved on with some of the sites and have higher power, with up 180 kW going in.

Normally with cross-border projects, we can do things jointly, but in the three different jurisdictions, we had three different approaches to procurement, and it just did not work to do one procurement process. In Scotland, the Scottish councils tendered for the design and the installation, and the councils are operating the charge points for a five-year period. Scotland was the first of the three tenders appointed, and it is fair to say that, in this respect, Scotland is ahead of both Ireland and Northern Ireland. Scottish Power was appointed in December 2022 to put in 24 chargers. That covers our Scottish colleagues.

In Ireland, a multidisciplinary team was appointed to complete the final designs and to procure, install, maintain and operate the supplier. The winning tender will operate the charge points for a seven-year period. That is part of the conditions of the fund. A two-stage procurement process happened, and we were appointed on 4 September 2023 to install 25 chargers across the border region.

1.15 pm

For the project, Northern Ireland, it is fair to say, has been the most problematic. There were difficulties with securing suitable sites and with Northern Ireland electrical requirements for new connections perhaps not marrying with the conditions of the fund. For example, we needed to know the spec of the charger to satisfy the funding requirements, and we could not know that until we had procured. Such things were therefore issues. We ended up proceeding with behind-the-meter connections at leisure centres, for various reasons, as opposed to installing new grid connections, which is what is happening in Scotland and Ireland. That is the nature of cross-border cooperation, however. Different jurisdictions have different needs.

We appointed Stephen Clarke Consulting to help us, and EasyGo, which, I think, is Electric Car Charger Ireland, was appointed to install, operate and maintain supply for a seven-year period. It is based here, which is interesting, so EasyGo is the Northern Ireland element of Electric Car Charger Ireland. In Ireland, coincidentally, we therefore have a Northern Ireland company, while in Northern Ireland we have an Irish company. That is just the way in which it worked out.

The installation is ongoing. We are under extreme time pressures, because the seven-year structural fund period ends on 31 December. That is the brick wall, and we must have all the work done by then. The project received late approvals initially, so we have always been up against it timewise, but we will get there.

Scotland has 16 chargers awaiting final connection. In Ireland, work is progressing well. Civil works have taken place at most of the sites. We are just waiting on the chargers, which, I am informed, should be here this week. The NI sites are also progressing on schedule, with civil works completed at most of them. The capacity in Northern Ireland and in Ireland at some of the sites is up to 180 kV, but it is dependent on whether the building can take that capacity. That is a key factor in all of this.

Some of you may have seen the excellent job that South West College has done on the

behavioural change element. There is billboard and radio advertising, a series of EV talk webinars, video review series and live roadshows. Those have been going on for the past few years. SWC has reviewed films on faster EV charging that can be seen on YouTube.

Finally, with every funded project, we need a closure conference, and that will be on 6 December. Anyone here who wants to attend will be very welcome. It has been an excellent project and shows what cross-border cooperation is about: our working together with our Scottish colleagues in Northern Ireland and in Ireland. This project will come to an end, but, when it is completed, it will have doubled the number of rapid chargers in Northern Ireland, which is significant.

I publicly thank everybody for the work that they have done to secure a new PEACE PLUS programme, which is worth £1.1 billion. That is the biggest programme that we will have had to date. It is a combination of INTERREG and PEACE PLUS. I want to thank Minister Baker; the UK Government are putting in something like £850 million of that £1.1 billion. Despite Brexit and all of that, we are really looking forward to implementing a number of projects under PEACE PLUS. To date, the EU funding has transformed the border region, and we are looking forward to a series of good projects moving forward. Thank you very much for your attention. *[Applause]*.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Pamela. We also have Councillor Terry Andrews with us, who is from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and is the elected chair of the East Border Region. I thank him for joining us: he will be with us this evening and he is very welcome.

There are a couple of questions for Pamela, but we are tight on time, so I ask colleagues to be brief. I will call Cathal Boylan MLA, followed by Lord Bruce. Is there anybody else who is desperate to get in a question? Good; thank you very much. We will take both of them together.

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA:

You are very welcome, Pamela, and thank you very much for your presentation. I put on record my thanks to you and your team for all the great work that you have done over the years. I will declare an interest, Co-Chair, as a former vice-chair of the East Border Region back in the old days when the then Armagh City Council was a single unit.

You have connected communities, Pamela, and now you have moved on to a different phase. We were concerned about where funding streams would come from when Brexit happened. However, if I heard you right, we are now in a safe place in terms of funding to further connect communities and do great work within them, especially in one of the best parts of the country, the east border region. Thank you very much for your presentation, and I extend my good wishes to you and your team down there in Newry. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Rt Hon The Lord Bruce:

I am a member of the Environment and Climate Change Committee in the House of Lords. We are in the middle of an inquiry into electric cars, and we are taking evidence from local authorities this coming Wednesday, so your presentation has been very helpful. One of the issues that has come out is this: who, ultimately, is really responsible for developing the infrastructure? The analogy was put to us that, when the internal combustion engine was taking off, there was no public government involvement in opening up filling stations: the market did that. The second problem is whether they do it in the right places. Will we do it in the the right places? This is interesting because, clearly, what you have done is taken an overview, rather than just leave it to the market.

My question is this: to what extent do you think it needs to be either a public-private partnership, or left to the market, subject to regulation? How much of it should be done? The other slightly tangential issue that arises is that, as we roll out electric cars, in the short term, it is mostly people with money who can afford it. Lower income people simply cannot afford it

and are not able to, not least because, if they cannot have connections at home, they are paying 20% VAT in the UK instead of 5%. As time goes on, however, the Government are going to lose an awful lot of revenue, which they currently get from fossil fuel sales. How is that going to be replaced? Is there any discussion about that?

I appreciate that you represent local authorities and I am talking about government, but what is your conclusion from the work that you have done as to how this is going to develop over time? It all seems very complicated and confused, from the evidence that we are receiving.

Ms Pamela Arthurs:

Thank you very much for your questions, Councillor Boylan — I am sorry: I am going back to the old days — and for your endorsement of the East Border Region. The question of who is responsible is certainly being asked by local authorities in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The organisation that was set up under the Taoiseach's office, Zero Emission Vehicles Ireland (ZEVI), certainly feels that local authorities should be engaged in this. It has taken some of the chief executives some time to come to terms with that. I know that. I have heard, even in Northern Ireland, council officials saying, "We're not petrol stations. Who's responsible here?" They had to go on to local authority land for the fund. We did not have a choice in that, and that is where they were.

I am afraid that government policy and whatever are not for me. We responded to and led an actual project call, and that is where we are. We have to deliver what the project asked for, but it certainly is something. As I said, Scotland is much further ahead than us. Last year, we visited Dundee. Dundee City Council's fleet has been electrified; it is a very good example of the project in action. However, the point was made that the fleet of electric vehicles was maybe £120,000 more expensive, as you said, because it is electric. Cost is still an issue. We have put in a combined charging system (CCS) and a CHAdeMO arm, because the Nissan Leafs, which are the cheaper cars coming into the second-hand market, can be powered only by the

CHAdEMO cable. Again, we are future-proofing the chargers so that, in a few years' time, we will be able to replace CHAdEMO with CCS, so both will operate. However, the policy is not my call, I am afraid.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Pamela, thank you so much. Colleagues will see that it is good for us to have practical examples of a practical issue that we are all facing but from the perspective of the groups that you lead across the East Border Region. I have had the privilege of meeting your colleagues in Westminster to understand some of the projects. You circulated documentation on some of the work that you do.

Ms Pamela Arthurs:

I have.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

You are joining us for lunch, along with Councillor Andrews, so if people want to take the time to explore more of that cross-border cooperation work, they can do so. We are grateful to you for your time today and for joining us. *[Applause.]*

I will suspend now for lunch, but I want to be back for 2.30 pm, promptly, please. We had hoped that the rain would keep off so that we could have the group photograph taken outside, but there has been a change of plan. The photograph will be taken on the staircase in the lobby — we are good on staircases — before lunch. Please make your way there directly and come back here at 2.30 pm. Thank you very much, everybody. We have had a fantastic session.

The sitting was suspended at 1.28 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 2.45 pm.

PROMOTING BRITISH-IRISH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I am delighted to be able to invite His Excellency Ambassador Paul Johnston to speak here today. He has been a regular visitor to BIPA over the years. I know that we are all looking forward to hearing him share his views on UK/Ireland relations. Ambassador, you are very welcome to our plenary session. *[Applause.]*

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

Thank you, Brendan and Karin. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My friend and colleague, or counterpart, as well as colleague, in a sense, Martin Fraser, was giving out last night that, as some of you will have heard, he got only “a two-minute slot”, as he described it, and I am getting half an hour. I would have happily swapped and had a couple of minutes last night rather than have to face the terrifying barrage of questions that your guest speakers have encountered today. So, I have twenty-nine and a half minutes’ worth of speech to read to you. *[Laughter.]* A short history of the Northern Ireland protocol: I thought that we could have a bit of that; or maybe British policy in the Middle East over the past 100 years.

No, I thought I would say a little bit about the context of our relationship. I am conscious that we have people here who are immersed in the British-Irish relationship. I will maybe say a little bit on the wider picture of the relationship, including some of the foreign policy and wider dynamics, and then I will be happy to take questions. I promise that I will not speak for twenty-nine and a half minutes. I will happily take questions on whatever you would like to cover.

One of the great strengths of the British-Irish relationship is, I think, such occasions as this. I do not say that just to be sycophantic, although that is never a bad thing when you face a hostile audience. Last night at dinner, Martin Fraser said that he joined the Civil Service in 1986 and that you could not have imagined then of something like this taking place. I had the same reflection, having joined the Civil Service in 1990. I am conscious that today is the thirtieth anniversary of one of the worst atrocities of the Troubles. The idea that, notwithstanding

differences and difficulties, people on the island of Ireland and across these islands are now able to sit and discuss these issues on a broad cross-party basis is a fantastic thing. How fantastic a position would the poor civilians of Israel and the occupied territories be in if their elected representatives were sitting in a group like this, having discussions, rather than facing the horrors that they are facing?

Of course, the situation in the Middle East is on everyone's mind and agenda. It seems a long time ago — I think it was 5 October — since the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach met for a meeting in the margins of the European Political Community summit in Granada. They talked about the need to restore power-sharing in Northern Ireland; our legacy legislation, with a clear difference of view there; working together on the European Football Championship in 2028, including on the development of Casement Park; and the importance of working together to combat the scourge of illegal immigration and people-smuggling, thus strengthening the common travel area. Neither of them would have thought that, just a few days later, the Middle East would be plunged into renewed chaos.

Our Government, like the Irish Government, have been active internationally with very convergent, shared underlying objectives: a clear recognition of Israel's right to self-defence, but of the necessity for that to be exercised with full respect for international law; and the crucial importance of avoiding escalation, to which end, my Prime Minister has been travelling in the region, as has the Foreign Secretary. I know that the Tánaiste is in either Brussels or Luxembourg today for the EU Foreign Affairs Council. Therefore we both have a lot of cooperation going on, including between our respective consular services, given the plight of British and Irish citizens in the region. Our officials and Ministers are in close touch on all of that. That is just one example of the multifaceted relationship that Britain has with Ireland.

When we published our integrated review of our external policy priorities, in 2021, a number of people were surprised that Ireland was listed up there, after the US, France and Germany, as

a key partner for Britain. However, the review recognised that on everything from foreign policy — Ireland was on the UN Security Council at the time — through to Northern Ireland, and a range of things in between, we have deeply shared interests. In the world that becomes increasingly convulsed — since that 2021 document, we have had the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and now the full-scale crisis in the Middle East — as the Taoiseach has said and the Prime Minister would certainly agree, like-minded democracies like ours need to stand together for our values and interests. That has been perfectly obvious on the Russia-Ukraine file, where, notwithstanding our differences — Ireland's position of military neutrality and our leading role in NATO — we have worked together in a complementary way on a range of issues. Ireland has made an enormous, heroic effort to take in a huge number of displaced people from Ukraine. We have made a big contribution to give lethal aid and other forms of military aid to Ukraine. We worked together when Ireland was on the Security Council. We will work together on the Human Rights Council if Ireland and Britain are elected to that in due course. As everyone in this room knows, the Britain-EU relationship has been through its ups and downs over the past few years. One strong area of cooperation has been to coordinate our approach to sanctions to maximise pressure on the Putin regime.

In a different part of the UK-EU forest, we have seen a welcome breakthrough in the past few months with the agreement that the UK could associate again with the Horizon programme on research and development. The British Government are grateful to the Irish Government, who were often, if not alone, in quite a small minority of EU member states that were prepared to speak out publicly in arguing that we should be allowed to take part in Horizon. From going around Ireland talking to people in many of the universities and research institutes, I know how keen the Irish scientific community was for that partnership to be made possible again. I think that, of the 2,000 projects that Ireland took part in under Horizon 2020, the predecessor programme, British scientists were partners in almost half. It is fantastic that we can relaunch

that UK-Ireland scientific cooperation in the UK-EU Horizon framework.

Bilaterally, there are also some exciting developments coming about in areas of scientific cooperation between GB/NI and Ireland, including climate science and agricultural innovation.

We are seeing a lot of work being done at the cutting edge of technology to promote the UK-Ireland relationship. In a couple of weeks' time, our Prime Minister will host a big international meeting on artificial intelligence — at Bletchley Park, in fact, which was, in a way, one of the homes of the development of computing during the Second World War. Ireland is one of a small set of countries that will be represented at ministerial level, by Dara Calleary. Just last week, we hosted a dinner at the residence in Dublin, bringing together British and Irish academic, business and other experts on artificial intelligence. It is always the role of the ambassador to be the person in the room who knows least about the subject that is under discussion. I would like to think that I fulfilled my role amply at the artificial intelligence dinner. I joked that I brought genuine stupidity to a discussion about artificial intelligence.

There is a really big agenda there across technology, science and innovation, where we have big interests. We have big interests in the security field as well. Those are related issues. We are fully respectful of the fact that you have your own debate to have on security and defence issues. Louise Richardson has just issued her report on that. I know that it will be discussed in the Dáil in the coming weeks and months. We have big shared interests in things such as undersea cable and cybersecurity. Given the strength of our business relationship, it is inevitable that the economic security dimension of that matters to us both. We are keen to find ways in which to take that dialogue forward, obviously in full respect of Ireland's right to make sovereign choices on all those issues.

Similarly, as I said earlier, we are keen to work together to tackle the scourge of illegal immigration and ensure that the common travel area works. I noted the debate earlier on the question of ETAs. We want to see that this area works for businesses and individuals, but also

that there is a secure border, given the pressures that we all face.

It is a partnership that is fundamental on many levels to both countries. It is one that our Ministers really value, particularly on the issues that relate to Northern Ireland, which the Minister gave a full airing to this morning. Whether it is the economic relationship or matters of learning from each other in frontier areas such as artificial intelligence or renewable energy, there is a constant and strong dialogue between the two Governments. From the point of view of the embassy, we see occasions like this, where there is opportunity for political representatives from not just the two Governments of London and Dublin but the Parliaments and representative bodies from across the areas covered by the British-Irish Council to come together to discuss these issues, as really valuable.

It is a great pleasure and a great privilege to be invited here. It is funny — a sort of ‘Brideshead Revisited’ moment for me — because this is the first place that I ever came to in Ireland, 20-plus years ago, when I had no idea that I would be ambassador here. My then fiancée was invited to a friend’s surprise fortieth birthday party. We had only just started to go out, and she said, “Would you like to come to a luxury weekend in Ireland?”. It was not all expenses paid, I have to say, and, as a Scottish person, that obviously weighed in the calculation, but I came to the K Club, and that, I suppose that you could say, was the beginning of a love affair with Ireland that culminated in being appointed ambassador three years ago. I am really happy to be here and to take your questions and comments. Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Ambassador, for your insightful thoughts across a wide range of areas.

Senator Victor Boyhan:

Thank you very much, Ambassador. You are very welcome. You started your speech with the unique relationship between the British and the Irish. I acknowledge first the Glencairn

conversations that you initiated through your embassy and to which you invited many of us. In arts, culture and heritage, I think of the programme that you ran on shaping our artists and the strong commitment to cultural, artistic links between our two countries. I always like to start from the basis of, “You win their hearts, you win their minds”. Through culture, music, the arts, culinary arts and all such different issues, we find common bonds that bring us together. You very much tapped into that, and I acknowledge that and thank you for your hospitality. You are regularly seen in our Parliament, and that is a measure of your absolute commitment and that of your staff, whom I acknowledge, to the job in hand.

I will not go into the legacy issues too much because I am conscious that you were here. That is the great thing about you: you sit and listen. Clearly, you have ears and you have thoughts and you take those thoughts away. You are, ultimately, a diplomat, so I will not ask you questions about that. All I will say is that I am glad that you heard what was said. That is important because, sometimes, words matter, but we also need to listen.

I want to touch on the special relationship with Scotland and Wales. I am always reminded when I sit at BIPA that, if I were a Welshman or a Scotsman, I would be scratching my head and asking, “What’s in this for me?”. I know that there are bigger issues, and, on another day, we need to talk about how, in BIPA, we have other jurisdictions that are unique. We have great commonality with Wales and Scotland. I talked to a number of colleagues last night at dinner, and we touched on that. There are many opportunities. We in Ireland clearly have very strong bilateral arrangements with those two jurisdictions through their devolved Administrations, but we could do more on that. I would like to think, through your office and the membership of BIPA, about how we can engage more and learn from the many experiences in Scotland and Wales. They bring a very rich history and experience to us, and we do not capitalise enough on that. They are here, and they might like to speak about it later.

There are challenges for us all, but, Ambassador, the Irish Government clearly have a direct

line to the UK: the House of Commons, the representatives and the system. There are diplomatic links in place, but that should not stop us from developing further and deeper engagement with the Scottish and Welsh experiences and on what they bring to the table and the bigger picture. I would be interested to hear your views on that, be they on the official diplomatic channels or the political channels. We can go beyond that: we can push out the parameters, and we will gain very much if we pursue that line.

3.00 pm

Again, I want to particularly acknowledge your hands-on approach to engagement and listening. Your staff at the embassy are very welcome in our Parliament, and you receive, and extend, a very warm welcome to us. That is greatly appreciated by us. Thank you.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

Thank you very much, Senator, for your kind words. They say that no good deed goes unpunished, but equally, sometimes good deeds are rewarded. Through hosting that Glencairn conversation on British-Irish artistic links, I had the pleasure of meeting Garry Hynes from the Druid Theatre in Galway and, as a result, was invited to the fantastic production at the Abbey Theatre of the Druid trilogy of O'Casey plays, which was the most extraordinary experience. It was seven and a half hours of theatre in one afternoon and evening. I learnt about the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War through the perspective of fantastic theatrical performances.

On Scotland and Wales, we are very fortunate to have in the embassy Scottish Government and Welsh Government offices on our platform and we do a lot of things together with them, including — it is a painful thing for us both to bring up now — a watch party for the Scotland/Ireland World Cup rugby match, back in the days when we were both in the World Cup. On a whole range of things, we try to work together. It is no secret that there will be times when the Westminster and Scottish Governments do not always see eye to eye, but as officials

we try to work together as transparently and professionally as possible, particularly on trade and investment issues. They are often win-wins that we can pursue together. What you say about engagement with the embassy — I would say with the wider embassy family, including the Scottish and Welsh Government offices — is very welcome and we certainly look to develop those links. Thank you.

Ms Rose Conway-Walsh TD:

Thank you, Ambassador. I want to acknowledge the importance of Horizon and our getting agreement. It was one of the major concerns that I had on Brexit and the projects, particularly as you say, on climate change and other challenges that we have to face on an all-island basis and between the two islands as well. That is progress.

I want to ask you about the opportunities for foreign direct investment in the North as it is now, having access to the British market and to the EU for goods. That will be somewhat impeded by the labour force. One of the key drivers here is obviously corporation tax and the educated labour force. As we are at the moment, the North is 24.3% behind in third-level education, and that is only part of the picture. The other part is that many third-level students go to Britain and do not return to make up part of that labour force.

My question is this: how important is student mobility across the island? For the first time, we have an explicit line in the legislation which tasks all the higher education institutions (HEIs) with increasing North/South student mobility. I welcome the fact that really good work is being done by the Atlantic Technological University and also Trinity College Dublin has agreed to double its number of students from the North. There is not only an educational and workforce benefit, but, obviously, that makes a contribution to peace and reconciliation and plays an important role when third-level students get to know each other. I ask you to comment on student mobility and the labour force on the whole across the island.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

It is an excellent question. I was fortunate to be in Northern Ireland for the Northern Ireland Investment Summit, a couple of weeks back. When you talk to investors, they say clearly that, across these islands, the tightness of the labour market is sometimes a challenge, as is affordable housing, particularly in the Dublin area but also in London and the south-east. However, that is an area where, perhaps, Northern Ireland has a competitive advantage. Housing pressures are less acute. Investors say that they want a skilled labour force, so there must be further development of the education sector in Northern Ireland and also, as you say, of education and labour mobility between Northern Ireland and Ireland and across these islands.

More work should be done to understand the impact of Brexit and other developments. The British Council has done some research lately, though I think it is more qualitative than quantitative, on higher education mobility. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) has done some work as well. It is certainly something that our Ministers are conscious of, and, obviously, it would be a matter primarily for the Northern Ireland Executive, once it is restored, to look at how you can engage and retain more highly educated people in the Northern Ireland workforce. It is of value in itself, but it is also important, as you say, in attracting foreign direct investment. I agree that it is an important priority.

Ms Rose Conway-Walsh TD:

Will you comment on the idea of putting education under the North/South Ministerial Council? Education and training present such major challenges for us but also opportunities.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

I do not know whether that has been covered. The North/South Ministerial Council has not been operating for a while, and that is a matter of regret. Personally — I do not know whether this is the correct official answer — I see no problem at all with issues related to education,

skills or the labour market being explored in that context and, indeed, in the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference because they are relevant issues for cooperation in all directions.

Mr John Lahart TD:

Thanks, ambassador. We enjoyed your wit; it was very droll. Thanks for the landscape that you painted. While we continue to share European space, we do not share European Union space any more. Where do you see the relationship within a decade?

The other thing has come up in some of the work of BIPA that I have been involved in. You talked about common security areas and common security threats in cyber, undersea cables and things like that. Are there other areas? I have often thought that drugs is a significant threat. We are both islands. We saw a significant threat and significant find recently. Could we cooperate a little more closely in those areas rather than duplicating some of the things that we are doing? That may be the kind of area in which the Governments and Administrations on the two islands could work quite effectively and more efficiently

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

As a diplomat, there is only one thing worse than being praised for your wit, and that is being praised for your candour. In ‘Yes, Minister’, the worst thing that a Minister could hear was Sir Humphrey saying, “That’s a very courageous approach”. *[Laughter.]* For an official, it is usually if someone says, “You are being very candid”. I was giving evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and no less a person than Ian Paisley Jnr said, “Thank you so much for being so candid with us”, and I thought, “Oh my God, what have I done?”. *[Laughter.]*

That is a roundabout way of saying that I will be candid on your first question about where the UK-EU relationship will be in 10 years’ time. It is genuinely unknowable what the EU will look like in 10 years’ time when you think of enlargement and other factors. It will be for future

British Governments of whatever persuasion to take decisions on any evolution of the relationship. There will be a review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement in 2025, which will be after our next election, so whichever Government is in office then will have to take decisions on that. I noted what Minister McGrath said this morning about the importance of stability and developing on the basis of where we are.

On the security relationship, there is a lot of very good operational cooperation between agencies. On the embassy platform, we have people from the National Crime Agency and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs who do a lot of practical cooperation, including in the area of drugs. Our people made a contribution to the excellent multi-agency operation that resulted in the big drugs seizure here just a couple of weeks ago. There is certainly scope to develop that activity. We do not talk about it a great deal in public, and we respect the operational independence and sovereignty of the relevant authorities. However, the scourge of drugs is massive. A large proportion of the drugs that end up on British streets are trafficked through Ireland and vice versa. That is one of the downsides to the common travel area. Therefore, cooperation between our countries in tackling drugs is paramount, and, I am sure, will be reinforced.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, ambassador. I need to group questions, if that is OK with you. I call Deputy Frank Feighan, to be followed by Deputy Paul Kehoe.

Mr Frank Feighan TD:

Thank you very much, ambassador: it is great to have you here today. I will try to be as brief as possible. The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly is a huge success. I remember Enda Kenny, at the first meeting many years ago when there was a bombing in London, telling me that both groups were in different corners. We have come a long way. We should not

underestimate the value of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

The UK has left the EU, and we are pitching our tent much closer to the EU. We can see an increased level of cooperation, and there is an increase in shipping and other things. I have a huge difficulty, however: from the 1940s to the 1970s, despite hundreds and thousands of Irish men and women going back and forward from the UK, our two Parliaments operated in isolation. When we joined the EU with you in 1973, that brought cooperation. There were about 28 meetings a day on average. To me, that brought about the Good Friday Agreement, the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Downing Street declaration, and it brought peace to the island. We are in that space again where we may not have those links. What is happening here is incredible, but is there anything more that we can do? I know that there are an awful lot of TDs, senators, MPs, MLAs and lords who want to do more. However, if they are not members of the British-Irish Parliamentary or its various committees, they cannot do those things. Now, more than ever, we need to redouble our efforts, not to copy the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly but to enhance it. Do you have any ideas on that?

Mr Paul Kehoe TD:

Thank you very much for your remarks, ambassador: you are very welcome. I was delighted that you mentioned Horizon funding and its importance for the UK. You will know that Minister Harris was in Wales last week, strengthening links and relationships between Irish and Welsh universities. Do you have any comment to make on how we can strengthen the relationship between Ireland and mainland UK in and around third-level education? A huge number of Irish students travel to the UK every year for third-level education, and vice versa. I was at a meeting of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce in the UK in the summer which emphasised the importance of Horizon funding. It was only afterwards that I really saw the importance and attractiveness of it for both countries and its merits for Irish and British students.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

I think the two questions speak to a wider theme, which is that one of the great strengths of the UK/Irish relationship is that it is so broadly based. There have been times in the last three years when the political relationship has been rather strained, but the business-to-business relationships, the people-to-people relationships and those between culture, education and research sectors have had to be more load-bearing at a time when maybe the two Governments were in quite a difficult place.

On Deputy Feighan's question about parliamentary linkages first, it seems to me that this body is particularly important, in that there is not just these opportunities for debates but also the process of committees and the production of reports and research, which brings the various Parliaments together. That is a particularly distinctive and important contribution. However, there is, for example, the Oireachtas friendship group with the UK, which the now Tanaiste, then Taoiseach, set up. I think that that was announced in a BIPA meeting back during the pandemic. There is obviously an equivalent British parliamentary group. All those fora lend themselves to the idea of simply, at one level, getting together to discuss issues. However, the production of joint ideas and research is really valuable, and we in the embassy — and, I am sure, Martin Fraser and his team in London — would want to do whatever we can to encourage that.

That goes to Deputy Kehoe's point as well. I was very struck, when our then Education Secretary came over here the year before last and had an excellent discussion with Simon Harris, I was very struck that they were both reflecting on things like artificial intelligence and technological change. The world of universities is going to have to evolve from one which was mainly designed around giving full-time education to 18- to 22-year-olds into one which will need to give different forms of education, training and upskilling to people at various stages in their careers. Our two higher education sectors will have to go through very similar transitions in the next few years. Therefore, learning from each other at the institutional level, and having

that greater interchange of people, is tremendously valuable. Again, we would be very much up for whatever can be done to strengthen that interchange of people at that formative stage.

3.15 pm

The Lord Kilclooney:

I appreciate the ambassador being here and thank him for his contribution. The late David Trimble, Lord Empey — whose wife, sadly, died last week — and myself negotiated, on behalf of unionists, the Belfast Agreement. As I live near the border with the Republic, I strongly support cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic. However, as I look around, as I did yesterday and today, I find that there are only two unionists here from Northern Ireland. Are we making the progress from the Belfast Agreement that was intended? I doubt it very much.

The Casement Park football site has been referenced, not only by yourself but by Minister Baker. Are you aware that the proposals for Casement Park are already causing great division in Northern Ireland, and that it is going to be like walking thousands of Jews into a Muslim area? You need to be cautious about Casement Park and not glibly say that it is a great idea.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

With respect, the first question on unionist representation at this event is not one for me.

I have seen some of the controversy about Casement Park. There is, obviously, sensitivity around it. Our Government's perception is that the United Kingdom and Ireland winning, between them, the right to host Euro 2028 is really important on a number of levels. There has been cooperation between the two Governments and, obviously, between the respective football associations. As I understand it, Casement Park is the only venue that matched the UEFA criterion — or would after development — of being able to host matches with more than 30,000 people. As I understand it, if that development does not go ahead, Northern Ireland

will miss out on hosting any matches, and those matches would be redistributed among Ireland and the other countries of the United Kingdom, which would be unfortunate. Happily, in a sense, it is out of my hands.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I was very glad to attend the Ulster Rugby versus Glasgow Warriors match two weeks ago in my home town of Cavan. It was the first time that the Ulster Rugby team had played on a Gaelic ground and they were very pleased with the reception. That is the type of cooperation that we need — the sharing of stadia and the sharing of facilities — because we have a common interest in participation in sports and in getting more people participating and enjoying sport.

Ambassador, I thank you again for, as other Members have reflected on, your constant engagement with us, as Members of the Oireachtas — our Parliament — and for attending meetings and inviting us to events. The visits to different regions around Ireland by you and your colleagues in the embassy are well received throughout the country. It is good practice to go out to local authorities and meet elected members as well as officials at local level who are involved in local government.

The PEACE PLUS programme was mentioned by Minister McGrath this morning. He is one of the Ministers who played a key role in negotiating that programme when he was the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. That is a very sizeable commitment by the British Government, the European Union and the Irish Government. As Pamela said, it is a programme that is worth some £1.1 billion, which can be transformative for some of our communities, North and South. We want to see that investment. We are pleased that that programme is in place.

Senator Victor Boyhan made the point that we want to ensure that this Assembly is not seen as simply being about Dublin and London. That is an issue on which we, at steering committee level, have been engaging and having discussions. Annabelle Ewing and her colleagues from

the Scottish delegation are anxious that a plenary is held in Scotland. David Rees, in his capacity as Deputy Presiding Officer of the Welsh Senedd, had us there at a Steering Committee recently. Karen Bradley and I partook in a Committee meeting of the Welsh Parliament. One thing that we have identified in our own parliamentary communities is that not enough is known about the work of our Assembly. However, we have made progress. Our members in the Welsh Senedd, the Scottish Parliament and the Oireachtas, and both Karin Smyth and Karen Bradley in Westminster, will try to get the opportunity to make presentations based on our annual report to each of the legislatures and to have better engagement with the relevant Committees in each legislature. Victor has a point: it is well made and one that we are very conscious of.

Ambassador, we offer our sincere thanks for your insightful contributions in your initial remarks and in your answers to our questions. Thank you very much.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

We are about to start the panel discussion on developing wind resources. However, we need a moment. Do not go anywhere but, while we set up the presentation and our guests come to the platform, you can stretch your legs or stand up and jog on the spot or something.

PANEL DISCUSSION: DEVELOPING WIND ENERGY

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

All BIPA Members recognise the crucial issue of developing renewable energy resources. The development of renewable energy, including offshore and onshore wind, is central to Ireland's energy policy. Wind energy is currently the largest contributing resource of renewable energy

in Ireland, and it provides over 80% of renewable electricity.

This afternoon, we will explore with our next panel of speakers the opportunities and challenges in developing wind resources. I am delighted to welcome Noel Cunniffe, CEO of Wind Energy Ireland; Niall Goodwin, head of policy at Wind Energy Ireland; Marian Troy, head of corporate affairs for SSE; and Matt Pringle, head of public affairs at SSE. Each will take a few minutes to make a brief presentation and leave time for contributions and questions from the floor. We are starting with a display. Noel, you are kicking us off; is that right?

Mr Noel Cunniffe (Wind Energy Ireland):

I am indeed.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thanks very much.

Mr Noel Cunniffe:

On behalf of myself and Niall from Wind Energy Ireland, we really appreciate the invitation to speak to you all on this important occasion.

To give a bit of background, wind energy provides between one third and 40% of Ireland's electricity every year. It has been a growing resource for Ireland. We have seen similar growth on the other side of the Irish Sea in Great Britain. I want to give you a short overview — I am sure that my slides will be shared with you afterwards — to give you a sense of where the industry is at today and of the opportunities for cooperation between Ireland and the UK.

I will give a bit of background on Wind Energy Ireland. We are Ireland's largest renewable energy association. We have over 200 members representing all aspects of the onshore and offshore wind supply chain. Membership ranges from companies that identify sites to develop onshore or offshore wind, right through the entire supply chain, from the planners to the grid consultants, the banks, the haulage companies that are involved in developing a wind energy

project and, ultimately, the companies that own and operate the assets. There is a wide range of members, including many that operate across Ireland and the UK.

I will set some of the background on why we do what we do. Very often in presentations like this, contributions show how desperate the world might be in 50 or 100 years' time when it comes to climate change. This graph, which was presented by the International Panel on Climate Change earlier in the year, really drives that home. It is the best visualisation that I have seen of the impacts that the choices that we make today will have on the future. I myself have a son who was born in 2020, and he will be 70 years old in 2090, as you can see there on the graph. The type of world that we leave for our children has a huge number of variables, but the choices that we make today define what that world will look like.

An element of hope from the report highlighted that the two most overwhelming things that we can do that will improve our chances of mitigating the worst impacts of climate change are installing solar and wind energy. They are available, cost-effective and being deployed widely across the planet. Thankfully, in Ireland and the UK, we are doing quite a good job in rolling out that new type of renewable energy generation.

What I want you to take from that is that wind energy can be and is Ireland's greatest asset when it comes to responding to the climate emergency, and that, as an island, we will be energy independent. The UK also is striving for that, with a target of net zero by 2035 in its electricity sector. That is a target that Ireland should replicate, but the choices that we make now will determine exactly when that occurs.

One of the positive impacts that are happening today as a result of wind energy on our grid is really lowering prices for the consumer. Every month, we produce a graphic highlighting the impact of wind energy on the wholesale market price. It shows the impact of what happens on the days when we have the most wind energy versus the days when we have the least. There is a clear demonstration — month in, month out — that the more wind energy we have on our

grid, the cheaper it is on the wholesale level, which will, ultimately, get translated onto consumer prices.

There are other elements; it is not just the wholesale market. We now have quite sophisticated renewable energy auctions for wind energy in Ireland, the same as what is in place in Great Britain. There is a fixed price for wind energy, so on the days when the market price is higher than that, there is a payback from the generator to the customer. This year in Ireland, about €490 million is being paid back to consumers and businesses because of those new contracts. There is also a new energy market revenue cap being put in place in our country; a similar one is in place in the UK. When that is in place, there will be further returns to the consumer.

Last year, the globe experienced energy shocks. In Ireland and the UK in particular, there were enormous energy price spikes, driven largely by our reliance on imported fossil fuels in these islands. Wind energy saved €2 billion in gas costs last year that we would otherwise have had to spend on gas and carbon credits to cover that energy that was generated from wind.

Looking ahead, Ireland has ambitious pipelines and targets to deliver onshore and offshore wind energy. In the power sector, we need to cut our emissions by 75% by 2030, compared with where we are at today. To do that, we have set a target to deliver 9,000 megawatts of onshore wind energy. That compares with the nearly 5,000 megawatts that we have today; we need to increase that by 4,000 megawatts. For offshore wind energy, we need to go from pretty much a standing start — only 25 megawatts — to nearly 7,000 megawatts by 2030, which is a hugely ambitious target. Thankfully, we have pipelines that can deliver that. There is an onshore wind energy pipeline in the region of 11,000 megawatts and offshore projects are in development around every part of the coast of Ireland, trying to deliver by 2030.

We had our first showcase of progress in what offshore wind energy can deliver earlier this year when we had our first offshore renewable energy auction. We awarded 3,000 megawatts of contracts to four projects for a very competitive price in today's market of €86 per megawatt

hour, which is substantially below the energy market price. We have two projects that are still vying to secure routes to market in the Oriel and Arklow Bank wind farms as they try to deliver between now and 2030. We can deliver those projects by 2030, and we can surely deliver our offshore wind energy target into the early 2030s.

Every year, we run a poll looking at the impact and visibility of wind energy in communities right around Ireland. This year, we are really seeing the impacts of drawing attention to the benefits of wind energy, compared with imported fossil fuels. Four in five people are supportive of wind power. A huge number of people see benefits of offshore wind when it comes to energy security, and it is seen as a beneficial factor in trying to eliminate climate change.

3.30 pm

We need to overcome three hurdles if we are to achieve our targets, and I will draw attention to some of them. The planning system is certainly one. In Ireland, it takes too long to achieve planning permission for any renewable energy project. On average, it should take 18 weeks to get a decision once an application is made, but, unfortunately, decision timelines are now approximately 90 weeks. More resources are needed in that system to increase the speed at which we can deliver renewable energy.

We also need reinforcement of our electricity grid so that we can move the power from where it is generated to where it needs to be consumed in our businesses and communities. In particular, the North/South interconnector connecting Ireland and Northern Ireland is a vital piece of energy infrastructure that needs to be delivered in the coming years to achieve the goals that we have for climate action in Ireland and in Northern Ireland.

Finally, people and skills. About 6,000 people are employed in the wind energy sector in Ireland today. We will need, at the least, to double that by 2030 if we are to achieve our targets and roll out offshore wind energy, hydrogen and other supporting technologies that will be

needed to deliver that. To do so, we will need to create new courses, new opportunities to reskill and new employment pathways for apprenticeships that do not currently exist. All of that needs to happen in collaboration with our Government and the industry.

Speaking of collaboration, when we look at what Ireland and the UK are doing, we see that we have an enormous level of collaboration when it comes to energy. The East West interconnector and the Moyle interconnector connect the island of Ireland with Great Britain. We have had collaboration right across the sector when it has come to onshore and, more recently, offshore wind energy. We were delighted to welcome the ambassador to our wind energy trade show two weeks ago as we presented what Ireland can do and how the UK can help us to deliver on our targets.

When we look into the future, we see enormous areas of collaboration and opportunity. In offshore wind energy, we have a huge shared space in the Irish Sea. The UK has an incredible track record of delivery in offshore wind energy, and we believe that many of the skillsets can be utilised in Ireland. I mentioned the two interconnectors that we have. The Greenlink interconnector, also connecting Ireland and Great Britain, is in development, and the MaresConnect interconnector is in the early stages of development.

Finally, the electricity market is an area that we really need to focus on. We need to be sure that our electricity market can be designed to achieve net zero targets. Only through collaboration between Ireland and the UK can that be delivered, given that, on the island of Ireland, we have a single electricity market between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

On the industry side, the final thing to highlight is that that collaboration already exists at industry level. A partnership between us and Wind Energy Ireland, with Renewable UK on the UK side, has allowed us to form Renewable NI, which is the voice of renewable electricity in Northern Ireland and which operates very successfully as a joint entity there.

I hope that I have given you an overview of the plan that we have, the pipeline of projects that

we can deliver and the support that we have in communities and from our Governments. Now we need to deliver it. We need to hit our targets, and that is the objective that all of us should have in working together.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you very much, Noel. We will move swiftly to Niall Goodwin.

Mr Niall Goodwin (Wind Energy Ireland):

I will just reiterate Noel's point and pass over to Marian.

Ms Marian Troy (SSE):

Good afternoon, Co-Chairs, elected representatives, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you very much for the opportunity to present today. It is very much appreciated by SSE. My name is Marian Troy. I head up corporate affairs for SSE Group in Ireland. I am joined by my colleague Matt Pringle, head of public affairs for SSE in Great Britain.

SSE plc's purpose is to provide the energy needed today while building a better world of energy for tomorrow. Our vision is to be a leading energy company in a net zero world. We develop, build, operate and invest in the electricity infrastructure and the businesses needed in the net zero transition. We are a FTSE 40 company, headquartered in Perth, Scotland, that employs about 12,000 people across the UK and Ireland. In our last financial year, we invested £2.8 billion of capital expenditure in clean energy infrastructure and made a contribution of over £6 billion to the UK and Irish gross domestic product.

We have set ourselves strict, science-based targets in line with the UN sustainable development goals and 1.5° pathway to reduce our scope 1 carbon intensity by 80% by 2030 compared with 2017-18 levels. We have also set the target of increasing our renewable energy output fivefold by 2030, enabling low carbon generation and demand in our networks, and, finally, championing a fair and just energy transition, including a guarantee of fair work and a

commitment to paying fair tax and sharing economic value.

Our fully funded net zero acceleration programme plus will see us invest £18 billion in clean energy infrastructure in the next five years, with an expectation to invest around £40 billion over the coming decade. This is one of the largest investment programmes that the UK and Ireland have ever seen, and we are very proud to be leading the net zero transition.

To break down our activities a little more, we are Ireland's biggest wind generator, with 27 onshore wind farms across the all-island single electricity market. At present, we are building more offshore wind in UK waters than any other company in the world and developing many more, including our Arklow Bank project off the east coast of Ireland. We are transforming electricity grids in our Scottish and southern English electricity networks to bring clean, home-grown power to where it is needed. We serve domestic customers in Ireland and Northern Ireland, offering electricity, gas supply and energy efficiency services. We serve business customers right across the UK and Ireland.

SSE's climate targets obviously sit in the context of Government's net zero and decarbonisation targets, and we see ourselves as partners in delivering on those ambitions. We firmly agree with Governments that the future must be net zero, and we support the setting of targets by the various countries represented today as a clear signal to developers and investors such as ourselves. There is general consensus that electricity can be the workhorse of decarbonisation, and by that I mean that we can decarbonise our electricity supply by harnessing renewable energy and then use the clean power to electrify sectors such as heat and transport. That all points to growing electricity demand over the coming years and the need to accelerate our delivery of renewable capacity.

Whilst the UK and Ireland have made good progress to date, a step change is needed, and there are a number of challenges common to our islands. First, we must foster investor certainty by bringing forward policies that give developers confidence and make the UK and Ireland the

easiest places in the world to invest in clean energy infrastructure. Support schemes have been successful in the past, although recent auctions have been more challenging. This must be addressed if we are to meet our targets. Auctions should set ambitious volumes and be flagged well in advance, and rules must reflect the reality of the risks and costs of project delivery in today's world.

Secondly, we must accelerate the delivery time for critical national infrastructure by reforming planning and consenting bottlenecks. A decade to build an offshore wind farm is just too long. Overall, from a developer's perspective, predictable timelines and clear guidance on outcomes will accelerate the delivery of infrastructure and reduce risk and costs. Given the climate imperative, the common good of decarbonising our electricity supply must be recognised and given due weight in our planning decisions.

Thirdly, we must ensure there is sufficient capacity in the networks to connect new generation. We are seeing congestion in our networks already, and, given the predicted increase in electricity demand and the need to connect new renewable generation, significant grid buildout will be required. Plans must be agreed and implemented as soon as possible to give the developers of renewable generation projects the confidence that their projects can be connected promptly. Delays increase risks and cost.

Finally, we must get on with building the flexibility and storage that we need to complement renewables and bolster the UK and Ireland's security of supply. From that perspective, we will need flexible thermal generation, storage and system services to enable a renewables-led system. Carbon capture and storage, hydrogen and short- to long-term electricity storage infrastructure will all contribute. Developing the infrastructure and business models to ground those technologies must also be a priority.

Most of the elements that I have just outlined will be delivered at a national level, but there is a wider dimension and an even bigger opportunity. Through collaboration between our islands,

we can deliver on a greater scale and share know-how and expertise to accelerate the transition. Through SSE's operations across the UK and Ireland, we can organically see the benefits of this collaboration within our own organisation.

We very much welcome the recent agreement of memorandums of understanding between the UK and Ireland on gas security, interconnection and offshore renewables. We believe that this collaboration can accelerate the achievement of net zero, and, even more broadly, we know that Scotland and Ireland in particular have renewable resources in excess of their own demand, with the potential to export clean power or green hydrogen. In that respect, we are very supportive of the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC) initiative and UK and Irish involvement in that group. That can unlock the shared infrastructure and business models to open an even greater opportunity to harness our renewable resources to the benefit of the continent and these islands.

Before I finish, I must say a word about customers and communities. It will be well known to everyone present that the last few months have been very difficult for energy customers, given increased costs due to the energy crisis and wider cost-of-living crisis. Alongside Government support, we have brought forward a range of support for our customers, and we do our best to drive value and efficiency in all our activities.

We firmly believe that, in the medium term, the delivery of home-grown clean power is the best way to insulate customers on these islands from volatile international fuel markets and to ensure security of supply. We also seek to enable customers to take control of their energy use, offering energy efficiency services and home generation technologies and developing demand-side management products.

We are committed to sharing the benefits of our developments, whether that be through local investment and employment or fostering the domestic supply chain. SSE alone expects to create up to 1,000 new roles a year up to 2026. Through our community investment

programmes, we seek to support community-based green transition projects, and we awarded £10.4 million in funding to local community projects across the UK and Ireland over the last financial year.

At this point, I will hand over to my colleague Matt to say a few words on the UK offshore sector.

Mr Matt Pringle (SSE):

Thanks, Marian. I will be brief, but I have a couple of quick points to make from a UK perspective. As Noel said, the UK offshore sector has been very successful over the last 15 years or so, since the introduction of the Climate Change Act in 2008 and the policies that came off the back of that. We have seen investment move from coal towards renewables, particularly offshore wind. We have grown the offshore sector to 15 gigawatts, and, at the same time, the Contracts for Difference regime has seen the technology costs come down significantly.

In SSE's pipeline, we have had two very recent milestones, which you may have seen in the news. Our Seagreen offshore wind farm in Scotland, which is now Scotland's largest offshore wind farm, was fully completed last week, and our Dogger Bank offshore wind farm, which is off the east coast of Yorkshire, has just started generating first power and will be the largest offshore wind farm in the world when it is completed. Those are two really significant projects that are already contributing clean power to the grid. So, we continue to make progress.

Looking to the future, there is still a high degree of political consensus around offshore wind as the cornerstone of our future energy system. The current Government have a target of 50 gigawatts of offshore wind by 2030, and the Labour Opposition has a target of 55 gigawatts by 2030. Those are both very challenging and ambitious, but welcome, targets. You may have seen the Prime Minister's net zero speech a couple of weeks ago, which generated a lot of headlines and attention, but it is welcome that, on that large-scale infrastructure decarbonisation of the power sector, there is still a lot of political consensus across the

spectrum.

With those targets in place, we are starting to grapple with the challenges that they represent. Marian touched on them, and they are common across the UK and Ireland and other markets, but it is the case that there will have to be an improvement in delivery time. If we are still talking about taking 12 years to deliver an offshore wind farm, then clearly the target of 2030 will not be met. There will need to be changes to the planning system and consent to speed up some of those processes. The grid is a big challenge. We need to make sure that we have enough investment in grid infrastructure to connect that scale of offshore wind. We are seeing some positive movement in that direction, but there needs to be more strategic investment and early at-scale investment. Finally, there needs to be flexibility, which Marian touched on. We need to make sure that we are replacing natural gas, and the flexibility that that provides when the wind is not blowing, with clean alternatives, such as CCS, hydrogen and different types of storage.

We are seeing degrees of progress across all those areas in the UK. Clearly, it will be a very challenging few years. I am optimistic about our ability to deliver against those targets, but pace is key because we are only six years away from needing to reach those milestones. We have an election in the UK next year, which may delay policy delivery, so pace is absolutely critical, but I am optimistic about our ability to deliver.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you so much. That is absolutely fascinating from all of you. One of the joys of this organisation is how much shared optimism and how many shared challenges we have between us. Those were fantastic presentations. It is time for questions. None of you were waving a minute ago, and now you are all waving at me. I will take Lord Bruce first.

Rt Hon The Lord Bruce:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you for those presentations. I am all in favour of the expansion of onshore and offshore wind energy, but it creates issues on the ground.

3.45 pm

First, with offshore wind, the actual landfall and onward transmission and the substations and visual intrusion, which people object to in scale onshore. One thing that surprises me is that we are still transmitting electricity on massive steel towers across country. Nobody would dream of delivering water or gas that way. As we build the new infrastructure, the biggest local objection that we get from people is the physical impact of those new power lines. Is it unreasonable and unaffordable to consider putting those underground?

Last winter, my home had one four-day power cut and one three-day power cut, so the wonderful wind that generates electricity also brought down the cables by which the electricity was being transmitted. It is a serious plea, for visual intrusion, security of supply and the landscape: should we not put the cables underground?

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Who is taking that? You can fight amongst yourselves.

Mr Noel Cunniffe:

Thank you very much for the question. I am delighted to hear about your support for onshore and offshore wind energy. When it comes to grid infrastructure, the grid is absolutely central to hitting every climate change target that we have as two islands. Without a stable grid, we will not be able to move the power from where it is generated to where it is needed. In Ireland, we had enormous investment in our grid in the 1950s up to about the 1980s, most of which was overhead lines. Since then, there has been very little grid investment. As a result, we have eaten into an awful lot of the headroom that we had available to us for moving generation for creating demand.

EirGrid, which is the transmission system operator here in Ireland, now investigates when it is developing new circuits. It looks first to see whether it can put them underground, and then it seeks to bring forward various types of solutions and always tries to ensure that it has an underground option if it is available. Transmission system operators are keenly aware that the quickest way to deliver projects can often be to put them underground, but that needs to be balanced with the economic cost of the projects. Very often, it is more costly to put them underground, and often there are extremely technical challenges to doing so as well. It is not as easy to install underground cables as it is to have overhead lines and operate a safe and secure power system. It is an option that is being considered, but it is important that the grid investment happens, be that underground or overhead line, along with all the other supporting technologies.

Mr Matt Pringle:

I can come in with a couple of thoughts. Public acceptance and taking the public with us on the amount of network that is going to have to be built is absolutely critical. SSE owns the network in the north of Scotland, which happens to be where a lot of the offshore resource is from. In that area, we will have to build a lot more grid, so we need to do a number of things to make sure that we are taking people with us and that we are ensuring that communities that host the infrastructure benefit from that.

With regard to undergrounding, it is a similar situation. There is an Ofgem methodology that looks at where that can happen. It is significantly more expensive to do that. It is probably essentially a political decision as to how much consumers are willing to pay in order to put that infrastructure underground versus having it above ground and having that visual impact.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you. Can I just check that I have everybody? There has been a rush of hands. I have

Peter Bottomley, Niall Blaney, Ross Greer, Seán Crowe and Éamon Ó Cuív. We will take the first two, Peter Bottomley and Niall Blaney, and then we will take the last three.

Sir Peter Bottomley MP:

Now that we are phasing out coal and reducing gas, why is the cost of electricity still tied to hydrocarbon prices?

Senator Niall Blaney:

Thank you very much, Co-Chair. I congratulate you both for putting this on the agenda today. It is vital that we have a good thorough discussion on all this, and I welcome the four people who are presenting today. First of all, as a representative who comes from Donegal in the north-west of Ireland, I am conscious of the fact that, of the small number of wind farms that we have presently, we only get the benefit of two hours' output per day, because the network currently cannot carry it. It is nearly a complete waste of funds to have those in place. From that perspective, what can you tell us about your engagement with Government on the roll-out of the new network that is required to carry all that new power?

New technology now exists to connect countries; joining up all countries, not just connectors, which are one way. Technology now exists to allow countries to buy and sell as needs be. I am thinking, from an EU perspective, that there is a great project sitting for the EU. Moreover, from the Irish Government perspective, there is the introduction of the new planning system that takes everything into the one department, so to speak, the operation of the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority (MARA) and proposals for the new An Bord Pleanála, An Comisiún Pleanála, which is coming into existence. How much will that help to streamline new projects in the future?

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Marian, do you want to kick us off for the first one?

Ms Marian Troy:

We eagerly await the reform of the planning system and hope that the time to consider applications will be greatly reduced. Even in welcoming the results of the recent auction, Minister Ryan said the same; that our auctions would benefit from more projects coming through the consenting funnel. We agree wholeheartedly.

On the new technologies that you mentioned, connecting more widely to the EU or UK and shared projects, I mentioned the North Seas Energy Cooperation. We see that as a great forum to bring forward the administrative supports for those kinds of projects and technologies. We definitely see opportunities for Ireland to export, whether it may be power or green hydrogen, beyond these islands, which creates opportunities for growth and prosperity here. Absolutely, as you mentioned, constraints in the system at the moment are of great concern to renewables developers; that even where we do build wind farms, they cannot always operate to their fullest potential, given the great limitations. It is to everyone's benefit that those bottlenecks in the system be addressed.

As for our engagement with Government or others, our message is consistent with that of Wind Energy Ireland and across industry that those issues need to be addressed if we are to meet our targets, and, in doing so, as I mentioned earlier, you reduce the costs and risks in developing projects, which reduces costs for everybody all round.

Mr Niall Goodwin:

I might add to that briefly and maybe pick up on Sir Peter Bottomley's important question as well. Sir Peter mentioned that, even as we get more and more cheaper renewables onto the system, the price is still being set by hydrocarbons or fossil fuels. That is the case. It is a consequence of the market arrangements that we have and the way in which the price is set. It is based on the merit order effect, which essentially means that the last unit of electricity that is needed to secure supply effectively sets the price. The way in which we tackle that is to get

more renewables into the system. You will have seen the slide from Noel that showed the price differential between the windiest day of the year and the day with the least wind: the price was depressed considerably. More rolling out of clean renewables and reaching our targets will only improve the situation and drive down prices.

There are also things like more longer-term contracts. The CFD model that we have in the UK and Ireland for supporting renewables is really good in that sense in that it provides investor certainty to the project, but also, when the wholesale price is above that strike price, it is a payback to the state and consumer, which is a really good way of tackling it. Ultimately, we need to get to where we have a zero-carbon electricity system where we do not depend on hydrocarbons to set the price.

Senator Blaney made a couple of really important points about the grid and planning, which Marian touched on. Ultimately, we need to have a grid that is fit for the system that we are trying to reach; a system that is based on clean renewables and not a system of the past. That means that we need to build public support for the development of the infrastructure that is needed to get renewables to the demand centres and where we need them.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you. We will go Ross Greer and then Seán Crowe.

Mr Ross Greer MSP:

I have one question for Matt Pringle and one for Niall Goodwin. On the point about planning, we made quite significant changes to the national planning framework in Scotland last year. Last month, we announced that we were going to halve the length of time for applications for onshore wind. Is further planning reform required on top of the progress that we have already made, or, now that we have changed our planning framework, should we be focusing on the other barriers that industry faces?

I just want to pick up on a point that was made in the initial presentation around workforce demands. One of the challenges that we have is that we simply cannot afford — due to wider financial constraints, inflation, an inadequate Budget settlement, etc — to create the college places that are necessary to develop the skilled workforce that we need. There is also a growing sentiment that the companies that are already making substantial profits, and will make more as the industry grows, should be contributing more directly towards working with funding colleges, creating apprenticeships etc. What do you see as the role of the private sector in supporting the state to deliver the kind of education that is required to have the workforce that you need?

Mr Seán Crowe TD:

I want you to expand on the subject of delays, particularly in relation to offshore wind. You mentioned planning and said that something that should take 18 weeks is taking 90 weeks. I would like to get some sense of what causes those problems. Is it the fact that it is relatively new and they are starting off that is delaying the system? Where are we in relation to apprenticeships in this state? I presume that you have met the Minister on that. When should we expect to see the roll-out of that?

We are not going to meet our targets at the rate that we are going. Is one of the challenges going to be around the turbines themselves? This morning, we heard the Minister saying that he was not aware of any companies that are interested. I thought that Cisco was talking about investing in that whole area a number of years ago. We have political consensus on the issue. Four out of five people might support it, but they might say, “Although not necessarily in my back yard”, or that type of thing.

There are big challenges in the industry. We hear all the time that there are blockages there, and you have outlined some of them. With a new Government, for instance, what would you identify in A, B, C, D order in relation to the roll-out of that? Can it be done that simply, or are

there structural delays or whatever in the system?

Mr Matt Pringle:

There were a couple of points there around planning. We are seeing some positive acknowledgement of the need to reform the planning system, and there has been some welcome reform. There is, however, a widespread belief that we need more in that space. There is one example in Scotland in relation to the threshold for public consultation on the building of new grid. We have been calling for that threshold to be increased because, at the moment, it is far too low. You can have one or two people objecting to a project that a planning directorate supports. That, then, starts a two- or three-year delay through consultation. Clearly, it will not be in the wider public interest if that is not looked at. That is one specific example.

Taking a step back and looking at the offshore example and the full process, it is not just about planning. You also have the process of securing the seabed and getting your contract for difference, your grid connection date and your environmental approvals and consenting, plus the planning. All of those things combined add time to the process and create a very lengthy delivery time. There are specific areas, which I will not be able to get into now in this forum, where you can make those processes more efficient and get that time down to six years. We are keen to see that.

Mr Noel Cunniffe:

I will be very quick. On the private side, we work with government on the skills workforce challenge. Wind Energy Ireland collaborates with Skillnet Ireland, which is a government authority, to develop a common skills training regime. This year, we have trained over 400 companies and over 1,500 people in various aspects of renewable development. I am very keen on public private partnerships when it comes to skills development, and it is something that we absolutely need to expand.

4.00 pm

To clarify the delays in the planning system, when I mentioned 90 weeks, it is 90 weeks for onshore wind, and that is a technology we have been putting through planning for 30 years in Ireland. It is not that the technology is new: it is well established. It is purely a prioritisation issue, a lack of assessment skills in the planning authorities and delays caused by court challenges. One of our recommendations is the establishment of a specific environmental court, which is part of the new planning reform Bill, and for renewable energy projects to be prioritised, as was directed through the REPowerEU document produced by the European Commission earlier in the year.

Finally, on the idea of support at a local level, four in five people are generally supportive of wind energy. When it comes to wind energy in their backyard, we asked that question and found that three in five people are supportive. Only one in 20 people are opposed to it. If you try to find one in 20 people opposed to anything in Ireland, you will probably find that. The support is there, but there is the potential for a significant vocal minority of people to be loud when it comes to opposing renewable energy and grid projects, and that is a challenge for the industry, but also for you as elected representatives, to try to take that message forward.

Ms Marian Troy:

On the planning system, we have discussed how resource is a problem. The will to put applications through the process is not lacking, but resources are, and that is delaying things. I have mentioned that we really need to strongly recognise the public good that is delivered from decarbonising our renewable system, and that is not always evident in the decisions that come through. Whilst decarbonising our electricity supply is recognised as a national objective at a high level, sometimes that is not borne out in local plans and decision-making. Ensuring consistency up and down the chain is something that can streamline our process and make clear to developers ahead of time what projects are likely to be progressed, so we do not waste

everyone's time and money by bringing forward projects that are not.

The industry recognises that apprenticeship and skills must be developed, because the lack of skills at the moment could be a barrier to delivering on our objectives. In our organisation, we have increased our apprenticeship and graduate programme offerings, so the message has been recognised loud and clear internally by developers like ourselves.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you. Éamon Ó Cuív and then Annabelle Ewing, and that is my final question. Going, going, gone. Thank you very much.

Mr Éamon Ó Cuív TD:

Go raibh maith agat. This is an issue where the big policy is very easy. I do not know anyone who does not agree with renewable energy, particularly since it is native and will give energy security to both of these islands — we will not be importing fossil fuels from far away. However, like everything else, it seems that the devil is in the detail.

First, are you happy with the proposals in the proposed planning Bill that would put time limits on all planning permissions — not only wind energy, but all onshore planning applications? I hear what you say about a special court. I think that that is necessary. When someone goes for a judicial review, which is their entitlement, it would be heard in good time without delay, and you could be relatively certain of the time.

My second question relates to the use of surplus energy. I understand that you often have surplus energy at night-time. What is the best way to store surplus energy, rather than just switching off the turbines? Is it battery, is it hydrogen, or is there another way to store energy so it is not wasted? It was proposed that surplus energy could be used to heat houses at night, and there were tentative schemes there, particularly to provide heat for people who are less well-off.

In relation to both onshore and offshore, people on this island often forget that we are dependent on port infrastructure for onshore wind because you normally have to import the turbines. Are you satisfied with the port infrastructure, which is absolutely vital?

My final question is not directly related to wind. What is the potential of solar? It seems to me that solar and wind are complementary, because, when it is very sunny and there is not too much wind, the solar compensates for the wind. What is the ability of solar to complement wind to make sure that you are less dependent on fossil fuels in those times of high heat and high sunshine, but low wind?

Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP:

This is probably a question for Matt Pringle of SSE. What representations has SSE made, or planned to make, about the important issue of, what must be called, the discriminatory transmission charging system in Scotland? The system means that energy generators in Scotland pay massively more to connect to the grid than their counterparts do south of the border. How on earth does that approach fit with our desire to encourage and facilitate the expansion of renewables, and, also importantly, to encourage public buy-in, which you would, perhaps, see more of if the pricing paid by the consumer was more reasonable, which it cannot be because of the transmission charging system? That is a question for Matt.

Mr Matt Pringle:

Historically, SSE has made representations to Ofgem and government on transmission charging in favour of a flat national price, but, ultimately, that is a decision for the regulator. The response that we have always had is that there are winners and losers in that reform, and the view is taken that, overall, the current system is favoured. That is something that we have engaged with them on in the past, frequently.

The other questions were around storage and port infrastructure. We will need a variety of types

of storage: long duration; rapid dispatch and batteries. SSE has a project in Scotland called Coire Glas, which is a pumped hydro station. It will, essentially, pump water up a hill and let it run down. That would double the UK's electricity storage in one project. Therefore, very big-scale, long-duration stuff is important, as is the smaller-scale stuff.

We need a lot of investment to be made to increase the capacity of our port infrastructure, and there is an acknowledgement of that. An illustrative example is Dogger Bank Wind Farm, which has just started generating power: I mentioned it already. The tipping point of those turbines is the height of the Shard in London; they are absolutely massive. That means that you need massive boats to bring them into port and put them up, and we need to increase the capacity and depth of those ports. That is a big part of the picture as well.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

I will get you all to make some points on the way through as we finish up. Noel, you may go next.

Mr Noel Cunniffe:

Thank you all for your questions. One thing to add on the ports is that the only port on the island of Ireland that is currently capable of constructing an offshore wind farm is Belfast. Therefore, if we were to try to hit not only the GB targets but the island-of-Ireland targets for offshore wind energy by 2030, we are going to need investment in several ports around the island. I think that the like of Rosslare, Cork and Shannon ports have already put forward projects and master plans for how they could expand to help deliver offshore wind energy.

On the planning time limits, as I mentioned, the statutory guideline is currently 18 weeks, but, in reality, it is over 90 weeks. To answer the question of whether it would help if there was a time limit: absolutely. Certainty would be greatly appreciated by the developer community in Ireland, even if the timeline were greater than 18 weeks. People would prefer to have, maybe,

48 weeks, which, I think, is the longest timeline in the Bill. At least they would have the certainty that if they put in an application, they would get a decision in 48 weeks.

Finally, on the use of surplus energy, you mentioned home heating schemes. I am a board member for EnergyCloud, one of the schemes that you mentioned. There is a lot of merit in trying to use surplus renewable energy to heat people's homes and electrify our heat and transport, as well as store it, as Matt mentioned.

Mr Niall Goodwin:

Deputy Ó Cuív raises a good question on the surplus energy. Ireland and the UK are two examples of countries that have been very successful at integrating variable renewables on to the system. As we continue that journey, we will, potentially before the rest of Europe, experience the types of challenges that you face when you have really high penetrations of renewables. That means more surplus renewables. We need to look on that as an opportunity and a really valuable resource. As Noel said, we can decarbonise heating and transport with electrification. We could look at high-value products such as green hydrogen: we can look at interconnection to utilise that and bring value elsewhere, particularly as we have increasing demand and a growing population. We need a policy on what we do with that surplus energy and a strategy to make wind power do more than just serve the electricity sector and decarbonise elsewhere.

You raised a really important point on solar. We have a target of eight gigawatts of solar by 2030, which is not a million miles away from our wind target. We are starting from a lower base there, so we need a lot of deployment of solar. You are spot on: solar is very complementary to wind in the months when we have less wind. In the summer months, we have high levels of solar, so that is when they can really balance each other. We need to get to a position in 2030 where we have an electricity system based on wind and solar that complement each other, backed up by clean storage technologies, so that we get to that zero

carbon electricity system as quickly as possible.

Ms Marian Troy:

I echo all of that. On the issue of planning, as I mentioned earlier, if we do not get projects through the planning system, we do not have projects to compete with one another in the auctions on delivering on Government targets at the best price. Time certainty is important for developers such as ourselves to ready projects and put them into competition with other projects to go ahead. I think that the will is there, so it is about setting up the structures and providing the resource.

I agree on the use of surplus energy. You mentioned a number of great contenders for using surplus energy and maybe I can tie some things together. Through our retail arm, SSE Airtricity, we are involved in research projects to see how we can empower customers to charge their electric vehicles and heat their water at times when there is surplus electricity. We are involved in a Horizon Europe project, which is looking at just that and how to utilise artificial intelligence to do it. Great innovation is going on, so we hope that solutions emerge over the coming years, and we definitely see ourselves as part of that.

Likewise, on the potential of solar, we have grumbled a lot about congestion on the grid, but we are also looking to bring forward solutions. One of our projects at the moment, and we are investigating others, is looking to co-locate solar and battery with a wind farm such is their complementarity. You can then fully utilise the grid connection that is already there and max out what grid infrastructure we do have. So, again, innovation is happening in the sector, which is great.

I will leave it there. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Great. I thank the superb expert panel for that presentation. We really appreciate your time out

of your companies and organisations. You highlighted the opportunities and challenges, and the similar problems that we share — around skills and planning, particularly — as politicians across these islands. That was an excellent afternoon presentation. The late afternoon slot is not the easiest slot in the world, but we really appreciate your time and your answering such a range of questions. Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

The motion is:

“that this Assembly has considered recent political developments.”

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

I move the motion.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

We will commence our debate.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

This is a broad motion. The discussion that we are going to have has been framed by the excellent presentations that have been given to us during the course of today. It is welcome to have honest answers to challenging issues where there is genuinely held disagreement, even if it is just to recognise the points of difference that are real.

4.15 pm

One issue that has been reinforced again and again today is the urgency that is required to bring about a functioning Executive in Northern Ireland. I was impacted by the presentation of Minister Ossian Smyth, but every Member who spoke echoed that point. I hope, as I think we

all do, that this is the last plenary meeting of this Assembly that will be held in the absence of a functioning Executive in Northern Ireland. Co-Chair, is there anything further that we can do, or is there, perhaps, something that we should not do or say, to help advance that objective? All the other issues that Members may wish to raise in this general debate on developments that affect this Assembly are important, but none is more important than the imperative of the institutions in Northern Ireland operating again.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Deputy Howlin. That was very much a theme running through all the contributions this morning and this afternoon: the value and necessity of restoring the institutions in Northern Ireland, namely the Assembly and the Executive, and, very important but often left out of the narrative, the North/South Ministerial Council. I think that it was Senator Currie who commented that Waterways Ireland and some other bodies cannot recruit staff because they do not have the authority to move ahead with practical day-to-day issues that need to be addressed, so, from that point of view, it is absolutely critical for all our islands that we have a functioning Executive, Assembly and North/South Ministerial Council as soon as possible.

Senator Currie, were you indicating?

Senator Emer Currie:

I had not indicated, but I will take the opportunity. *[Laughter.]*

I highlighted the difficulties that we are facing because we are not working together as we should. Waterways is one example, and we, as this body, also have a responsibility to amplify the issues that will be faced by Tourism Ireland in relation to the electronic travel authorisation because the North/South Ministerial Council is not meeting.

Among other issues that should be considered is one that my colleague Rose Conway-Walsh

focused on earlier: the lack of student mobility across the island. Only 0.2% of students from the North are able to secure places in southern universities because of the Central Applications Office (CAO) requirements. It requires four A levels when the norm is three. What student will take on four A levels? There is also a lack of information in each other's jurisdictions about the CAO and UCAS. Those are just some of the examples, and the proposer of the motion is absolutely correct that these things will be solved by a functioning Executive, but the question is this: what else can we do in the interim?

Ms Pauline McNeill MSP:

Having been a representative on this very important body, I realise that we have different perspectives on many things and that it is important to speak to issues that we might be able to find some consensus on. Given the breadth of the motion, it is incumbent on me to mention the situation in Gaza/Israel today. I start by saying that I hope that we all agree to condemn the horrific attacks on the people of Israel, which were absolutely horrible for those mothers, those parents and the hostages who were kidnapped. However, I do not think, and I hope that there is some agreement on this in the room, that it justifies the collective punishment of a single people who, as we sit here today, are being wiped out by the force of bombardment.

Whether you want to agree with that or not, I would hope that this Assembly would say with one voice that all life is equal; that Palestinian lives and Israeli lives are equal; and that, if people are denied water and electricity and the means to survive, then we should say with one voice that that is morally wrong. I do not know what the mechanism is, but I would like to think that, even if we do not all share one single view, we do share a single view that no one anywhere in the world should die because the world did not speak up and say that, at the very least, there should be a sustained humanitarian corridor in order to make sure that people can live.

I realise that it is a complex and difficult situation. I have been involved for 25 years, and I

would say that it is the worst that I have seen and experienced in trying to understand the events as they unfold. I feel a state of desperation in my heart about the world not saying enough about ensuring that there is at least humanity here, while we hope that there is an interlocutor intervention to make sure that all of the hostages are released and that there is peace in the long term.

I will finish on this, Co-Chair. It is hard to see where the hope might be for this, because, for 30 years, the peace process has really achieved nothing. However, you still have to hope that out of this, in the long run, there will be some realisation that the only hope for the Middle East and peace for both nations is for Israel to be safe but for there to be an independent, sovereign Palestinian state.

The Lord Bew:

I support what Brendan Howlin said — I am sure that it is the strong view of the meeting — which is that it is desirable to get back to a functioning Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland as quickly as possible. I am very strongly of that view, and I have spent a good part of the last year arguing unsuccessfully for it to happen. Nevertheless, it is quite important to acknowledge that while, in general, the discourse of this body is entirely open, broadminded and reasonable, there are moments when it is not difficult to see why we are having such difficulty, which Lord Kilclooney mentioned in relation to attracting our unionist Members to attend. That moment today was when the Minister, quite without assumption, used the problematic phrase, “the island economy”. I absolutely concede that there are in electricity, as we have heard today, and in agri-food, elements of an island economy. It is also true, however, that the Northern Irish economy is heavily locked into the United Kingdom economy in a way that the economy here is not — again, on the figures that we have been given.

The problem is that, first, when the Good Friday Agreement was negotiated, it was not a question of what the British side said or what the Ulster Unionists said. The Irish Government

quite explicitly talked about cooperation in a North/South ministerial body, and you have rightly lamented its absence. The Irish Government said that there were two economies on the island of Ireland and that it was about practical cooperation in the interests of and benefit to all in achieving a settlement, and that worked, and it was a logical argument.

I am not saying that there is no such thing as an island economy, but the argument now, in the official discourse of Dublin, is one that grates on unionists. If you look at Lord Dodds's speech in Parliament last Wednesday against re-establishing the Executive, which I strongly disagreed with, one of its key themes was that the Windsor framework is all about the creation of an island economy which will be one economy and, on the basis of that, will lead to political unity. That was a key theme, and there is a deafness on the part of Dublin not to realise that that is a key argument.

I fully concede that that is exactly what Lord Dodds was saying 25 years ago, when he was Nigel Dodds of the DUP, against David Trimble. It is exactly the same argument. Jim Allister makes exactly the same argument. So far, this thing, this argument is just dropped. I fully concede that it is a rewind or a replay. I fully understand why Irish TDs should find this all a little bit tedious because, in a way, it is. Nonetheless, we have to think seriously about why that is, despite now there being an excuse.

There is a major political moment in Northern Ireland: in the next few days or weeks, we hope to get the Assembly back again. We have to understand why there are so few unionist members here and why the take-up is so low. One reason is, just at the edges, a certain ideological insensitivity.

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA:

While listening to Pauline's contribution, I thought about when I was interviewed, in February this year, by Palestinian and Israeli film-makers. They had come to Belfast for the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and were making a documentary on the peace process. I,

obviously, played no part in bringing about peace in Northern Ireland, and I am a legislator who has not yet legislated since my election in May, but I have experience of being on Belfast City Council. They were fascinated by the governance of the council and power-sharing. They asked specific questions about how the committees were chaired and managed. I said to them, “This is all quite boring”, and they said, “No. It is fascinating, and it feels so far away from what we know”.

I messaged one of the film-makers last week, because you can see the awful war crimes and children dying on both sides. It is so hard to find the words or know what to say. All I said was, “We are rooting for you. We are rooting for peace”. The guy responded to me and said that their imaginations are filled with hatred and death right now, and the only hope they have is their project and the other way of doing things that they saw in Belfast. It was a poignant reminder that our peace is precious and that what has been achieved is precious, and it is not just for people in Northern Ireland but is for the world, and it is why BIPA is important.

Post-Brexit, in this troubled unstable world we live in, it is important that parliamentarians come together. It is welcome that the Steering Committee is looking at how we can better communicate the work, the collaboration and the cooperation because it is important, moving forward, but it offers hope to everyone else around the world. Thank you.

Ms Sarah Murphy MS:

I echo everything that Pauline and Kate have said this evening. As a member of the Senedd in Wales, I have learned so much from being in BIPA. I was elected only a few years ago, and I have had the privilege of coming to a number of these meetings and weekends away. Nothing stayed with me as much as when we heard Bertie Ahern speak about the peace agreement. It had a profound effect on me, and I often quote what he said about the compromise that was needed. He said that you give a bit, you get a bit and nobody gets everything that they want. I say that to Mark Drakeford quite often in our group meetings; it is a wonderful way of thinking

about things. What also stayed with me was that he said that you now have a generation who only know peace. I echo everything Pauline and Kate have said. The hope is that we will get to that place, there is a generation of children who are very much caught up in this at the moment, millions of children. I agree that they should not be without water and hospitals and what they need to survive this terrible time. I hope they can get to a place that we have all been able to get to.

I will go back to my Welsh Senedd group, and be very proud of what we have discussed this weekend and that we are able to discuss this here in such a conciliatory and open space and say what we want to say. This is everything; this is truly empowering, and I am very proud. Thank you very much.

4.30 pm

Ms Emma Harper MSP:

Thank you very much, Chair. I did not really intend to speak, but to pick up on what Brendan said about restarting Stormont and what Pauline McNeill said about Palestine, if we are thinking about Ukraine and what is happening across the world, we, as BIPA Members, need to do whatever we can to support peace and collaboration.

I was thinking about what we have heard today about wind turbines, offshore or onshore, hydrogen, solar or electric vehicle charging. All of that is about innovation. When I visited a farmer this week, he said that you cannae have innovation with fear. The only way that you can have innovation is with confidence, stability and security. Security does not just mean no bullets or bombs being dropped on your homes and your neighbourhoods. Security is about security of home, security of clean water and security of education for yourself and your weans.

I wanted to speak partly to echo what other Members, including Kate, have said. We need to do whatever we can to work together to enhance the work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, because we are able to have discussions, be collegiate and collaborate in the two

and a half days that we get to spend together.

Rt Hon The Lord Bruce:

I agree with what has been said, specifically about getting the Northern Ireland Assembly back. That is absolutely way overdue. There are a couple of things to mention. One of my colleagues shared an article a couple of weeks ago about the future of liberal democracy — I do not mean Liberal Democrats with a capital “L” but a liberal democracy or society — that said that the fundamentals of liberal democracy require two things: the first is debate, and the second is compromise.

On both the Israel/Palestine problem and the unionist/nationalist problem, the danger is that people on both sides get into their bunkers and say, “We will not give an inch. No surrender”. There is no future in that. There is no resolution in that. Tony Blair, who was a peacemaker in Northern Ireland and then an envoy in the Middle East, said that the irony was that, at that time, there was an agreed solution to the Middle East but no peace. There was no agreed solution to Northern Ireland, but there was peace because people were willing to have it.

The only other comment that I will make — I know that they are not here but it has to be said, and we have said it to them in Parliament — is that the argument that one hears is, “We should not be prepared to accept certain things that have been negotiated or agreed”. The basic essence is that nothing should be agreed in the Northern Ireland Assembly unless the two main groups agree, but I do not see that that is what power-sharing is about. Power-sharing requires compromise; it does not mean veto. I really think that the hard-line unionists should recognise that it is not democratic to use the power-sharing agreement to justify a veto. It requires compromise. They can fight and negotiate their issues as hard as they like. I completely understand their concerns, and Lord Bew highlighted them. They are real — I understand that — but, in the end, Northern Ireland is entitled to have governance. We cannot go on like this.

Mr Nigel Mills MP:

I agree with everything that Lord Bruce just said. As we live in liberal democracies, at some point, if our various Governments and political parties cannot find a way through, we have to ask the people to make a decision for us. If we really cannot get institutions up and running in Northern Ireland, and if we cannot find some further assistance for the DUP that addresses some of its genuine and deserved concerns, I wonder whether we just need to ask the people of Northern Ireland whether they are happy with the Northern Ireland protocol as modified by the Windsor framework. That is the only way that I can see of addressing the consent issue. It is a perfectly realistic concern that we have modified the position of Northern Ireland, to a certain extent, without getting consent. Perhaps we should ask the people of Northern Ireland if they consent to that change. I am not sure that that is a very attractive option, but how many more months can we leave this situation without trying to find a way through? It is not easy to see a way through if the party that is holding things up is insisting on negotiations having an outcome when there are no negotiations taking place that can possibly deliver that outcome. If we cannot find a way through that that party is happy with, we need to do something different. It was encouraging that Minister Baker effectively said that the UK Government would take some action if there was no progress soon. He did not define what “soon” meant or what the action would be, but, hopefully, by the time of our next BIPA gathering in the spring, we may have made some progress on this. Otherwise, if we do not try something different in the meantime, I suspect that we will have a similar debate with similar comments and similar lack of progress.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

Thank you very much indeed for the debate. On the referendum point, let us just make sure that it is not 50 per cent plus one, or we will have another Twitter storm, with every other kind of media fake news that is out there, that will engulf the entirety of this island for the next day

and a half.

Lord Kilclooney is not here at the moment, so it might be said that I am the only unionist in the village. It is important that we look at BIPA and what we do among our interrelationships and that we help create the conditions for when the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive come back. They will come back; I am, as much as I can be, reasonably confident. When they come back, we will need to deal with some of the critical issues that are likely to come, and some of those will come in quite unexpected ways.

One of the most interesting things that we will have to deal with is that a Northern Ireland Assembly that cannot run a district heating scheme will have to deal with the whole acquis of European laws and regulations. For that, we will need help and support, and I look to our friends across these islands to link with us to give us that help and guidance. I know that Kate is listening in the back row, so, in case there is any chance that I end up as the chair of the new European committee in the Northern Ireland Assembly, I say that I will reach out to all of you, because we need to make this work.

As Minister Baker said, we are in a position in which the Windsor framework is there. I do not like it. I cannot think of anybody in my community who likes it, but, if it needs to be operationalised — that horrible word — we need to be in a position in which the provisions within it, including the Stormont brake, are seen to be able to work and in which there is seen to be democratic accountability. If we can achieve that — we will need your help — there is a degree of confidence, Co-Chairs, that we can head off into the future to do it. I am probably now stopping people getting to their dinner.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks very much, Steve.

We do not have the authority to introduce a motion during this debate. It would have to be tabled tonight at the steering committee. Pauline talked, in her introductory remarks, about the

terrible suffering and about how we all want to see an end to the conflict and to people being deprived of basic humanitarian rights such as the right to water, heat and electricity. I do not think that anybody would dissent from those comments, which she made exceptionally well.

With regard to Lord Bew's point about the economy North and South, I represent a constituency Cavan-Monaghan that has a huge interdependence with Northern Ireland through our neighbours in Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh. Thankfully, trade has grown hugely on a North/South and South/North basis since 1998. It is very interesting that the 2021 figure for North/South trade on the island — the figures have grown substantially in the meantime, from a Northern Ireland and an Irish state point of view — totalled €9.6 billion, with trade North to South accounting for €6 billion of the value, and €3.6 billion coming from trade South to North. Those figures show that the economy in our state is exceptionally important to Northern Ireland. When you compare them, you see that there is actually double the trade North to South than South to North, and the difference in the relative size of both economies. We are very interdependent. I see that at a local level. Everybody else here who represents a border constituency on either side sees the huge interdependence that we have on each other every day of the week in trade and commerce.

I thank all of you for your contributions. Politics matters. I think that it was the ambassador who said, when referring to the Middle East during discussions earlier, that politics needs to work. We need to have it working and functioning as well as possible on our own islands as well.

There is a little time ahead of a reception, which takes places in the Garden Room at Rococo Hall, followed by a plenary dinner at the River Room restaurant. Importantly, we will resume at 9.30 am sharp tomorrow. Thanks for your cooperation today. I look forward to that tomorrow. The plenary session is now suspended until 9.30 am tomorrow. Thank you, colleagues.

Adjourned at 4.41 pm.

Tuesday 24 October 2023

The Assembly met at 9.51 am.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Good morning, colleagues. We are a bit late, but we have the right number of people; thank you for being here. We have people bringing in more coffee, which is fine. Welcome to the second day of deliberations. I am looking forward to the rest of our Assembly meeting and more stimulating engagement. We had a really good day yesterday. This morning, we will deal with some Assembly business. First, Committee A will present its report. We will also hear updates from Committees B, C and D. The session will conclude with a discussion on supporting energy transition, a subject that is important to us all, and we will hear from Lisa Vaughan, CEO of Tipperary Energy Agency, and Eugene Conlon, manager of Energy Team.

Programme of Business agreed.

**COMMITTEE A — ‘PROTECTING THE COMMON TRAVEL AREA IN THE
POST-BREXIT ERA’**

Senator Emer Currie:

Thank you very much, Co-Chairs. I hope that everyone is ready for ten or 15 minutes’ intense evaluation of the common travel area (CTA). On behalf of Committee A — the Committee that considers sovereign matters between the UK and Irish Governments — I will present our report, ‘Protecting the Common Travel Area in the Post-Brexit Era’.

As you are aware, the common travel area is just over 100 years old and is a long-standing set of arrangements between Ireland and the UK, which relates to immigration controls and facilitates free movement between the UK and Ireland. However, it has never been put on a statutory footing. Post-Brexit, in 2019, the CTA was formalised in a memorandum of

understanding (MOU) to allow citizens of the UK and Ireland to enjoy associated rights and entitlements — including access to employment, healthcare, education and social benefits, and the right to vote in certain elections — in each other’s jurisdictions. The CTA predates the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and, I think we can all agree, underpins it. It facilitates the cross-border nature of many people’s lives on these islands; reflects the totality of relationships between the UK and Ireland; and is essential to realising the right of people in Northern Ireland to identify and be accepted as Irish, British or both, as they choose. However, it has been subject to change over the years, as it is not an international agreement enshrined in legislation.

The UK’s decision to leave the EU and continuing legislative divergence, as well as policies relating to visa nationals that predate Brexit, all pose challenges for the day-to-day operation of the CTA. Who can reside in each other’s jurisdictions, who can enter each other’s jurisdictions, and how can they enter? This report serves to highlight current stretches and strains, propose solutions on how to overcome them and protect the crucial role of the CTA since 1922, which we summarise as:

“enabling the freedom of movement on these islands, and reciprocal rights which is vital for many ... on a day-to-day basis.”

Our inquiry took evidence in London in January and in Derry and Letterkenny in June. It met the parliamentary undersecretary of state at the UK’s Home Office; the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee; representative organisations; industry stakeholders; local county authority representatives; and more, as outlined in the report.

Here is a summary of our nine recommendations. Our report has been widely encompassing, so I will try to summarise it as succinctly as possible.

With the introduction of the UK’s Nationality and Borders Act 2022, a scheme has been established whereby non-Irish and non-UK citizens will need to obtain an electronic travel authorisation (ETA) before travelling to the UK. In reality, for Northern Ireland, that means filling out an electronic form before crossing the border. The Committee welcomes the UK

Government's decision to exempt persons who are lawfully resident in Ireland from the requirement to obtain an ETA for travel within the CTA as a practical improvement to the scheme that addressed the real concerns of people on the island of Ireland, but we need more practical improvements.

The Committee believes that the ETA is currently unworkable on the island of Ireland and at odds with long-standing CTA arrangements and principles that underpinned the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The potential negative impact on Northern Ireland, the north-west and all-island tourism must be addressed. The ETA should be suspended until appropriate measures have been introduced to mitigate the negative impact on Ireland and Northern Ireland's tourism industry. The Committee recommends that, in the event that a full exemption is not possible, the UK Government consider options to reduce the cost and administrative burden on organised coach tours and groups visiting Northern Ireland via Ireland. A short-term tourism exemption of up to seven days, which would apply to 93% of tourists entering Northern Ireland from Ireland, has been suggested by the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance. The Committee endorses that recommendation and welcomes Steve Baker's commitment yesterday to consider it with the Home Office.

The Committee acknowledges the security concerns of the UK Government that motivated the introduction of the ETA scheme and that immigration controls are important tools for sovereign Governments. It recommends that the Government of Ireland work with the UK Government to explore whether measures can be taken to address those concerns. The Committee recommends that, when new legislation is brought to either Government, Cabinet consideration be given to its potential impact on Northern Ireland. The introduction of the ETA is indicative of a need for a greater understanding of the potential impact on Northern Ireland of legislation introduced in either sovereign Parliament.

We did not look just at the ETA and its impact on the CTA. Outside Brexit, changes to

immigration legislation in the UK and Ireland have impacted the operation of the common travel area over the years. The Committee heard that visa nationals crossing the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, even for short visits, require onerous visa applications. This invisible border, which predates Brexit, leaves visa nationals living in Northern Ireland feeling trapped inside a border that is invisible to others. That has impacted not only their daily lives and cross-border life as we know and take it for granted, whether it be daily movement to beaches, schools or the shops of Donegal, but access to and the roll-out of critical cross-border services in education and healthcare.

Two examples stood out for us. The first was in how some ambulances from Northern Ireland could not assist after the explosion that occurred in Creeslough, County Donegal, because not all of the paramedics had the visas necessary to cross the invisible border. The second was in how recruitment in hospitals and universities is affected, undermining cross-border cooperation in areas of huge significance and progress such as cancer treatment and integration between the Atlantic Technological University and Ulster University at Magee. The Committee believes that there is scope for closer cooperation on visa lists and that migrants who are permanently resident in either Ireland or the UK should be exempt from the requirement to obtain a visa for short visits to other jurisdictions.

The Committee also recommends that both Governments explore the possibility of creating joint work visas that would allow people to take up appointments in both jurisdictions, which would be particularly beneficial in the healthcare sector. In the best interests of children and patients in Northern Ireland and Ireland's social care and health systems, the Committee recommends that both Governments work together to develop practical solutions, including examining ways to streamline registrations for associated professionals working in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

10.00 am

We have some recommendations in relation to the general operation of the CTA across these islands, and the uncertainty that Brexit unearthed about rights and regulations. The Committee welcomes the continued mutual recognition of citizens' rights in Ireland and the UK in the 2019 memorandum of understanding. However, as no official mechanisms are outlined, the Committee, first, recommends that both Governments explore dedicated mechanisms for citizens to seek remedies if they have been denied rights provided for under CTA arrangements. Secondly, clarification on payroll requirements is needed for companies that have a cross-border workforce in Northern Ireland and Ireland. The Committee also recommends that Governments in both jurisdictions work together to develop a policy that would allow companies in Ireland and Northern Ireland to be able to offer their staff in both jurisdictions the same allowance in remote working. Thirdly, the Committee believes that more public awareness is needed in Ireland and the UK regarding the CTA and citizens' rights. In line with that, the Committee recommends that there is targeted engagement, particularly for such groups as landlord representatives, to clarify that an Irish or British passport can be used as a form of identification. That would be beneficial to Irish citizens in the UK, as well as to British citizens in Ireland.

In conclusion, I thank the Committee members for their commitment in bringing forward this important report, and I offer my gratitude to every stakeholder who provided evidence. However, our work in this regard is not finished. The Committee believes that now is the right time to focus on the importance of the CTA between Ireland and the UK. The Committee hopes to meet with Ireland's Minister for Justice and the UK's Secretary of State for the Home Department, in January, to discuss the report and its recommendations. We believe that our recommendations can enable the smooth operation of the CTA and help uphold the long-standing values and principles that underpinned and predated the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. They will enable freedom of movement on these islands, and reciprocal rights

across our islands, which are vital for citizens day to day.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Emer. Do colleagues have any comments?

Mr Nigel Mills MP:

Thank you, Co-Chair. It is a pleasure to follow Emer, who has given a full summary of the report. In carrying out this piece of work, we discovered that we all fully value the common travel area, and we accept that it is right that we grant each other's citizens almost the same rights as our own citizens. However, when you try to work out who a citizen is in this situation, you find that it is not easy to define: there is a collection of people who have a full right to reside, but are not citizens. Do we mean to apply it to them? I think that we probably do mean to apply the same freedoms to them; we just need to work out how we get the system to do that. In a normal situation where you have a common travel area, you might want to have an electronic travel authorisation/electronic system for travel authorisation-type thing (ETA/ESTA) for the whole travel area, but we know that that is not a possible solution because we want to apply this to EU nationals, and Ireland could not do that. Therefore, even if there was the political will, which I doubt there is, we could not practically do it, so we need to try to find solutions that work in this situation. The process of applying for an ETA or ESTA does not take very long, for the majority of people, and it does not cost very much. If you know that you have to do it, it does not make a material difference to a holiday. However, if a group of tourists who are coming into the Republic of Ireland want to go to the Giant's Causeway, they probably will not realise that there are different requirements to enter the UK, and, by the time that they realise that they want to go to the Giant's Causeway, it may be too late to apply for one of these things, and the extra cost may mean that the coach tour drops that trip and decides to do something else. That would be a serious problem for Northern Irish tourism. The chances

of tourists being stopped, and somebody checking whether they have an ETA, while they are visiting for a couple of hours, are probably incredibly low, and it is not even clear what the consequences would be, but there will always be the potential for a car crash or something else to go wrong, the person getting caught and there being some kind of serious sanction. That is enough for the people who are organising the coach trip not to want to run the risk of bringing across the border people who do not have the necessary authorisation, but who should, and it being the organiser's responsibility.

The UK Government need to engage in further serious consideration to identify a proportionate way of handling this matter. We think that the best way is to have a short-term exemption for people who are coming from the Republic for a short visit to Northern Ireland. If they try to cross over to the mainland, they would probably be spotted by the airline or the ferry company.

I am not sure that we want to have border checks, but there would be some chance to pick up an anomaly, which probably mitigates a lot of the risk.

We think that there is a solution. As Emer said, it was welcome that Steve Baker undertook to have another look at that. We do not want to accidentally do damage to Northern Ireland tourism. We have made great progress. If we can have a joint visa for Chinese tourists to visit both jurisdictions, you would think that we could fix the situation for non-visa nationals who, by definition, are a much lower risk — especially as to get on the island of Ireland, they will probably have had to go through an airport and have their passport checked anyway. There is some fallback control. Hopefully we can find a way forward so that we do not accidentally cause damage when we really do not want to.

The Lord Bew:

First, I want to support very strongly Senator Currie's words in expounding the main principles of the report. In particular, it is correct to say that this goes to the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement; that is an absolutely serious point. I am grateful to her for the way that she has

chaired our group.

I am also grateful that the security concerns of the UK Government are acknowledged. Those are, strangely, not Irish security concerns as such, but more jihadi security concerns. Watching RTÉ, I have seen pictures where, for example, an Irish woman, who had married a person who lived in Dublin and subsequently carried out terrorist acts in London, said how easy it was to go back and forth. It is not unreasonable, therefore, for the United Kingdom Government to have certain concerns about exploitation of the CTA.

Finally, I want to add balance to something that I said yesterday afternoon, when I suggested that the somewhat over-expansive use of the term “island economy” is actually fuelling unionist fears in the North. It indisputably is, whether that is right or not. However, that should be balanced by saying that, in the North, the discussion of the outflow from Brexit focuses entirely on what are called the Irish Sea border issues, whereas, in fact, it is perfectly clear from the work of our Committee that, on the border on the island of Ireland — it is, therefore, something that nationalists would legitimately regard as a matter of sensitivity — the outflow from Brexit also has an effect internally on the island of Ireland. You could, perhaps, say that some of that outflow is irksome rather than serious, but, then, you could say the same thing about certain features of the Irish Sea border as well.

I want to say that, if it is fair for me to say that the use of the term “island economy”, which does exist, in part, in Dublin is frequently casual and does not take note of the impact that it is having on the Northern Irish debate, and the negative impact that it is having on a return to Stormont, it is worth my acknowledging that, in Belfast, there is a complete failure to realise that, as well as the Irish Sea border inconveniences, another outflow of Brexit is that it creates inconveniences for Irish citizens and is an irritation for those who have a view about the fundamental unity of the island of Ireland, etc. I should say that as some form of balance to what I said yesterday afternoon, because that is the missing element in the Northern debate: the

acknowledgement that they are not the only people to be inconvenienced. Thank you, Senator Currie.

Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP:

First, I wish to commend the work of Committee A and the convener for what, I think, is a very good report indeed. I want to pick up on a point that was made a few moments ago. As a lawyer to trade, I think that it is always a safer approach to comply with any law that happens to be in existence, rather than to simply ignore it and hope for the best. Scotland has a clear interest in ensuring that the key tenets of the common travel area are maintained and respected and not unilaterally undermined. In that regard, assuming that this report is adopted by the Assembly, it might be worthwhile to forward a copy to the Scottish Government. I am sure that they would be very interested to read it.

Sir Peter Bottomley MP:

I agree with everything that has been said by everyone. I want to give two or three examples, picking up on the economy of this island. When I was Agriculture Minister some years back, if I had suggested that Northern Ireland should have a common animal health status with Great Britain, the Northern Irish farmers would have thrown up their hands in horror. They wanted to make sure that they kept the same standards as the island rather than the nation, so to speak. The point that travel should be easy for people between Northern Ireland and the Republic matters. It was illustrated for me by going from one member of our extended family in Monaghan to another member in Ravensdale, and the direct route would have taken us through Northern Ireland. As it happened, we went around for different reasons, but you cannot avoid the border in many parts of Northern Ireland and the Republic. For those who might be caught up in some kind of meeting with officialdom and who find that they have not got something they ought to have had in theory, it does argue for the exemption, which matters a lot.

If we have managed to muddle through for 100 years without a formal agreement, with a formal agreement we ought to have some part of muddle, overlap or shadow there that can be interpreted in ways that are convenient both to authorities and to the people involved. We do not have to be so bureaucratic that, if you meet officialdom, you are in deep trouble for all sorts of unnecessary reasons. We need to keep a sense of proportion and perspective. It may be difficult to get full agreement, but people ought to know what they are aiming for.

Mr Frank Feighan TD:

I thank Emer and the Committee for the report. It is very important. The common travel area is 100 years old, and Peter is right: we have muddled through sometimes, and some of the rights are included in bits and pieces of legislation in both Parliaments. However, I voice my concern that sometimes we can have unintended consequences, and as someone in the constituency of Sligo-Leitrim, which includes north Roscommon and south Donegal, where there is the new Atlantic Technological University, we genuinely want cross-border cooperation, and these unintended consequences are simply unacceptable.

I was not aware of the health issue in Creeslough, but we need more cross-border health cooperation in areas such as Sligo, Enniskillen, Letterkenny and Derry/Londonderry, and anything that impedes cooperation is detrimental to, I will not say the future of the north-west, but to increased cooperation. Again, thank you for the report. It is very timely, and I welcome it.

Deputy Rob Ward:

Thank you for the report. I come from a small island that has been impacted by Brexit, and we did not get a vote on Brexit. I come from a Parliament where French is an official language of the Assembly, as indeed is Jèrriais, the Jersey French, and we have had an issue with French day trippers coming from Saint-Malo. The solution that has been found is to give an exemption

for day tourists to travel on ID cards. One of the issues with French tourism is that many French tourists do not have a full passport, because they are very expensive, so they use ID cards, and the exemption has given access to that tourism pipeline again. It has now changed up to 48 hours, and it is a moveable feast for the Home Affairs Department.

The other question I have discussed with my colleague from the Isle of Man is who enforces the ETAs when you travel to the small islands, such as the Isle of Man, Jersey or Guernsey. We have come up with so many scenarios, such as an American businessperson who has been in Ireland, and then wants to travel to a headquarters on one of the small islands. Will they need separate ETAs? Who is responsible, and, importantly, who pays for that? There are wider issues, but the report is very interesting on the context of this for travel between Ireland and Northern Ireland. I just thought that I would mention the semi-solution that we have tried to come up with in Jersey, although I believe that there is an issue over ID cards and whether they will be universally accepted.

10.15 am

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

I welcome the report and congratulate Emer and the team. I remember that, in the immediate aftermath of Brexit, we enacted, in the Oireachtas, comprehensive legislation. There were massive Bills running across every Department. There were two of them. In particular, I remember the debate on the common travel area. The strong view was put forward that it was an uncodified arrangement that had been successfully applied for 100 years and that, as soon as you start codifying it, passing and analysing legal text, you would create anomalies and difficulties for yourself. I am very much in Peter Bottomley's space when he says that the vagueness has helped us to muddle through rather well for 100 years. The more legal definition that we have in this area, the more unforeseen consequences there will be that adversely affect people's movement within in these islands and do not work to anybody's betterment.

I think that we will move into an era of greater scrutiny on the movement of people and immigration and greater demands for more legislation in this area in all our jurisdictions. We have to be very cautious that, in looking at external issues, we do not impact on the essential elements that hold the goodwill of the people of these islands together and have allowed an intermingling that has done us all, I think, a power of good for a century.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Brendan. Are there any other comments? With regard to what Peter Bottomley said about people travelling from Monaghan over to Ravensdale in Louth, I will just say that, when I make a 25-minute journey from Cavan town to Clones in my own constituency, I go in and out of Northern Ireland four times on that road. I do not want to see any obstacles to free movement, anyway.

Ms Rose Conway-Walsh TD:

I want, just briefly, to thank Emer and the Committee for that extremely useful report. We will certainly examine it and the Good Friday Agreement at the joint Oireachtas Committee. We have looked at this subject several times. We can build on that.

I have two questions. What would it take to put that on a statutory footing? What would the mechanisms be? My other concern is the impact on attracting international students across the island. Take veterinary studies, for instance. At the moment, we have only one veterinary college, in UCD. We hope to have at least another one in the South, but there is no veterinary college in the North. We have international students coming there, so that has all kinds of repercussions across the board.

Besides that, every day when tourists stay in hotels in Dublin, they go from, say, Buswells Hotel to tour around the island and go to Belfast, the Giant's Causeway, and all that. If that stops, even for a period, we are unlikely to get it back again because tour operators are unlikely

to go back and undo that. We really need to look at the consequences of that and try to deal with those matters as quickly as possible, because it is quite time-sensitive as well. Thank you.

The Hon Juan Watterson SHK:

Just to highlight the bizarre nature of this: if you are driving from Cavan to the other side of your constituency, and you give someone a lift, will you have to do a passport check before you leave Cavan? *[Laughter.]* Otherwise, it sounds as though you could be done for people smuggling across the Irish border.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I would have to claim that I was on my way to our Parliament, whereby you cannot be stopped, if they want to invoke that rule. Hopefully, it will not come to that, Juan.

Emer, do you want to make a few concluding comments, please?

Senator Emer Currie:

Thank you, everybody, for your comments and, I believe, support for the report, and for agreeing with our conclusion that an ETA, in its bluntest terms and as proposed, is unworkable on the island. We are trying to mitigate the consequences. It is unworkable for the reasons that you have stated. Who is going to oversee it? Who is going to implement it? What are the consequences? Are there sanctions involved? It is unworkable. Brendan's great comments summarised the situation very well. We have to consider, in all future legislation, the unexpected and unintended consequences on the island of Ireland.

We are proposing close cooperation on visas for international students. We need to find solutions for people who work in healthcare, students who are coming to university and people who work in a university. We have proposed a practical approach to that.

You can be in a family in which one person can travel across the border with no barriers, but there may be somebody in your family who cannot. It is not just about the proximity of the

border and how porous it is; it is about the different scenarios in our families that make life very difficult right now, not just theoretically, like the ETA would be. People are living in those situations now.

We have provided practical solutions, but the ETA is unworkable, and we need our friends in the British Parliament to speak up for us in that regard. If it cannot be waived completely, there need to be mitigations to overcome those potential barriers.

We probably could have written an entire report about the possibility of putting the ETA on a statutory footing, because it would necessitate so much analysis. We have not included it as a recommendation because it would involve a huge amount of work. We also did not find that there was an appetite to do that. That is why it is not included as a recommendation, but it is not something that we could not look at.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I ask the plenary to formally adopt the report of Committee A.

Report agreed.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I take the opportunity, on behalf of all Members, including Karin and me, to commend all the members of Committee A for their work in completing the report. It is a very important report about an issue of concern to people. We will arrange for the joint Clerks to send it to the British and Irish Governments. Thank you, Emer, and your colleagues.

COMMITTEE B — UPDATE

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

I call on the Chair of Committee B, Darren Millar MS, to bring the Assembly up to date on the work of the Committee.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

We are undertaking an inquiry into UK and EU defence and security cooperation post-Brexit. We decided to break that into three parts: cooperation on the response to the war in Ukraine and the threat from Russia; cooperation on cybersecurity and cooperation on intelligence and policing. Those of you who have been BIPA Members for some time will be aware that we tabled an interim report at the Jersey plenary which primarily focused on part one of the cooperation that we were looking at, which was in response to the war in Ukraine and the threat from Russia. That report effectively concluded that the departure of the UK from the EU had not had a significant impact on the cooperation between the EU and the UK in terms of the way that there had been a response to the war, and that cooperation had actually been very good — largely because, of course, it was led by NATO.

We found, though, that Europe, and particularly Ireland and the UK, had been exposed to other risks, particularly in terms of risks to critical infrastructure, which is offshore and under the water, including telecoms and energy infrastructure in particular. We are going to be reporting on that latter issue in further detail in our final report in the spring of next year, along with paying more attention to cybersecurity and intelligence and policing cooperation.

In order to support our work, we held some further evidence sessions in Dublin in July, where we met the Garda Commissioner, a panel of academics and a panel from industry, along with representatives of Ireland's National Cyber Security Centre and the Irish Department of Justice. The initial findings and outcomes from those particular evidence sessions appear to suggest that the cooperation on policing, both North/South and east-west, is very strong and continues to be strong. That is underpinned, of course, by part 3 of the EU and UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, and it appears to be working very well indeed, as we have been told. The UK and wider EU intelligence and policing cooperation is also good, but we were told that that relationship could effectively deteriorate because of the Schengen information system, which has been upgraded in recent times. That could have an adverse impact on that relationship in

future.

We found that the critical offshore infrastructure is vulnerable to sabotage and, indeed, accidental damage, and therefore we need to take some more evidence on what can be done to mitigate those risks. We are in the process of setting up some further evidence sessions with the UK National Crime Agency and the National Cyber Security Centre in London, and with the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. We hope to be able to publish a report for the spring plenary next year, which will be our final report on this matter.

I also wish to put on record my thanks to one of our outgoing clerks, Claudia Zelli, who has done an excellent job of supporting the Committee during her tenure. We are going to be losing her, unfortunately, but we welcome Niamh Murray to the Committee and are looking forward to working with her very much indeed.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Darren, and the members of that Committee, which includes myself. I am going to thank myself. [*Laughter.*] It is an excellently led Committee that is doing really interesting work. Thank you for that update.

COMMITTEE C — UPDATE

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

We will now hear an update from the Chair of Committee C — Economics, Brendan Howlin TD.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair. The theme that Committee C has been working on echoes the main themes of this plenary, which is energy — energy supply, future energy capacity within our

jurisdictions, decarbonisation generally, energy affordability and fuel poverty, energy pricing and how electricity is priced, and cooperation between our states in future energy supply and grid development.

We have already taken evidence in Scotland, particularly listening to community energy projects, both on the mainland of Scotland and on the islands. We have taken evidence in England on very elaborate carbon sequestration projects in the North Sea and on the issue of fuel poverty there. We propose to hold a further meeting in Ireland later this month, when we will look at energy storage and, in particular, how we can store the energy that Ireland hopes to generate from offshore wind in future. Again, we expect to conclude our work on a timeline that has us making a report available for the spring plenary, which I expect to be in Ireland too.

10.30 am

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you Brendan, and I thank the members of the Committee.

COMMITTEE D — UPDATE

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

I call on the Chair of Committee D — Environment and Social, Lord Dubs.

The Lord Dubs:

The saga of those of us who tried to get to the Jersey plenary meeting and failed because of the flights will continue to be a talking point for some time. It also meant that I was not there to present the report that the Co-Chair, Seán Crowe, delivered in Jersey. Those of you who were not there will probably have picked up that the report was about indigenous minority languages in the various BIPA jurisdictions. It was a pretty good report, the Committee worked hard on it, and we hope that it will be picked up more widely than it has been so far.

We then agreed to do a new report, which we have started on, on housing, particularly rural housing. We were influenced in our decision by tensions in holiday areas between local people who cannot find anywhere to live and those involved in Airbnb and tourism. There are a lot of tensions, and there are also tensions in other parts of the rural economy. We started taking evidence yesterday. We decided that, as we were all at the plenary, it would be useful if Committee D were to do its work in conjunction with the plenary. We met yesterday evening and had an interesting session, and we will meet this afternoon and hold three more evidence sessions, which I will mention in a moment.

I am grateful to members of Committee D for being willing to do the work when everyone else is relaxing. After the afternoon session yesterday, we had to do some work, and we had a pretty interesting session. I hope that combining the plenary and our Committee meeting will prove to be a model, where appropriate. It certainly saved a lot of extra travel and, I suppose, money. At the session yesterday evening, we had two witnesses, from Irish Rural Link and — I cannot pronounce this; I should have learned how to pronounce it, but I have failed on that, and, particularly as we did a report on minority languages, I should have been better at it, so I apologise, but, anyway, somebody will correct me [*Laughter.*] — Údarás na Gaeltachta. That was an interesting session. The second organisation, which I will not mispronounce again, was concerned, given housing development and so on, that the minority language position would be weakened if fewer people who spoke a minority language were able to get housing in areas where, at the moment, there are enough of them living for it to be a workable language, as opposed to other areas where fewer people speak it.

This afternoon, we will meet representatives of the planning authorities. A lot of the work is concerned with planning and planning guidelines, so there is very much a local dimension, which I will come on to in a second. We will meet the local authority of our hosts, here in County Kildare, to discuss issues to do with planning and the delivery of housing. Secondly,

the Committee will meet academics from the International Centre for Local and Regional Development and from Maynooth University, here in County Kildare, to explore some of the academic work that is going on in the area. Finally, in our third session this afternoon, we will meet representatives of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Rural and Community Development, and we will discuss Government policy. As I said, a lot of it is to do with local planning issues and, possibly, local planning guidelines and even tightening up local planning procedures; that may come out of it, but it is too early to say.

You may think that it is a bit of a jaunt, but the Committee is considering whether to go to the Lake District or to Cornwall to take evidence. Both are my favourite parts of Britain, but that is pure coincidence and has nothing to do with it; it just happens that they are the most obvious areas to go to, and we will certainly go to one of them. Our next evidence session will be in Scotland, and we are weighing up going to Edinburgh against going to Aberdeen to take evidence. There are good arguments in favour of both. That will be the next evidence session. Cornwall or the Lake District will follow, and then we will take evidence in Wales. Northern Ireland will come after that. It is an issue that is relevant to all of us, because there are clear tensions in the area of housing. I hope that it will be a useful report.

I am very grateful to the Committee Clerks for the work that they put into getting the witnesses and so on, and to members of the Committee for being willing to work later yesterday evening and stay this afternoon when the rest of you are on your way home. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Lord Dubs. Your work ethnic will shame us all as we sit at Dublin Airport later on. However, that looks like a good use of time. Our colleagues at the BIC that have expressed an interest in, and picked up, the report on minority languages as work that they are also interested in doing. That is good news for that work. Thank you, Lord Dubs, and the Committee for that

work.

We have time for a short coffee break. If we can be back here for 10.50 am for the rest of the agenda and the final part of our session, that would be helpful. Thank you.

The sitting was suspended at 10.35 am.

The sitting was resumed at 11.07 am.

SUPPORTING ENERGY TRANSITION

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

All of us, as BIPA Members, recognise the crucial importance of supporting sustainable energy transition as we realise net zero ambitions. With our next panel of speakers, we are going to explore the opportunities and challenges facing communities as they transition to sustainable energy. I welcome Lisa Vaughan, the CEO of Tipperary Energy Agency, who will update the Assembly on implementing the climate action plan and the role of the energy agency; and Eugene Conlon, the manager of the Energy Team, which is based at the Market House, Dunleer, County Louth, who will speak about leveraging the power of communities. I invite Lisa to address the Assembly.

Ms Lisa Vaughan (Tipperary Energy Agency):

Thanks so much. It is lovely to meet everyone. I am really delighted to address the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly today in Kildare.

I will talk to you about the Tipperary Energy Agency. I will also tell you about energy agencies in general as an important actor in climate action. I will give you a sense of the view from the ground from an organisation like us, which is very much on the implementation side. I will also give you some of our experience and feedback, particularly in the skills area and from our sister company, which is on the domestic retrofitting side. That might be interesting; it is quite

topical for people.

We are a social enterprise and have been around for about 20 years. Our mission is to translate zero carbon ambitions into practical actions with measurable results. That means that we are an engineering organisation at heart. We are, and always have been, mainly technical specialists, and we are very much focused on getting climate action projects up and running and completed so that we can deliver real reductions in carbon emissions and energy efficiency savings. That is what we have been doing for many years. Obviously, the policy environment has moved significantly during that time. It is our view, and, I think, the view of everybody, that we are very much in an implementation phase. I will demonstrate through some of the work that we are doing what we think are the critical issues from our perspective on that front as well. I hope that that will be useful and informative to you.

You might not have heard of energy agencies as a construct. They are quite a European type of construct that have translated into organisations in Ireland and across Britain. In Europe, they tend to be subsidiaries or close relations of local government and municipalities, and they very much have always been energy specialists that inform local government across Europe.

We, being an energy agency with a couple of other very large energy agencies in Ireland — Codema in Dublin, and another in the south-east of Ireland — have plugged into that network across Europe. We are part of the European Federation of Agencies and Regions for Energy and the Environment (FEDARENE), which is an umbrella group of energy agencies across Europe that has its headquarters in Brussels. Through that organisation, we get to engage in policy at a European level, but, more importantly, be involved in live projects across Europe, as shown on the map. We get to work with and observe actions that are taking place on the ground across Europe and learn from them, but, equally, we try to translate them into an Irish context to make valuable actions take place in Ireland. We are ahead in some places, but I think that we all recognise that we are behind in some areas. In community energy, which Eugene

will talk about in more depth, we see other countries in Europe — potentially Scandinavia, Austria and parts of Germany — as being ahead of us, and we find it useful to go on the ground in those places and learn from them.

Equally importantly, FEDARENE has been very successful in the past five to seven years at influencing the European Commission on energy policy matters. That is very much because the Commission has seen FEDARENE and the agencies across Europe as real actors over many years, with a lot of very deep experience in translating policy into investment in energy efficiency and carbon reduction.

Over the years, we have also had strong relationships with energy agencies across Britain, in particular. Tipperary Energy Agency has worked closely with a number of organisations in Britain on European projects, and, in the post-Brexit era, we continue to have a lot of informal knowledge sharing, which we find valuable, as does FEDARENE. We maintain open channels of communication and engagement there, and we take any opportunities that we can to go on the ground or bring them over here. We are eager to make those things happen.

Whilst we have Tipperary in our name and our headquarters in Nenagh in Tipperary, we work on projects across Ireland, and have done so for many years. We work very closely with Tipperary County Council — it was a founding organisation of the agency — but we have also worked closely in latter years with a number of local authorities across Ireland. We bring our experience to them, particularly now as they are trying to implement the climate action plan, and help them with that. We work with many other public bodies across Ireland. We have just finished a very large piece of work with the Department of Education and the European Investment Bank, surveying 600 schools on their energy efficiency. That will be used to inform the Department's plans for the retrofitting of schools over the next number of years.

We also work with many communities, particularly in Tipperary, but also across the mid-west region, on their energy planning. Eugene will talk about the view from the community level on

how that works and the positives and negatives of it. We also work with SMEs in the region, so we cover a lot of bases. As a social enterprise, we obviously have the social aspect but we also have the enterprise aspect, which gives us a lot of perspectives on the energy transition.

The agency is justifiably proud of the fact that we try to undertake projects that are firsts. We want to do firsts to demonstrate to others how they can be done. We did the first retrofit of a school in Ireland, and we used that project example to inform central Government in particular, but also suppliers and contractors, of what you need to do to achieve the outcomes. Tipperary County Council has been a leading local authority in Ireland on renewables, particularly in solar and the retrofitting of its buildings, and we are now pushing on with it on a full decarbonisation plan.

11.15 am

We also set up the first dedicated unit — Superhomes — to carry out housing retrofitting in Ireland. That was underwritten by the European Investment Bank through its European Local Energy Assistance (ELENA) facility, which offers significant funding. It is not the easiest funding to get your hands on, but once you have it, it gives you the freedom to put together a fairly significant technical resource. We brought that technical unit to a point. Obviously, there is a much larger body of work to be done now in domestic retrofitting in Ireland, so we paired up with Electric Ireland to have a joint venture. We have a new company called Electric Ireland Superhomes, which is one of the national one-stop shops for domestic retrofitting. I will give you some feedback from that organisation in terms of what we think is working and not working at the end of the presentation.

With our partners in Tipperary, we set up the first community wind farm in Ireland, called the Templederry Wind Farm. From the photo that I am showing you, anyone from Ireland will see that that was neither today nor yesterday. It is an immense source of frustration to all of us that others have not followed it since. That said, the policy environment and certainly the supports

are leading us to a point now where we really, truly believe and hope that we are going to see a lot more community energy projects taking place in Ireland.

From a European and an Irish perspective, community energy will not solve national energy needs over the next number of years, but it is really important to allow agency for communities to be part of the transition. It also has a potential benefit in that communities can generate their own income, which can then be used for other projects throughout the community or as match funding for other grants.

There are a lot of very good reasons why community energy is really important from a national perspective. What we see in Europe is that there is a lot of focus at a national level to try to encourage community energy generation. We hope to be able to follow some of the exemplars across Europe by putting some real projects on the ground, probably particularly in solar energy. We have done a lot of work with communities to retrofit community buildings and to put solar panels on the roofs of community buildings. That is, however, perhaps about larger installations that will allow for significant generation for the community and, potentially, for trading.

Another first for us was a project that we completed recently, the first deep retrofit of a leisure centre in Ireland to a near-zero energy building rating. Across all the jurisdictions in the room today, leisure centres are amongst the largest energy users in municipalities, local authorities and communities. They are also very tricky to retrofit. Technically, they are tricky buildings to get right. We did the first of those in Ireland, and we moved off fossil fuels into geothermal and biomass.

That was a collaboration between ourselves and Clare County Council and the community-owned leisure facility in Lahinch. It is important for two reasons. We bring people, particularly technical staff, from other leisure centres and public local authorities to the site to demonstrate the technical aspects of the project to them. Many of them are now very much in the planning

phase of looking at their own leisure centres. It is also important, however, from another key policy area point of view, in that whilst the project received significant central Government funding through a number of streams, there was still a fairly large gap that could not be filled to make the project work. The community in Lahinch, by the nature of where they were — not dissimilar to where we are today — had access, through the golf club, to a number of very high net worth individuals and were able to source philanthropic funding from two sources to make the project work. That was wonderful, and the project is wonderful, but that is not an answer either. Certainly, as we are moving into large-scale implementation of decarbonisation projects, we cannot expect that to be the answer to what we are trying to do. Being able to bridge that gap will be one of the critical issues over the next five years for public and private organisations.

From an industry perspective, we work with SMEs, but we have also worked with large industry. We did a major project with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment earlier this year, and that looked at decarbonising high-temperature heat processes in industry, which is very hard to do. We spoke to actors in the Irish food sector, multinationals, particularly in medtech, and SMEs in the supply chain to multinationals. They are all saying the same thing: from a national perspective, they need to have access to reliable sources of decarbonised energy. “Reliable” is the key word here, because, given the critical processes in some of those organisations, there cannot be a lack of reliability. It is a competitive issue for Ireland with regard to inward investment. Equally, our indigenous industry, particularly in the food sector, needs to be able to plan accordingly for what can be significant investments in capital to ensure that they decarbonise.

Green electricity — I know that you spoke to people about this yesterday — and offshore renewables will probably be part of the answer. Potentially, large-scale biomethane will be part of it. The organisations that we spoke to in the mid-west are certainly eager to see that. There

needs to be a degree of certainty about the policy environment over the next number of years. Irish companies want a degree of certainty so that they have a line of sight for those investments. Some plant managers, while they could identify clearly the projects that they want to do, really struggle to get corporate approval because paybacks on some of those can be well beyond what is generally approved at a corporate level.

We also see quite an interesting dynamic in the SME base that we work with, where people are in a multinational's supply chain and their key client is putting pressure on them because it has a strong decarbonisation target at corporate level and expects its supply chain to come with it. For a small Irish company, there can be a dizzying array of actions that have to be taken to meet that need. For one company that we worked with, that covers everything from its travel policy to the energy that is consumed by its workers' PCs. Those organisations require support, such as technical and funding support, to enable them to make those changes. Otherwise, they will be out of their supply chain; there is no doubt about that. As corporate reporting comes to pass on sustainability, those companies will move quickly.

An important project, from a policy perspective, that we have just started is one that we got significant funding for from the European Commission, again, to set up a specialist unit within the agency to work across the mid-west and south-west region. There are two critical issues to mention from Lahinch. The first is that we have to move beyond doing single buildings to aggregating buildings if we are to achieve our climate action targets by 2030 and into 2040 and beyond. We need to do things at scale now. The second piece is that, to do that, we will need to attract private financing into the market to bridge the gap that public financing cannot bridge. This project has specifically tried to do that. We are working with a number of local authorities and public bodies in the region to take 25 buildings from the region, and obviously do all the energy analysis and assessment and planning for the projects, but then work with financing specialists in both the private sector and Irish Government to look at how we can bundle the

buildings in such a way that they become attractive, for some or all of the project, for private financing of the decarbonisation measures.

There is a lot of policy interest from a national level in this project's working well. There is also a European interest in it because it is obvious that we need to take this approach if we are going to achieve the targets over the next number of years. There is quite a lot of private financing out there in the European environment, but, to date, it has not been attracted into the Irish market because there is nothing of reasonable scale that makes sense for them to come into the market. There is a bit of a standoff happening there. To try to bring some of that into the market, we also need to try to standardise the approach — particularly across the public sector, but it can be applicable equally to any private sector organisations that have an estate of buildings — so that we all know what we are looking for and what private sector financiers will require, and that we actually drive some degree of standardisation from the sub-supply market of what is needed. That is a big project that we are very focused on and that will hopefully yield important developments for Ireland in that area.

It is really no surprise that there is a huge skills shortage. On a positive note, we are seeing a lot of global engineers entering into the Irish market. They like the fact that there is a lot of potential and opportunity. With the policy environment in Ireland, there is a degree of certainty that there will be opportunities here for a number of years. That is a positive. Another positive is that people from technical disciplines, such as engineering, are moving into this area. That is wonderful, but it requires access to flexible, short third-level technical courses that allow people to build their competency in energy so that they can get up and running very quickly.

Last, but not least, we try to facilitate — but, equally, encourage others to facilitate — any opportunities for public and private actors to learn about projects that they are either planning to do or have done. We get called on a lot for that because there are many decarbonisation projects that need to happen. A lot of those projects have a big ticket attached, and there is an

understandable nervousness and lack of knowledge about how to tackle them to manage the risk and deliver. Anything that allows people to share their experiences is critical. Any forums that do that should be both encouraged and, if needed, funded.

One of the positive stories is that a number of new energy agencies have popped up over the past year or two. We are very actively involved in mentoring people in the North West City Region, which is Donegal County Council and Derry and Strabane District Council, who have set up an energy agency. It is about getting that region to net zero carbon by 2045. We are delighted to help them gain the special expertise across the region. It is a good initiative that is involved in a number of areas. They are being very smart about how funding and support is accessed across Donegal and Derry and Strabane. We are working heavily with them on the Donegal side because we can support them through European investment projects. They are looking at doing a domestic retrofitting service for the region because there is quite a low uptake of retrofitting of houses there.

Finally, we have a joint venture with ESB on domestic retrofits. We are probably the largest domestic retrofitting organisation through Electric Ireland Superhomes. We believe that clarity on funding and policy has been significant in encouraging one-stop shops and operators into the market. The clear regulatory regime for the one-stop shop is very helpful from a consumer perspective because it is well regulated. We find the quality assurance onerous, but it is very good and will be really important to give consumers confidence in the market operators. The grants are generous. There is a lot of discussion in the media that it is very expensive and that the grants are not enough, but, relatively speaking, from a European perspective, they are generous. Whilst low-cost financing has not yet come into the market, there is a line of sight to its coming in, and that will be important. Whilst many of the retrofits to date have been on a cash basis, that needs to move to low-cost financing that people can access to undertake their retrofitting.

Local authorities and housing bodies have a large stock of housing. It is important that they can kick on here, but also that they have the technical resources to manage that. Whilst a lot has been done and very positive action has been taken, the Government need to drive a concerted campaign in Ireland to outline the benefits of houses transferring to heat pumps, and to demystify and take away the horror stories, to build people's confidence. Everyone will have to do it, but, similar to the slow but sure change to electric vehicles, there needs to be support from Government in messaging about the benefits of heat pump technology. We, in Electric Ireland Superhomes, do a lot of marketing, but it needs a much stronger push because we have to continue to build confidence in this area as a major Government and national target. We have always had good relationships across the jurisdictions with others who have done very good work. We engage with a couple of organisations in Manchester and London that were early leaders in the area, and that helped us when we were setting up our one-stop shop.

11.30 am

Those would be the key messages from me. It is, without a doubt, about scale, but what we have seen, particularly over the past two to three years, is a very distinct move from strategy and planning to very serious engagement on costing and how to get these projects off the ground. That is very welcome, but the critical thing now is to make sure that the financing and the technical skills are there in order to be able to deliver on what are very large targets, but absolutely achievable.

In the agency, we see ourselves continuing to be at the front of pushing the agenda with any and all of our clients nationally, where we get the chance. I am delighted to be able to give you this presentation today and happy to take any questions when we are finished. Eugene Conlon will talk more about the community side. We do a lot there, but I felt that he would probably give you a lot more detail and I did not want to overlap with him. Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Lisa, for your insightful contribution across the wide and varied work that your agency undertakes. I now invite Eugene Conlon, manager of the Energy Team at the Market House to give his address to the Assembly.

Mr Eugene Conlon (Dunleer Sustainable Energy Community):

Thank you, indeed. I am delighted to address this Assembly this morning. I am the manager of the Dunleer sustainable energy community, which is a not-for-profit organisation. I will give you a little bit of information about that in a moment, but first, I am delighted to address this Assembly, because this sort of forum for collaboration between countries is absolutely critical, particularly in the present international political climate. Secondly, the community that I am a part of is very proud of the work that we are doing in climate change, and we believe very much that the model that we use can be replicated across many different countries. Your role is critical in encouraging and supporting community engagement.

I am going to break the presentation up. I am conscious that some people cannot fully see the screen from where they are sitting. Do not worry: Regina will send out the presentation afterwards, and I will go through all the details here. I am going to break the presentation up into three parts. The first is a case study; the second is some learnings; and, lastly, I will talk about opportunities and your role, perhaps, in those opportunities.

We are based in the north-east, about halfway between Dublin and Belfast. We are what is referred to as a sustainable energy community. There is a network of sustainable energy communities right across the country. Presently, there are 800 of them all around Ireland. What do we actually do, and what are sustainable energy communities? The concept is to use less, to use clean and to innovate. Those 800 communities around the country are in different stages of development. Some are doing tremendous projects and educating people, and they are also doing a lot of retrofitting. Others are, perhaps, not so active, but the reality is that every single

one of them is getting messages out and starting programmes. Some of those programmes are, for instance, to measure the energy use in the area that they serve. They look at some of the low-hanging fruit and say, “How do we develop that or address it?”.

The Dunleer sustainable energy community was established in 2015 and became a not-for-profit structure in 2020. We employ four people, and we have two people on work experience and four volunteers, like myself. Our objectives are to inform and inspire people to take action, to complete energy upgrades on homes and other premises and, lastly, to generate. Let me deal with a couple of those items. Two of the critical things that we have identified as key levers for success are, first, having the legislative supports and statutory agencies in place — that is very important — and secondly, and probably the key thing, having activation and engagement programmes for delivering on the strategy. That is what will happen on the ground and will make the difference. That is where, we believe, the likes of community groups and the sustainable energy community network will come in. Critical to our success since 2016 have been partnerships between four groups: community, business, statutory agencies and academia. A lot of people in policy have a lovely name for that: the quadruple helix. They are four very important groups that we have leveraged significantly since we started the project.

What is our model? We inform and inspire communities, homeowners and businesses to take action on energy. We then undertake a technical assessment of every business and, indeed, every household so that people have a roadmap for what to do when they ask, “What should I be doing in my home to get it from a Building Energy Rating (BER) of C1 or something like that up to an A rating?”. The technical assessment is critical. We then group a number of the projects together. They could be community facilities, sports facilities, local authority buildings, commercial buildings or homes. We group them and submit an application to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) for funding. Lisa mentioned the generous funding. It is quite significant at the moment. Lastly, we work with an external organisation to

implement the retrofits or energy upgrades of those homes. That is the process.

I report to a group of board members, and there is the inform and inspire delivery group. I use my words carefully. We do not do education. We inform and inspire, because, in this area of climate change, that is what you need to do. Boring people to death with PowerPoint presentations from specialists and scientists will not bring about behavioural change. That is the first point that I want to make. The second point is this: that team collaborates with Dundalk Institute of Technology, so the information that we use to inform people is validated. The institute seconds one of its staff to work with us as a community to deliver sessions across the country.

I will show an example of a schools activation programme. We are in primary and secondary schools, starting to educate children at seven and eight years of age. I can tell you that, by the time that they get to 10, they will be very well briefed on the whole area, and they will shape the future. Here is an example of a community programme whereby we go into libraries and hold a session to inform and inspire people. It is a partnership with Meath County Council, one of the county councils that we work closely with. That is a major programme whereby we bring that information into all the library services and communities that are part of the public participation network, which is the register of communities across every county. That is inform and inspire.

On the retrofit or upgrade, the group in the photograph that I am showing manages the upgrade for us. Since 2016, we have upgraded 363 homes, plus a whole lot of commercial and other centres. The tons of CO₂ removed from the atmosphere by our work total 5,456. The kilowatt-hours of energy saved are 19 million. The total investment to achieve that is €14 million. That is what we have invested as a community not-for-profit structure since 2016. That has mainly brought buildings from an F rating right up to B2, which the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland sets as the target rating.

The photograph on the screen shows an example that we are exceedingly proud of. It is a sustainable energy community that was set up in the Cooley peninsula in the north of Louth, near where we are based. Local people set up a sustainable energy community. The schoolchildren came together with the community. Do you know what they did in their first year? They retrofitted 12 homes in the community. Look at the power of that: schoolchildren and the community came together, and that was their first project, with an investment of probably about €400,000. Again, it shows the power of communities.

Here are examples of other projects that we have done. I am not too sure about other countries, but, in this country, certainly, a lot of sports facilities have diesel generators that power the lights around the pitch, for example, at night-time. With us, a lot of those clubs have switched from diesel generators to low-energy lighting, so very positive steps have been taken. We have also worked with charity and community organisations such as the Alzheimer's Association. The photograph on the screen is of air source heat pumps that we installed in Louth County Council corporate offices.

Let me touch on the partnership. People say, "Hold on a minute. You're a community group. What do you know about retrofitting homes?". The key thing from our point of view is to say, "OK, let's partner with somebody who's very experienced in it." We partner with an organisation called SE Systems, which is a private company — remember what I said about the partnership between business, community, private etc — that has 15 years' experience. It is the lead applicant. It also ensures that the installations are done to a very high level of quality. Most importantly, it carries the financial risk. We, as a community group, are not exposed financially; it manages all of that. The four parts of the jigsaw are: the homeowners and community, commercial and properties; our group; SE Systems, which, as I described, installs the works; and SEAI.

Let us look at other partnerships. There are plenty of credit unions across the UK and Ireland.

We have worked very closely in partnership with a lot of credit unions to assist homeowners in getting funds to upgrade their homes. As I said, we have also worked with private businesses and three or four different local authorities. Another example of partnership is the centre of excellence for the north-east on climate change that we are constructing. That is a partnership between the Department of Rural and Community Development, Louth County Council, ourselves and a local group. All those bodies are not just passively looking at that project; they are investing in it.

There are some challenges. We depend on project management fees, which we apply to every retrofit. That is how we get our income to pay our staff. We also charge when we bring the inspiration sessions to communities. We always need funds, but we also need more volunteers. Let me capture some of the learnings. Trust is critical. If you walk into someone's home to upgrade it, the first thing that they think is, "They're going to destroy my house. They'll pull it asunder and make a mess." You have to build up trust. Having that is critical. That is where community groups can particularly add value. Many people trust the local people in organisations.

I have highlighted some of the other learnings. The SEAI network of sustainable energy communities — the 800 communities around the country — is working. It is delivering energy projects on the ground. It is delivering the strategy in real actions. Secondly, community-based leaders can challenge and champion behavioural change that politicians like you, or, indeed, statutory agencies, may find hard to do. Let me give you examples of that. I, or my colleagues, can stand in front of a group of farmers and ask them why they are not planting more woodlands. We can stand in a housing estate and ask somebody at a meeting why they are driving a 2-3-litre jeep when there is not a farm within a radius of 10 miles. Why are they using that? In most situations, it is probably because that is a status symbol. We can challenge those approaches. We can also go in to schools and ask the children, "If you've two cars at your

house, will you go home and ask your parents to switch one of those cars to an electric vehicle?”. You cannot do that; you would probably be eaten if you did. The statutory agencies would be eaten. Community groups can do that. We have a voice that we can bring to climate change that perhaps politicians and statutory organisations cannot.

Lastly, when it comes to home energy, we can encourage people to take the step of getting their homes upgraded. If you go to a meeting, you will get the full list of, “Ah, it costs too much. It costs this, and it costs that.” We can get over some of those obstacles and encourage and, as I said at the beginning, inspire people to take the next steps.

11.45 am

What are some of the impacts and opportunities for partnerships? I will give you some examples. An Taoiseach visited us about a month ago to see what we are doing. He, as a key politician, started to understand how the system works and operates. We have brought that to many venues to promote and build trust, as people will see that this organisation has been endorsed at a senior level in government. You also have that power, because you are key influencers right across the countries that you work in.

The second example concerns the issue of trust. We prepared a public transport activation programme for the whole of County Louth. We built that in collaboration with employers, businesses, communities, the local authority etc. It is a discussion document. The leverage and discussion that we have got from that has been enormous. The junior Minister visited, and he wanted to understand what the policy and discussion document from the local community is about. We will also leverage that to show that we are connecting with key people at a leadership level.

Earlier, Lisa mentioned generation. Over the next number of years, an enormous amount of things will happen in generation — 100% community-owned generation. Presently, I am aware of four projects in the country. Probably 25 acres of solar energy are being developed in those

four projects as we speak. Interestingly, in the four projects, communities are collaborating with the local authorities. The development of those solar farms will be done by the local authority and the community working together. In the present scheme, which is the renewable energy electricity support scheme, the group is working very hard to develop community-owned energy projects. A year ago, when I talked to groups, particularly if there were discussions about local turbines or solar farms, people did not want turbines to be built in their area. In the past three to four months, that attitude has changed significantly. A lot of people now realise what we went through with the fuel crisis last year and are saying, “Yes. We need to embrace turbines. If it is close to where I live, I have to put up with it”. There is a very different attitude.

I now come to examples of areas where you can support communities. Your role as influencers and legislators is very important. You have to create the environment, at a statutory level, to be able to deliver the energy transition. Keep close to community groups in the areas that you serve. You, as politicians, influence people. Communities and homeowners listen to you. Please keep close to the communities that you serve. Actively support groups that are already in your communities to act on climate change. They may not be sustainable energy community groups; they could be other types of community groups such as tidy towns groups. Support those groups. Lastly, loosen up funding for groups to support them to act.

I will give an example of partnership opportunities in Northern Ireland. We have had discussions with the Ulster-Scots Agency and a number of other bodies north of the border, as well as the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and two colleges in the South, to discuss whether we can replicate the sustainable energy communities model in the North of Ireland. That is very doable. There are also opportunities in communities in other countries. I urge this Assembly to encourage those groups to take action.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to speak with you. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Eugene. It is very clear from Lisa and Eugene's contributions that different groups throughout the country are doing a huge amount of work. The message is that all those initiatives need to be given added impetus so that we can meet our targets.

I will take questions and comments again. I am conscious that people have travel commitments and we were due to be finished at noon, so the questions and comments should be as concise, brief and comprehensive as possible.

Ms Sarah Jones MP:

Thanks for those presentations. They were really helpful and interesting. I am very interested in how we change people's minds in this way. Both of you talked about that and about how you take people with you. The most striking thing that I heard was that people's minds are being changed because of the fuel crisis; everybody has been paying more for their bills, so they understand the need for those turbines. However, we have a long way to go with things such as heat pumps, where the cost is so prohibitive that people are nowhere near understanding. We also have the beginning of a conspiracy theory that it is all nonsense stuff online as well. Are there any further thoughts — you touched on it in the second presentation — on what we, as politicians, can do to try to navigate this and get people, willingly, to the place where we want to take them?

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thanks for the presentations. I have a question about the different attitudes. I do not know whether there have been any formal surveys of public attitudes towards wind turbine development in particular, but I do not perceive that there has been a significant shift in public opinion on onshore wind in particular. There has definitely been a shift in public opinion on offshore wind; the public seem to recognise that it is important to generate as much wind energy as possible offshore. The resistance is not there, as it used to be when the technology was much

newer, certainly in the UK. It would be good to have some more formal investigation into public attitudes, and I wonder whether you can point us in the direction of any that might have been done.

One of the other problems that we have — I do not know whether this is common in all jurisdictions — is the planning system and people taking individual action on their own property. I saw reference to some of the solar farms that are being developed. Of course, the volume of energy that can be generated from solar farms versus wind on the same land is quite significantly different. Certainly, more and more people seem to want to install solar on their rooftops in the UK, but there are no current requirements through the planning system to force developers to install solar on rooftops as part of the planning process. If we are to generate a lot more energy from solar in a way that does not impact hugely on the green spaces that we have, that might be a sensible way forward. What assessment has been done of the differences in the planning systems of the different BIPA jurisdictions? Might some be more able to promote action than others?

Senator Victor Boyhan:

Those presentations were fabulous. As someone who lives in the Republic, I was in awe. I have learned things today that I did not know. That just shows that it is fresh and challenging.

I will focus on what Eugene said in his presentation about community generation. That is spectacular. When you talk about community engagement and community involvement and community generation, there always has to be a benefit for people to buy in. We know that, historically, there have been a lot of objections to the alternative generation of energy. That is shifting, but it is slow and takes a lot of time. The key thing is winning the hearts and minds of communities and customers. That is what it is about. Eugene, you left us with a very strong message about that. I am interested in hearing from both presenters about how we enhance, speed up and drive behavioural change. That is, arguably, the greatest challenge in reaching

our targets. Although we are agents with our own political connections and we represent people, it is true that many politicians have not been to the fore in driving change. That is something that we have to address in our political establishments. The issue is behavioural change. It is very impressive. Has it been progressing, even in the past year or two? How do you see the best way in which to drive the behavioural change that is necessary to meet the targets?

The Lord Kilclooney:

Those were two very impressive presentations. Plainly, a lot of work is being done right across the island. One thing that was not mentioned, but seems to be the way ahead, is small nuclear plants. Have you considered them?

Ms Lisa Vaughan:

That was a fantastic array of questions. On the behavioural change piece, similarly to Eugene, though I did not touch on it, we would always have been active on that influencing and engaging at community level and across others, be they public authorities or SMEs. There are probably two parts. Eugene clearly outlined one, which is community engagement with people on the ground to let them see the benefits, where they are actively involved and have agency in it. Obviously, the other side is definitely national Government. I absolutely take the point that there are a lot of bad stories on the internet, in particular. Even informally, people say “This is hugely expensive”, “I am not sure that it works”, and “My house is going to be cold” — all that kind of good stuff. We need consistency of message here. We need the examples on the ground.

In Lahinch, what was really important for us was that it was a well-used public facility in a national landmark location. We were able to articulate to people coming into the building the difference in the quality of experience — the air quality, the warmth, the facilities — in the

building and to show that, when you transition to heat pump technology or geothermal or biomass, the quality of what you get is actually much higher than what was there before, and to just focus on that, regardless of the reduction in carbon emissions. It is possible to bring people like yourselves, public representatives, on site — we have done that in the past — either in a domestic environment or a larger building, to demonstrate what is actually there, so that you can then articulate clearly and understand, from an on-the-ground perspective, what the benefits are and what needs to happen, but that has to be allied to a much wider, national campaign that is consistent and undertaken over a number of years, because we will be here for quite a while on that side.

On renewables, we are also seeing, more on the solar side, huge appetite and interest beyond smaller-building rooftops. Companies are looking at any spare land that they have. Non-profits are looking at their land. Sports organisations, too, without a doubt. There are obviously challenges in exporting to the grid that we have here in Ireland, but, for self-consumption, it is a good start, where the grid connection will come, to be prepared and have actually put some renewables in place on site. Again, it is about changing minds and demonstrating to people beyond the organisation, particularly if you look at sports facilities, where things are actually taking place. That is also really important for behavioural change. I will get Eugene to talk more about the renewables side, because he sits on the committee.

Mr Eugene Conlon:

Yes. I suppose that there were a couple of items, from the top. On the air source heat pump question and the cost of it, yes, we hear that. I always say two things to the individual. One that I see day-to-day at work is that they have no problem paying out on a mini-mortgage to buy a car, but they will not get a proper mortgage to do up their home. It is one thing that I challenge people on. That is one element of it.

The second element, to reiterate Lisa's point, is that the quality of life that they have will be

completely different to what they are experiencing at the moment. It is really a question of pushing back against people. Presently, they will get a grant of up to 50% from SEAI. I know that that is not the case in the UK, but that is a significant incentive. Part of the response is to keep challenging back, but also, because we partner with credit unions, we provide people with the financial channels to be able to address those issues.

12.00 pm

How do we mobilise people? I think the second point is very relevant. I put up “trust”, because I passionately believe that there are three elements to it: credibility, capability and intimacy. Is what is being said at the moment about climate change credible? It is credible. When we sit down with people and look at the 800 sustainable energy communities around the country, do we see that they are capable of delivering retrofits? Yes. The third element is intimacy. We describe intimacy as the sort of relationship in which there is sort of respect and warmth between you and me. In building and in getting people mobilised, trust is critical.

On your question about onshore development, you are right that we could probably do with data, but I am giving examples of what I experience day to day. For instance, a very significant wind farm is being developed quite close to me. The number of objections in the area is minimal. Do you know why? It is because of the Ukraine crisis. People are starting to hear a wake-up call, but we also have to challenge. I understand that, for you, as politicians, there is a limit on how far you can challenge, but, as community groups, we can stand up and challenge the status quo.

I cannot comment on the planning issues, because I am not exactly certain about that area. On driving behaviour change, as I said, at the national level there is a role, and at the local level there is a role. Please remember what I said earlier; please partner. I know that statutory agencies are sometimes afraid of community groups, because they are afraid of what they will be sucked into. All I will say is this: overcome that fear.

My last point is on Lord Kilclooney's question about nuclear. My personal opinion is that you are absolutely right. We need to construct small-scale nuclear, and we need to do it now.

Mr Seán Crowe TD:

I am very impressed with your submission. I suppose that those of us who are in leadership positions in the community all know of communities that would jump at the idea of getting solar on their roofs, for example. You are right to say that one of the most important things is trust. It is relatively new technology for a lot of people. They are worried about who is going to put it in. Are there cowboys? There are a lot of them out there when it comes to any new technology. If we really are serious about replicating some of the work that you are doing with your organisation, the ideal would be a one-stop shop to help people go through the different layers. The first layer for a lot of the organisations that I come across is the seed money. They ask, "How do I get from A to B?" or "To get the solar, how do I get the funding?". Would it be helpful to have that sort of one-stop organisation that community organisations could go to? You have the experience from the time that you have been doing it, but is that spread around the country? Who would you go to for that? Would it be yourselves or replica organisations like yours?

You are pushing an open door for communities that would like to do it. A lot of community centres in my local authority area would jump at the idea of trying to get solar or some sort of heating, but it is very slow and difficult, with the bureaucracy that you have to go through to get money from the local authority, for example. At government level, they say that they are all in favour of it. At local authority level, we are all in favour. Communities are in favour of it, but it is about how you get through that bureaucracy and those layers to get from A to B to deliver on the project. That is the big challenge.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Seán. Concluding remarks, Lisa and Eugene?

Ms Lisa Vaughan:

I agree. A lot of communities, not just those in our geographical area, come to people such as ourselves and Eugene all the time for that information and advice. There is a move in Europe towards more of a one-stop-shop structure. It has not necessarily landed here yet, but there is a reasonably good network for people in Ireland to tap into of those who have done it. Without doubt, it could be more formalised. There will be a lot of activity in this area over the next two to three years.

Mr Eugene Conlon:

I passionately believe that the network of sustainable energy communities nationally has the potential to do exactly what you are describing.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Eugene. I will allow one final question from David Rees, a Member of the Welsh Senedd, and then we have to conclude. I am under pressure because people have flights etc.

Mr David Rees MS:

It is not a question: it is more of a statement, or something to think about. I will start with solar energy. Everyone talks about it being fantastic, and I have it on my roof, but the real benefits come from battery installation with the solar. Many people do not understand the battery installation agenda, so how do you work with Governments to push the additional battery installation, so that you benefit from it not just when the sun is shining but in the evenings? That is an important aspect.

Let us be honest about the wind farm agenda. Having 250-metre towers close to communities is a large obstruction. You might be OK when they are further away, but the closer they are,

the more people are concerned, especially when they are surrounded by them. We need to look very carefully at how and where they are placed strategically and how we manage their location and installation. A community that is surrounded by wind farms will be impacted by things such as flicker and noise, and you will lose public support as a consequence.

Mr Eugene Conlon:

Your second point is a very fair one. On your first point, in every home that we do, solar will be part of the solution. Here in Ireland, we are in a unique position now because we have the feed-in tariff, so there is no need for the battery.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

On behalf of my Co-Chair, Karin, and all Members of our Parliamentary Assembly, I thank Lisa Vaughan and Eugene Conlon for their excellent contributions here today. In all our jurisdictions, we have examples of communities that are leading the way in transitioning to sustainable energy. It was very worthwhile to hear this morning about the work that you do in supporting communities across so many areas in how they, too, can change. We wish you well with your work. Thank you, Lisa and Eugene. *[Applause.]*

ADJOURNMENT

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Brendan. Our business is now concluded, colleagues. On behalf of us all, I thank all our speakers and the Irish secretariat, with particular thanks to Veronica Carr for putting the arrangements in place for this plenary session. I also want to thank the parliamentary reporters, our sound engineers and our media personnel, the staff at the K Club and all those who have helped to make this plenary session such a stimulating, enjoyable and productive event. I will now ask Brendan, my Co-Chair, to make his concluding remarks.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Karin. I echo your words of thanks to all the support staff from the Oireachtas and the other legislatures. I pay particular tribute to our joint clerks, Regina Boyle and Martyn Atkins, for the leadership that they give to our Assembly. They are very ably supported by colleagues from the different legislatures. I put that on record and echo the thanks to the K Club for the fabulous arrangements and facilities that we had here, which are top class. Our next plenary session will be in Ireland again, and we will let you know the dates and the venue as soon as possible.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Brendan. I call Sarah Jones MP to move the Adjournment.

Ms Sarah Jones MP:

I move that the sixty-fifth plenary session of this Assembly be adjourned.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Karin Smyth MP):

Thank you, Sarah. The sixty-fifth plenary is now closed. We will meet in plenary session in the spring. The plenary session now stands adjourned. Lunch will be served upstairs in the South bar and restaurant. I wish you all a very safe and pleasant journey home, and we will see you in the spring. Thank you.

Adjourned at 12.09 pm.