

BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

SIXTY-SIXTH PLENARY SESSION

Monday 15 April 2024

The Assembly met at 9.30 am.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

The Assembly is now in public session. First, I remind everyone present to please turn off mobile phones and other electronic devices. Second, could I ask members when they are invited to contribute from the floor to clearly state their name and legislature? Finally, I remind Members that the proceedings of this body do not attract parliamentary privilege. That is all the boring stuff.

Before we begin our formal Assembly, I would like to take a moment to note the deep regret the Assembly felt at the recent passing of Sir Tony Lloyd MP, a former Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and an associate member of the Assembly. Tony addressed the Assembly in his role as Shadow Secretary at the London plenary in 2018. On behalf of the Members of the Assembly I would like to extend condolences to his family and friends.

We are delighted to be joined today by Mr Enn Eesmaa, a Member of the Estonian Parliament, representing the Baltic Assembly for the duration of the plenary.

I welcome all Members here today to Druids Glen in County Wicklow, also known as the Garden of Ireland. Wicklow is a beautiful county, full of endless natural beauty and captivating history. We are delighted to be hosting this 66th plenary session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly in the scenic surroundings of the stunning Druids Glen Hotel and Golf Resort.

You have all been circulated with an up-to-date list of BIPA membership in your briefing packs. I have to inform the Assembly also that in accordance with Rule 2A, the following

associate Members have accepted the invitation of the Steering Committee to assume the powers and responsibilities of Members for the whole of this session: Kevin Brennan MP, Lord Faulkner of Worcester, and Jackie Dunbar MSP. We have received apologies for the plenary session from Irish Members, Senator Frances Black, Alan Farrell TD, and Senator Victor Boyhan. Unfortunately, due to business scheduling in the House of Commons a number of our valued members were unable to attend this plenary. We all understand the challenges of parliamentary life. Of the British Members, we have apologies from Stephen Doughty MP, Damian Green MP, Mark Logan MP, Conor McGinn MP, Jerome Mayhew MP, Mark Menzies MP, Karin Smyth MP, Gregory Campbell MP, Alistair Carmichael MP, Lord Godson and Lord Donoughue. Of the devolved Members, we have apologies from David Rees MS and Colin McGrath MLA.

ADOPTION OF PROPOSED PROGRAMME OF BUSINESS

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Good morning. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here today to the scenic surroundings of the stunning Druids Glen Hotel and Golf Resort. Members will have received a copy of the programme of business.

During this plenary we will be focusing some of our discussions on the challenges and opportunities facing the tourism sector which is of great importance to all our jurisdictions.

To begin proceedings, we will hear from An Taoiseach, Simon Harris TD. We are delighted he is able to give the opening address to the Assembly.

We will then hear from Mr Thomas Byrne TD, Minister of State, who will address the Assembly and respond to questions.

Later this morning we will hear from Joanne Stuart, chief executive officer of the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance, who will address the Assembly and respond to questions.

We will then hear from our respective ambassadors, Martin Fraser and Paul Johnston, who will update the Assembly on British-Irish diplomatic relations and respond to questions.

The morning's session will conclude with a debate by Members on current international events. Two motions will be put to the Assembly, one on the situation in Gaza and another motion reaffirming the Assembly's position on the situation in Ukraine.

Monday afternoon's session will begin with an address from Alice Mansergh, chief executive of Tourism Ireland.

We will then hear from Eoghan O'Mara Walsh, chief executive officer of the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation.

We will also hear an update from the Chair of Committee D, Lord Dubs, on some of the work of this committee.

Today's proceedings will conclude with a debate by Members on a motion on "the relationships between the development of tourism and provision for housing in rural areas across the BIPA jurisdictions".

We expect today's session to conclude around 5.00 pm.

Tomorrow morning the Assembly will hear from the Chairs of Committee A and Committee B.

We will then hear from the Chair of Committee C, our colleague, Brendan Howlin, who will present his Committee's report on "Government Energy Strategy and Consumer Energy Policy" for consideration and, hopefully, adoption by the Assembly.

Tuesday's session will conclude with an address by Gráinne O'Connor, manager of Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Geopark, who will respond to questions.

The Assembly will adjourn at 12.15 pm on Tuesday.

I will now ask Seán Crowe TD to formally move that the adoption of the proposed programme of business be agreed to.

Mr Seán Crowe TD: I move that the programme of business be adopted.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD): Is that agreed? Agreed.

OPENING ADDRESS

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

We have done the formalities and I now have the honour of inviting our first guest speaker, An Taoiseach, Simon Harris TD, to address the Assembly.

Members, I remind you that the address by An Taoiseach is to be recorded by the broadcasters present.

Taoiseach, you are very welcome. We are absolutely delighted that you are able to join us during this plenary, not just today but also last night. We are delighted that we are here in your constituency, an absolutely stunning part of Ireland. We are very appreciative of your time to the Assembly, in what is your first week in office, so I take the opportunity to congratulate you and to wish you all the best in your new role.

An Taoiseach (Mr Simon Harris TD):

Thank you very much. Good morning everybody. Thank you for the warm welcome. I feel I should give you a warm welcome as well. Thank you so much for coming here to visit us in what I believe is beautiful County Wicklow. It has been my home all my life and is a county that I am so proud to represent in Dáil Éireann for the last 13 years. I really want to thank the Co-Chairs, Brendan Smith TD, an individual I know for a long time, who I know is so committed throughout his public service to working to improve relations across the island of Ireland and indeed between these islands. I thank you, Brendan, for all your work.

Thank you so much, Dame Karen Bradley MP, for your contribution to peace and prosperity on this island. Thank you for your service as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We have gone from not having met at all to having met twice in the last three weeks. It is great to have you here in Wicklow. May I also be associated with your message of sympathy to the family of the late Sir Tony, whom I had the honour of meeting once in Omagh. He was an incredible public servant, whom I know was so committed to Northern Ireland and indeed to peace and prosperity between these islands as well.

You are so welcome this morning to County Wicklow. It was a great honour to meet almost all of you during the course of yesterday evening when you were having your meal. Thank

you very much. I was feeling very left out knowing you were all down here having dinner in my constituency, and I had to come down to check in on you all. It was very nice to see you having a lovely evening and to have an opportunity to have a word with so many of you. I certainly didn't get much notice that I was going to end up being the Taoiseach of this wonderful country, so I'm not sure, Brendan, how you knew to choose County Wicklow as the venue. Yet again, your uncanny foresight must have been very much in place.

I wanted to be here this morning because I really value the work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I wanted to be here to acknowledge that and to thank you for all that you do. I know it is wide-ranging in your representation of parliamentary democracy across our islands. I welcome colleagues from Wales, Scotland, England, the Isle of Man, Jersey, Guernsey and from across this island, North and South. I am so delighted to warmly welcome Enn Eesmaa from the Estonian Parliament, who is representing the Baltic Assembly. Thank you so much for being here today as well. *[Applause.]*

I also acknowledge the presence and the continued committed public service of our ambassadors: Ambassador Paul Johnston and Ambassador Martin Fraser. Thank you so much for the tireless work you do on behalf of your respective Governments. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

I know that you have chosen tourism as the focus of this plenary event today. Here in County Wicklow, the Garden of Ireland, and across our islands, we are very fortunate to have a very strong tourism offering. Tourism provides a very good frame in which to consider our shared economic and social challenges and those shared economic and social strengths also. For a start, across these islands, tourism is a major welcome driver of employment and of regional development, but it is also susceptible to some of the most complex issues that we face, including costs, skills, competitiveness, climate, and security. In choosing tourism as the issue to discuss at this plenary, it provides you as parliamentarians with an opportunity to delve into so many of the greatest challenges we face at this time. It is absolutely essential that we get this right because the benefits of tourism go far beyond just simple economics. The volume of travel and tourism between and across our jurisdictions has played a key role in cementing the strong relationships and the easy familiarity which we now enjoy as island neighbours. You certainly cannot put any economic price on that. My colleague, the Minister of State, Thomas Byrne TD, will speak further this morning on this important topic, as well

as the CEOs of the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance, Tourism Ireland, and the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation. I wish you well in your discussions.

Throughout my time in government, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to be a regular visitor to Britain. In fact, I was in Bangor and London in recent weeks and months. Both visits brought home to me how substantial, close, and varied the British-Irish relationship is. It is built on a deep and enduring political, cultural, economic, and social set of ties.

Reflecting the value that Ireland and the UK attach to our bilateral relationship, I was very eager to have the opportunity to speak with British Prime Minister Sunak on my first full day in office last Wednesday. There was a particular poignancy to that call because it was on the 26th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The Prime Minister and I discussed our close and deep friendship and our shared ambition to see relationships across these islands prosper further.

We are agreed on the particular importance of stability and opportunity in Northern Ireland and, in that context, we very much welcomed the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly in February and the re-establishment of the North-South Ministerial Council last week, which was the first opportunity we have had in about four years to meet in person in that council.

Our economic and trading relationship continues to flourish, despite significant global headwinds, with bilateral trade now reaching some €122 billion in 2022. Both the Prime Minister and I welcomed this and the achievement that is behind these remarkable figures. I take the opportunity today to commend the work by all involved, most particularly businesses themselves across these islands, in achieving these tremendous figures and for continuing to meet the challenge of adapting to the very significant changes arising from the United Kingdom leaving the European Union.

Like many relationships that really matter, British-Irish relations can on occasion be described as challenging - let us be honest amongst friends - we have faced many challenges together in recent years. It is important that we are true to ourselves in any assessment of the relationship. It is a testament to the strength of the relationship in recent decades that we have always continued to talk, and we have always continued to work through matters of joint importance, no matter how difficult, including through the work of this British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I wanted to be here this morning therefore to publicly acknowledge

the work of the Assembly, and in particular the commitment of some in this room to the work of the Assembly over many years. Steadfastness matters in the friendship, and I thank you for yours.

I did say last week upon taking up office as Taoiseach that I am wholly committed to my responsibility as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. It is one of the most solemn responsibilities that I took on last week. Therefore, I was very pleased to meet with the First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, and the deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly, in Armagh on Monday and to speak to them again jointly on the phone on Wednesday.

With the restoration of the institutions in Northern Ireland I welcomed the renewed opportunities for North-South cooperation in so many areas, including infrastructure, research, healthcare, innovation and indeed tourism. We had an opportunity at the North-South Ministerial Council last week to begin to plot a way forward. The institutions are now back up and running. British-Irish relationships are a lot better now than they were even a year ago. Thanks to the Windsor framework, there is now an opportunity to say what next, what more can we do together? I look forward to exploring that. Both the First Minister, and the deputy First Minister, were very clear that they are determined to work together on shared objectives in a practical and pragmatic way and to work with the Government of Ireland in the same spirit.

The Government of Ireland will likewise continue to work to realise the full potential of cooperation and dialogue across borders and communities. This is at the heart of the Government's Shared Island initiative. This initiative provides a framework for investment that delivers benefits for the whole island and for working together on a North-South or an east-west basis where it makes sense to do so. We now have some great east-west projects under way. In my last role as Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science I was delighted that we managed to establish two new co-centres of research, one in food sustainability and one on water and biodiversity. These are bringing together experts, not just on a North-South basis, but north, south, east, and west, to get the best possible minds across these islands working together on some of the biggest challenges we face: food sustainability and climate action. It is a really good example of issues that do not respect borders and, quite frankly, do not care about politics. It shows how we can try and put structures in place to get people working together.

In the same vein, there is also shared work and learning ongoing across Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland on restoring our peatland. I very much look forward to seeing the outcome of that.

In February of this year the Government announced funding commitments of more than €800 million for cross-border investments on the island of Ireland. Some €600 million has been committed for the upgrade of the A5 north-west transport corridor, which is a really important project, and a number of linked road projects. The funding will also allow for the construction of the Narrow Water Bridge across Carlingford Lough and the completion of the Carlingford Greenway. It will also see rail services between Belfast and Dublin increase to hourly and it will contribute towards the development of Casement Park in Belfast, with a view to it hosting games during the joint hosting by Ireland and the UK of UEFA 2028. I look forward to working with the Northern Ireland Executive and the British Government to see these infrastructural projects delivered.

The Government is also working now with the Northern Ireland Executive in agreed areas of cooperation.

9.45 am

We have agreed new pilot projects on educational under-attainment and in enterprise. They are currently under development. Very much relevant to your discussions today, Co-Chairs, we are also looking to promote connectivity, shared branding, and sustainable tourism across the island of Ireland. In an ever-more competitive world it is really important that where it makes sense, we pull together and work together to get people to the island of Ireland and indeed to these islands, because if we grow the size of the pie, everybody across these islands will certainly benefit.

Recognising the value of dialogue, as this Assembly does, through the Shared Island initiative, we will continue to focus on bringing people together. This is so important. I am of a generation that was not old enough to vote in the referendum of the Good Friday Agreement. I am now the Taoiseach of the country. We need to really consider this. There is a whole generation of people who are yearning to be involved in a conversation about the future and about how we work together. Such a conversation is not meant to be divisive or argumentative, it should be about the practical areas in which we can work together and how we get to know each other better.

If I am being very honest, I am also of a generation where probably more people of my generation are familiar with London, Berlin, and Paris than they might be with Belfast or Derry. We really have to challenge ourselves - emblems aside - on how we make sure people on this island and these islands get to know each other better. Because it is interpersonal relationships, knowing each other, and being familiar with each other that is the key to embedding peace. If you have those interpersonal relationships, it is like a good government. A colleague once said to me that a government never falls over policy disagreements, it falls when trust breaks down. When we talk about peace and prosperity, we can learn a similar lesson. There is a challenge for all of us, one I pose to this Assembly today, on how we get talking again and get people knowing each other. How do we reverse the trend that we have seen in relation to student mobility, where there are fewer students now going North to South, South to North or east to west than there were only a few short years ago?

It is not just about saying that we protected the common travel area; that is really important, but is it working? How do we incentivise and help people? We have some ideas. I see my good friend, Senator Emer Currie. She and I talk about this all the time. I really do pose a challenge to this Assembly. I would welcome your thoughts on this in the weeks and months ahead. How do we continue to ensure that our people become more familiar with each other across these islands? It is a major challenge.

As part of this work, I was pleased to launch the Shared Island Youth Forum last September. This is a gathering of people that not only were not old enough to vote in the Good Friday Agreement referendum, but they were not born when the Good Friday Agreement was put in place. They have every right, and we have every responsibility, to involve them now in a conversation about the future. It is an incredible gathering of 80 young people from across the island, from completely different perspectives, traditions, and backgrounds, who have committed to working better over the course of a year to develop their vision for a shared future on this island, whatever its constitutional make-up may be. Again, there might be an opportunity for this Assembly to continue to engage with them, because I would really like to hear more voices from our neighbours across these islands to consider what we could give and what we could gain over the next number of years in pursuing further reconciliation across the two islands.

Perhaps, paradoxically, we do know for certain that in the coming years we are going to have to navigate together the same geopolitical uncertainty. Whichever part of this island or these

islands we live on, we are going to have to work our way through a period of extraordinary geopolitical uncertainty. Last week I was in both Brussels and Warsaw meeting European leaders, where we discussed the future strategic direction of the European Union as well as the urgent humanitarian situation in Gaza, the war in Ukraine, and other pressing issues. These issues will also be discussed at the European Council, which I will attend on Wednesday and Thursday of this week. Prime Minister Sunak and I also discussed Ukraine and Gaza when we spoke last week. The global context is more relevant to our relations than it has been in generations.

Here at home, as Taoiseach, my focus, first and foremost, will be to create equality of opportunity, to support those who need the State the most, to protect our hard-earned economic success and to use its benefits to deliver tangible outcomes to society. In all that I do, I recognise the importance and the opportunity of working with our closest neighbours - you here in this room today - and with Ireland's partners, both in the European Union and more broadly.

It has been an absolute pleasure to be here for the opening of this plenary session and to have an opportunity to speak to you in my home county. I want to say clearly, on behalf of the Irish Government, that the British-Irish relationship matters greatly. It matters greatly to me personally as Taoiseach and it matters greatly to the Government of Ireland. I want to see us build on the foundations of the last quarter of a century of peace and I want us to reflect on how in this turbulent world we can make these islands a better place for the generations that follow us. I often think the last generation gave us the most incredible gift possible; they gave us a peace process. They gave us peace. They gave us a framework and they gave us one of the most enduring peace processes possible. If we are to be self-critical, we have yet to see the full benefit of it. We have seen the peace element, now we must see the prosperity element.

I was at the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement in the Abbey Theatre and I remember somebody describing peace on this island as a frosty peace. There is some truth in that. The challenge for all of us now is to warm things up, make sure that the relations become warmer, and to make sure that we continue to find ways to talk and work together on mutual challenges. I must say, after the last number of weeks and months, the re-establishment of the institutions, and my excellent conversation with the British Prime Minister, I feel more hopeful and more optimistic than I have in quite a while. The British-

Irish relationship and the relationship with all our friends on these islands is something we value so much.

I look forward to visiting the Isle of Man in June for the British-Irish Council summit. I am particularly looking forward to seeing the return of Northern Ireland's First Minister and deputy First Minister to that institution for the first time in quite a long time.

I wish you all the very best with your plenary deliberations. I hope you enjoy the hospitality of my beautiful county of Wicklow. Go raibh mile maith agaibh. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Taoiseach, on behalf of all of our Members I thank you for addressing the Assembly here today. I wish also to reiterate my Co-Chair, Karen's comments on how appreciative we are of your time in joining the Assembly this morning and also your presence last night and for taking the opportunity to meet with Members from all jurisdictions. We wish you well in your new role as Head of Government.

I am delighted that you gave a very strong, clear affirmation of the opportunities that exist to strengthen the relationships between our respective islands, for the betterment of all communities across these islands. Our Assembly will continue its work supporting the work of the Governments in that respect as well. Again, Taoiseach, on behalf of all Members, our sincere thanks for your detailed address here this morning and the very strong positive messages about what can be achieved between our two islands, working together. Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF STATE AT THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM,
CULTURE, ARTS, GAELTACHT SPORT and MEDIA**

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

While my Co-Chair escorts the Taoiseach out, it gives me the honour to introduce the Minister of State, Mr Thomas Byrne, who is going to speak to us next. I remind Members again that the address by him is being recorded by the broadcasters present.

Thomas Byrne is Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. That is quite a long list that he covers. We are delighted to see you here again. You did address us in 2022 in your capacity as Minister of State with responsibility for Europe, in our Westminster plenary. We are really pleased that you are here with us today, and you were with us last night as well. We look forward to hearing how we can enjoy more of the shared experiences under the portfolio that you cover. *[Applause.]*

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

Thank you very much Co-Chair. Thank you very much to the Assembly for the invitation to join you at the 66th plenary conference. I am a long-standing colleague and neighbour of Brendan Smith, so I certainly could not refuse him. As you mentioned, Co-Chair, when I was Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, I had the opportunity to engage with some of you before, which may have been the first one post COVID, two years ago. People felt it was very important at that point to re-engage in person, but it is more important to keep that up and I'm glad that you are doing that.

It is good to see people from the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Senedd Cymru, the Tynwald, the States of Guernsey and the States Assembly from Jersey. I am delighted to see so many of you here. I look forward to hearing the experiences and views of our neighbours. We already had some fruitful discussions last night.

I again thank Brendan for his leadership. I recognise the presence of a lot of my Oireachtas colleagues. I do welcome the presence of An Taoiseach, not just this morning, formally, but also last night as well on an informal basis. That is very welcome right here in his constituency. He is very busy, but it does speak to the importance the Government places on the totality of relationships on these islands. It can become a bit of a cliché, but it is important that we do not let it become so.

Events like this can't happen without a team. I thank everybody from the Oireachtas, the secretariat of the Assembly, the Department of Foreign Affairs and all of the officials from the various Assemblies and Parliaments who are here today.

We are in a beautiful part of Ireland. As you will remember, it is known as the Garden county. The very first time I was in this hotel was at our party think-in in 2007 when I was first elected as a Member of the Dáil. Coming around that corner into the back door of the room

earlier I had a distinct memory of the then Minister for Finance reprimanding us in most blunt terms to get into that room as quickly as possible. They were different times in politics when discipline was maybe a little bit stricter.

We are here today to talk about tourism, which is one of Ireland's most important indigenous economic sectors. Tourism is deeply rooted in the fabric of Irish society. It supports close to 300,000 jobs across this island. There is no underestimating the impact tourism has in sustaining communities and promoting regional development all across Ireland.

The importance of tourism to the economy on both side of the border and the joint approach taken to the promotion and development of the sector has led to tourism being one of the areas chosen for formal North-South cooperation under the structures of the Good Friday Agreement. When I mention this when I go abroad people do find it very interesting and impressive. The cooperation has been hugely beneficial, with the tourism sector now an exemplar of what be achieved when we work together on the island with a shared purpose. Apart from its clear economic value, tourism also plays an important role in promoting the image of the island of Ireland abroad, generating a positive impression of Irish people, our landscape and culture for our visitors.

Great Britain was the largest single market, accounting for 35% of the 10.8 million overseas visitors to Ireland. Those 3.5 million British visitors generated over €1 billion in revenue for the Irish economy. The contribution of the British market to the regional tourism economy and to the season extension objectives are significant, with around 41% of British visitors coming between October and March. Britain remains one of our key markets and, equally, I know that Ireland is a very important market for many parts of Britain.

Tourism Ireland is running an extensive and targeted programme of activity to inspire potential overseas visitors to travel to the island of Ireland. The message is that the island of Ireland has so much to offer across regions and seasons. Tourism Ireland is showcasing iconic reasons to travel here, expanding people's bucket list from our best known spots to our hidden gems. The focus will be on tourists with value adding tourism traits, to use the lingo, but that means people who have the funds to travel, who prize memorable experiences, who tend to travel across regions and, crucially, across seasons.

I am also pleased to note there is a very positive outlook for direct air access to the island of Ireland for April 2024. Scheduled air capacity to the island will be 106% of last year's levels, with 2.5 million seats filled for the month. Fáilte Ireland industry research shows that 2024

looks promising for most sectors in terms of visitor volumes. That of course is on the back of severe difficulties and the elimination of tourism for large parts of the pandemic period.

I understand that the Department has also been working closely with our tourism agencies and stakeholders in developing our new national tourism policy framework. The new framework will mainstream environmental, economic, and social sustainability across the entire tourism sector, and it will shape how our tourism industry develops up to 2030, in line with our broader sustainability targets.

Tourism Ireland is accountable to the North-South Ministerial Council. That is why it is so important that the North-South Ministerial Council can meet. It is good, as the Taoiseach and others have mentioned, that it reconvened and met last week. It is great to see the structure is in place. There will be a tourism sectoral meeting to follow in June.

Enhancing cross-border cooperation has been a core commitment of the Government, particularly through tourism connections. One such tourism initiative currently in development is a collaboration project which links the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway Coastal Route in the north-west region. The project is supported by a €7.6 million allocation from the Irish Government's Shared Island Fund to 2025. That is being developed and implemented by the three tourism boards on the island. The aim is to connect these two magnificent touring routes and motivate visitors to explore further, stay longer, and spend more, meaning greater economic benefits for the region.

10.00 am

As a government, we look forward to the delivery of this exciting project and to other North-South tourism initiatives that can enhance our cooperation, North and South, and our all-island tourism offering. There is a great opportunity for tourism also into the future through the further development of cross-border tourism initiatives and collaboration between Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, and Tourism Northern Ireland. Tourism Ireland is working with the other two agencies on the roll-out of an umbrella certification scheme to promote sustainable tourism. Tourism Ireland will continue to play a role in the development of the international consumer messaging and branding of the scheme.

There are other initiatives which are being explored with the three tourism agencies on the island, including through the PEACE PLUS programme. Our working group across the agencies is developing a tripartite proposal around potential tourism projects that could be

considered for application. North-South engagement and collaboration in the area of tourism has added value to the marketing of the island to potential overseas visitors from both jurisdictions. There have been significant achievements in the area, including the development of screen tourism and maximising the tourism benefit of major sporting events. I very much welcome the return of the Irish Open to Royal Portrush in 2025.

Last October, Ireland and the UK and the football associations on the islands received the brilliant news that we will co-host the UEFA Euro 2028 championship. It is a really good opportunity to showcase our world-class tourism and sports offering to Europe and the wider world. It is a welcome return to formal cooperation on a major project involving Governments and associations all working together that will showcase the islands to the world in the post-Brexit context. That is really important.

For our part as well, we recognise the tourism benefits and the economic benefits. As Minister for sport, I have been talking to my colleagues across the jurisdictions. I want a greater emphasis as well on sporting participation to result from these major events that we are supporting and celebrating. The award of the tournament to Ireland and the UK reflects real east-west and North-South cooperation in the preparation and presentation of our joint bid, but also in the work that is now ongoing to deliver on these championships. It will be the largest sporting event that we have ever jointly staged. It will also be the single largest sporting event ever held in Ireland. We look forward to hosting Euro 2028 with the UK and to further deepening our relationships with our bid partners through the medium of sport.

That is not all. The International Cricket Council (ICC) announced a couple of years ago that the UK and Ireland are the preferred hosts for the 2030 T20 World Cup in cricket. Working closely with the cricket associations and the ICC, I am confident that Ireland and the UK can deliver a fantastic tournament in 2030 as partners together.

In closing, I am confident that the discussions over the coming days will highlight mutual opportunities and learning points for all delegates. I am certain that it will be a productive conference. Thank you very much, Co-Chairs, for your invitation here today. I wish you every success. Now that I am Minister for the Gaeltacht, as of last week, I must say go raibh mile maith agaibh, a thousand thanks to you all. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you very much Minister. You have agreed to take questions. Is that correct?

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

Yes.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

That is a relief.

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

I understand. That is no problem.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Peter Fitzpatrick has already caught my eye.

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

First, I welcome the Taoiseach and Minister Byrne to our Assembly meeting today. Coming from the border county of County Louth, which is right beside Northern Ireland, it is very important that we build a relationship between both North and South.

I welcome the return of the Executive to Northern Ireland. It is a great day for the island of Ireland. Back in February the Irish Government announced a Shared Ireland investment of €800 million. I welcome that. The money is going to go a long way towards building a good relationship between North and South. I have family in the North and family in the South and an amount of people work in the North who live in the South and *vice versa*. It is great to see them all working well together. The €800 million the Government gave was very good. I am looking for an update on the €800 million. Over the years we heard a lot of money had been invested but we do not see where the money went.

In fairness, the Minister has given a clear commitment on the redevelopment of Casement Park, which is very welcome. There is a joint venture between the UK and the Irish Government on holding Euro 2028. I come from County Louth, where we have been speaking for a long time about the Narrow Water Bridge and the relationship between North and South. The development of the A2 in Newry and Warrenpoint, which leads to the R173 in Omeath, is something I am delighted to see in my lifetime. I really do welcome it. A commitment was also expressed about the railway line. An amount of money is being spent. Could the Minister give an update on the situation. As I said, it is great to see the relationship going. The sum of €800 million is a lot of money.

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

Do you want me to answer those questions now?

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Why don't we start with that, and we might group questions later.

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

That is a wide area and goes way beyond my own brief. I am very happy that the Shared Island Fund is now delivering. You will see the Narrow Water Bridge built. You will see increased frequency of trains on the Dublin-Belfast line from January. A lot of my own constituents get on the train at Drogheda, so it is going to really benefit them. That reminds me that I need to do a promotional video outlining the benefits to Meath East residents of that particular project, but there's lots of benefits to lots of people. It is about connecting people. There is real money behind it now, for trains, the Narrow Water Bridge, the A5 and Casement Park as well, which is a very important project that we continue to work on with our colleagues.

In the sports Department I have worked in the last few years in the context of the Euro bid. That is really important. It's a real sign of an interest from the Government in Dublin in the North and connecting people, and trying to drive joint economic development, but it is not just about the spending of money. Apart from this Assembly, we have had other engagements as well where people come together to talk to each other in different contexts. The Shared Island programme in the Department of the Taoiseach has been remarkably successful. A huge amount was built up through COVID and now we are starting to see real, practical results. That is something that is going to continue. It is about just keeping that dialogue going and maximising the opportunities for joint benefit. That is very positive. The projects that you mentioned are all going to get done. I very much look forward to them.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you, Minister, for the positive views you have expressed about tourism in Ireland, North and South. I fear there is another dark cloud over the horizon. I'm sure you'll be aware of it. I serve on the Justice and Home Affairs Committee in the Lords, and we have been taking evidence on what's going to happen this autumn when the new restrictions come in, not in the common travel area, and not for people in the common travel area, but either

people from other parts of Europe or indeed people from outside Europe altogether. A tourist who comes to Dublin may decide he or she wants two days in Belfast. Will he or she have the authorisation to do it, or will they be breaking the law if they travel north? There is a real mess and the danger is that this will deter tourism to the North. The danger is that it will damage the very positive story you told about cooperation North and South.

It is our fault. It is Britain's fault, it is not Ireland's fault, but we need somehow to solve this problem. Do you agree, or am I being very pessimistic?

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

It's an issue I have engaged on. In fact, when I visited and spoke to the Assembly two years ago, one of my engagements alongside that was a meeting in the Home Office on this particular issue. We tried to get engagement at that time. That was a different and difficult context at that time because there was so much else going on in the relationships that was of a higher profile.

This is a concern to the Irish Government. It is something that we are very much aware of. All I can say is that we will continue to engage with the UK Government and stakeholders on the matter. We do share the concerns about it. It is a worry, particularly in the context of us being effectively an all-island tourism market. If you fly to Dublin from America, as lots of people do, not just Irish people, you will need an extra bureaucratic requirement to get to Northern Ireland, which is unfortunately. You are right: it is a decision of the UK authorities, but we will continue to engage through our embassy and through our officials on that. Yes, we do share the concerns about it, very much so.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

I am sorry but I am not getting any power to the microphone. Thank you, Minister, for your address. I also live in a beautiful part of the world, north Wales, where tourism is a very important part of the economy. In fact, tourism is important across the whole of Wales, with it accounting for in excess of 11% of all employment, and about £6 billion worth of income to the country as well. One of the policies which is currently being pursued by the Welsh Government is the prospect of an overnight accommodation tax, a tourism tax, as it is being dubbed.

I know that one of the things which you have in Ireland is a differential rate of VAT on tourism-related businesses, which actually gives them a tax advantage compared to other

businesses. What advice would you, as a tourism Minister, give to those who are advocates of extra taxes for overnight accommodation businesses, particularly in nations where it's an important part of the economy?

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

It is probably not appropriate for me to comment on taxation proposals of other jurisdictions, so I'll stay out of that debate if you don't mind. However, for a long time we did have special VAT treatment for the hospitality sector. That is a complex area and it certainly costs a huge amount of money in tax forgone. It was brought in in 2011 by the Government that came in at that particular time when demand was on the floor, to try to increase demand by reducing the VAT rate. It was very successful, but like all tax changes that are meant to be temporary, they're very hard to remove. It has been removed, simply because the cost was very significant, and it's fair to say in this jurisdiction at least, the demand is very high for tourism accommodation, restaurant services, etc. It certainly was a very good tax benefit that I would say hotels, restaurants, coffee shops, etc. very much appreciated, but there was a massive cost to it as well in terms of the tax forgone. Like everything else, taxation is a balancing act for every government. At the time, it was designed to improve the tourism offering, it very much did that and helped build up the massive tourism offer that we continue to have post recession. VAT in this jurisdiction is complex too because it is subject to European rules as well, so the Government doesn't have complete freedom of motion on it. Any taxation incentives are always beneficial for the particular sectors but in terms of what we can do jointly together it's about those beautiful vistas that we have here in Wicklow, that you have in north Wales, which I suppose have some similarities, and that we have right across these islands.

Mr Kevin Brennan MP:

Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for your address. Events are a big driver of tourism, both in Ireland, and certainly in my constituency in Cardiff in south Wales. Keir Starmer, the leader of the Opposition recently announced that the next Labour government will introduce a similar measure that was introduced in Ireland regarding secondary ticketing and the restriction on the price that could be charged in the secondary ticketing market for events. Would you be able to share with members of the Assembly an assessment of how the legislation that was introduced in Ireland just a couple of years ago is working? Outlaw

companies – I say that even though we are not under parliamentary privilege - like Viagogo, have been very critical in their actions of the legislation in Ireland.

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

Yes, to be fair, it has worked overall. That's my assessment of it. I was at the Leinster rugby match a few weeks ago, not the one this weekend but the previous match, and people were selling tickets. They were freely available so there was no real issue. I would say the people who had them were at a big loss, but it is certainly not a thing now compared to what it was a few years ago. That law has been successful.

What I am concerned about though is that, to some extent, these events have to be left to supply and demand. The problem at the moment is the demand for all these major events - concerts, matches and in particular the music scene - is very high. That is leading to really high ticket prices, which are becoming less affordable, maybe not for the very wealthy international visitor, but for teenagers, young people or ordinary people who want to enjoy these events. That is a concern. I don't have any particular proposals on it at the moment, but it's something that we want to do.

10.15 am

In terms of our major events, we have a section within my Department dealing mainly with major sporting events where the Government gives support. We are launching a general policy on how we fund these major events. I mentioned two of them there but we also have the Ryder Cup coming up. We have the Europa League final as well in a few weeks in Dublin. These are events that are supported by the Government. We look at a cost-benefit analysis as to how we decide to support them. I suppose we're going to formalise that more with our new policy, but one of the key things again for us from a sporting point of view is to make sure we actually have more people participating in sport. If we are funding the Ryder Cup, it is so important and there is a really good economic benefit. It will have a huge tourism impact but I actually want more people playing golf out of that, and even pitch and putt as well. We're working on proposals in relation to that as well. It is to get that wider societal benefit too.

Mr Frankie Feighan TD:

Thank you Co-Chair. I just want to thank you, Minister, for the great work that is going on, especially the €800 million for projects across the island. That is very welcome.

I saw it myself over the years. The one thing that I notice is that if anybody, especially from the west or south of Ireland got to Belfast was to go to the Titanic museum. Also, most of the people from Belfast or the North went to Tayto Park, which is now Emerald Park. Those projects are cross-border ones and they get people together. I just welcome the funding.

I think Co-Chair, Brendan Smith, will agree with me that sometimes it becomes central between Dublin and Belfast. As a TD who represents Sligo-Leitrim-North Roscommon and South Donegal – it is the same for Brendan Smith who is along the border. We need to pay a bit more attention to the rural areas of the north west. It is not a criticism but it is just something that I feel may be left out.

I represent the constituency of Sligo-Leitrim. A lot of people don't realise that Sir Edward Harland, the great ship builder, died in Glenfarne on 24 December 1895 and his body was brought to Belfast. It just shows the links that were there on the trainline. We're pushing very hard for the Sligo, Leitrim, Northern Counties Railway (SLNCR) Greenway between Sligo and Enniskillen and further afield. We need to push a lot more of those projects. The area needs to be recognised a little bit more. There is great work going on. Thank you.

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

I cannot disagree with you. We want to see more regional development. There are some examples of projects around the general north-west that are going to benefit that area. Indeed, if I go back to my own main brief of sport, I have said that the major events cannot all be in Dublin. They have to be around the country. That's very important. I am deeply conscious of that, as is the Government.

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Thank you very much, Minister. You certainly have a portfolio involving the areas where we can have so much commonality and so many shared experiences. We are very grateful that you took the time to be with us, both last night and today, and to give us your time this morning, and for taking so many questions as well. So thank you very much Minister.

Mr Thomas Byrne TD:

Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

TOURISM – A FORCE FOR GOOD

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Our next speaker is Joanne Stuart, chief executive officer, of the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance. We are delighted that Joanne is with us here this morning to address our Assembly and she will then take questions. Joanne, you are very welcome here this morning.

Ms Joanne Stuart (Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance):

Thank you. Good morning, everybody. I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk to you about the tourism industry in Northern Ireland. Selecting tourism as the theme for the BIPA plenary meeting underlines the importance of tourism to all the regions represented by this Assembly and the crucial role that it has in supporting sustainable regional growth and delivering economic and social impact. The Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance (NITA) was established in 2018 and is the voice for tourism in Northern Ireland, representing the many and varied sectors that make up the tourism economy.

As you know, tourism in Northern Ireland was one of the six areas of cooperation included in the Good Friday Agreement. As a result of the agreement, the business model for overseas tourism was changed, with the cross-border agency Tourism Ireland becoming responsible for promoting Northern Ireland overseas, including in GB, as part of the island-of-Ireland destination. That has been the case for over 20 years, and an estimated €1 billion has been spent on promotional activities. That differs from the other regions of the UK, which are promoted overseas by VisitBritain.

Tourism has been one of the most successful strands of the Good Friday Agreement. In 2019, overseas tourism accounted for around 25% of total tourism spend, around £250 million. That had grown by 50% from 2011 to 2019. This has driven investment by the private sector, with over £600 million being spent in development of hotel capacity alone. It was good to hear from an Taoiseach that there has been a renewed commitment to connectivity, shared promotion and sustainability between the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK Government.

In a world of constant change and shifting priorities, the tourism sector emerges as a dynamic force for good, ready to shape and contribute to the economic mission outlined by the Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, on 15 February. With a focus on good jobs, regional growth, productivity and net zero, the Minister recognises the crucial role of tourism in transforming

the economy.

Tourism possesses the unique power to catalyse economic growth and job creation. NITA's collaboration with Grant Thornton last September produced an impact model that revealed the sector's far-reaching contribution. In 2021 — bear in mind that we were in the pandemic at the time — tourism contributed 5% to the Northern Ireland economy, with an economic impact of £2.3 billion, and supported 7% of total jobs. We must also remember that 70% of our visitor spend is by visitors from outside Northern Ireland, which means that tourism is a significant export sector.

We cannot do this without government investment. Government investment in tourism projects helps to regenerate and rejuvenate our spaces across Northern Ireland, and it is critical that we continue to invest in the development of new experiences and the refreshing of existing assets. We are competing with our nearest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland, for our share of visitors to the island of Ireland, and we need to ensure that we keep pace when it comes to the development of product and support for the industry.

Investments such as Titanic Belfast have transformed the Titanic Quarter and the waterfront in Belfast. That has attracted further private-sector investment, improved transport infrastructure and provided a world-class attraction that is a magnet for tourists. Once here, tourists visit other regions and other experiences. In the first 10 years of operating, Titanic Belfast has generated around an additional £500 million into the broader economy. Just this year, it invested £5 million in a project to reimagine the galleries. That has seen a significant increase in visitor numbers and an increase in repeat visitors of over 30%, and, in March 2024, Titanic Belfast welcomed its eight millionth visitor since it opened in 2012, a real return for everybody on the initial government investment.

The four city and growth deals in Northern Ireland bring a mix of funding from the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and local councils, around £500 million of which is in tourism and regeneration projects across the region. This investment is attracting and leveraging private-sector investment and will enhance the experience for tourists and local communities. This government investment has been supplemented, as we heard from An Taoiseach and Minister Byrne, by €800 million of Shared Island funding from the Irish Government — a true collaboration for mutual benefit. The PEACE PLUS funding from the EU continues to be an important source of funding for cross-border projects, a number of which support the tourism industry.

It should be noted that the majority of tourism businesses are SMEs and microbusinesses, and the programmes run by Tourism Northern Ireland provide critical support to businesses to

invest in their experiences, which create new ways to generate value and provide more reasons for tourists to stay longer and spend more.

One recent programme has supported innovation within tourism businesses. It was great to see the number of businesses that are already innovating and now being recognised through the Innovate NI scheme as gold innovators. However, continuous investment in our product and experiences is necessary. The budgets for Fáilte Ireland are around six times the level of budget allocation compared with Tourism Northern Ireland. In addition, the challenge is having to fund projects within one financial year. I think that a move to multiyear budgets is something that we would all like to see.

When we move into community empowerment and regional growth, tourism brings numerous social benefits, attracts visitors and directly injects spending, jobs and infrastructure investment into communities across Northern Ireland, supporting regional growth. That helps to preserve and celebrate local culture and heritage thereby fostering community pride. Moreover, tourism's role in developing visitor experiences leads to the provision of additional local services, offering opportunities for entrepreneurship and diversification and creating pathways into work for those furthest from the job market.

Tourism's remarkable capacity to bridge cultures fosters mutual understanding and appreciation. By showcasing and preserving cultural treasures, historical landmarks and indigenous traditions, tourism not only attracts visitors but instils a sense of pride in our society. It is 26 years since the Good Friday Agreement, and tourism has provided the space to embrace our identities and differences. The growth of political, cultural and neighbourhood tourism enables us to build on the hard-won peace, and ensure that all parts of society benefit and we see that prosperity.

We then come to inclusiveness. Tourism is an inclusive employer with a track record of providing a diverse range of desirable career paths, from entry level to highly skilled roles, and offers career progression and social mobility. According to a report on the future of tourism in Northern Ireland, published last year by the Department for the Economy, 54% of tourism employees were female, 15% of all 16- to 24-year-olds were employed in the tourism industry, and the Northern Ireland tourism industry has a larger share of disabled employees when compared with other industries collectively.

Tourism truly is a beacon for diversity and social mobility. However, there is room for further progression, and tourism is one of the solutions to deal with the high number of economically inactive we have in Northern Ireland. The latest figures show that 27% of the potential workforce in Northern Ireland is economically inactive – the highest figure among the UK

regions.

We have the urgent call for environmental sustainability, and tourism is stepping up to the challenge. Businesses are showcasing adaptability and innovation in addressing eco-friendly tourism practices, conservation efforts and community engagement initiatives. The tourism industry in Northern Ireland is making significant strides, and the recently launched all-island sustainability mark for tourism – a collaboration between Tourism Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland and Fáilte Ireland – will provide a consistent and measured approach to supporting and promoting the sustainability credentials of tourism across the island.

The multifaceted nature of tourism positions it as a key driver in regional economic growth, championing environmental sustainability and preserving our cultural heritage as well as providing good jobs. However, we are facing challenges, none more so than the introduction of the electronic travel authorisation (ETA), which was raised by Lord Dubs. For Northern Ireland in particular, the consequences of that decision could be disastrous. Any initiative regarding the Irish border must be dealt with with the utmost sensitivity, yet that legislation was put together and passed with little regard to the practical, political and economic impact on the island of Ireland.

Over 70% of Northern Ireland's international visitors arrive via Dublin and travel across the land border into Northern Ireland as part of their trip. In most cases, because we have been promoted as being the island of Ireland for 20 years and have had completely seamless travel, people do not appreciate that they are moving into a different jurisdiction. The introduction of new travel restrictions for those overseas visitors could result in Northern Ireland being struck off the itinerary of many all-island tour operators.

10:30 am

We are also concerned about the legal jeopardy that tourists could unwittingly find themselves in. Since the Good Friday Agreement, as I said, we have been promoted as a part-of-the-island-of-Ireland destination. Therefore, a tourist could inadvertently enter Northern Ireland without being aware of the need to have an ETA. That will put them in legal jeopardy and leave them open to a criminal charge and even deportation, as per the UK's Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the Illegal Immigration Bill and Bill 262. You need to appreciate that that is different from the rest of the UK, where all tourists who arrive at a direct port of entry have their ETA checked prior to travelling by the carrier, which has a legal obligation to do that. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that any tourist will arrive directly into the UK, be it Scotland, Wales,

Manchester or even Belfast International, without an ETA and be open to criminal sanctions. We are calling for an exemption for those tourists crossing the land border into Northern Ireland. That is something that all our Northern Ireland parties support. We want to provide that protection for those tourists who come to the island of Ireland and want to include Northern Ireland in their trip. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Lord Dubs and his colleagues in the House of Lords and the Irish Government for their support in our call for an exemption. We are competing on a global stage and with our closest competitors, because they are only 90 minutes down the road, but we are here. Different policies on air passenger duty, VAT, corporation tax etc make it more challenging to ensure that we are able to offer value for money and encourage tourists to make a trip to Northern Ireland. The introduction of the ETA will, again, introduce a barrier that may make many decide not to come.

Competing for skills and talent — again, this is similar across all our regions — is also a challenge. Employers in the tourism industry are working harder than ever to attract and retain talent through better pay and incentives, flexible working arrangements, career progression and reduced trading hours to allow employees a better work-life balance and by responding to evolving employee expectations. We are seeing positive changes, and we hope to collaborate with Fáilte Ireland to have a consistent approach to employer excellence. However, we are working in a tight and competitive labour market, and the current UK immigration policy is particularly challenging for businesses in Northern Ireland.

On promotion, the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) has recently published research showing that global tourism is soaring past its pre-pandemic levels and is set to break records this year. The question is whether that will be true for us. People do not just come to Northern Ireland. We need to continually inform and engage with potential visitors. We need to address negative perceptions and make Northern Ireland a must-see destination. Tourism Northern Ireland has done well in significantly increasing the number of tourists coming from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland. That was one benefit to us of the pandemic, because people were not able to go overseas. What has been the real positive is that that trend has continued, and the outdated perceptions of Northern Ireland are being changed. However, to ensure that continues, more investment needs to be made in promotional activity.

Again, both an Taoiseach and the Minister touched on access and connectivity. In the last couple of years, we have seen an increase in short-haul routes to our three regional airports from both GB and mainland Europe. However, there is the potential to further develop those routes to provide direct access to Northern Ireland. It is also important to look at long-haul destinations, especially with the restrictions on passenger numbers at Dublin Airport and the

impact of the ETA on those visitors crossing the land border into Northern Ireland. We have an opportunity and a need to explore additional direct access routes from long-haul destinations and other hub airports. We were pleased to see that referred to in the ‘Safeguarding the Union’ paper that was put together by the UK Government to restore the Stormont institutions.

The strategic importance of Belfast, as a principal gateway into Northern Ireland, needs to be recognised with transport infrastructure supporting travel in Belfast and around the different regions. The announcement of the Shared Island and PEACE PLUS funding to enable an hourly service of trains between Dublin city and Belfast city has been welcomed by the tourism industry. We were also pleased to see the all-island strategic rail review, which is ongoing.

With an estimated three million visitors from outside Northern Ireland each year, transport infrastructure, policy and development must be based not just on the needs of our local communities but on those additional tourists. That includes transport and road infrastructure alongside improved water and energy infrastructure. Another example is that we are seeing an increase in tourists using electric vehicles and wanting to go on routes where they are able to charge as they go. We therefore need to see investment in electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

In conclusion, the restoration of the Stormont institutions has been well received globally and has injected a sense of optimism and stability that is much needed by business in Northern Ireland. The return of the Open next year, the successful One Young World event in Belfast last year and a growing number of business events, alongside our breathtaking landscapes, heritage and diverse culture, provide authentic and quality experiences for our visitors to enjoy. By harnessing the power of tourism, Northern Ireland has the potential to pave the way for a thriving, sustainable and culturally enriched future. It is crucial to recognise and embrace the immense potential of tourism as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joanne, for your exceptionally detailed outline of the progress that has been made over the past 20-plus years, the great opportunities that have been grasped by the industry in Northern Ireland and the challenges that are there as well. We have a number of questions, if that is OK.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Joanne, it is really good to hear from you. It will come as no surprise to you that I will home in on two things: air passenger duty (APD) and differential VAT. Have the Northern Ireland

Tourism Alliance or the business community analysed what the net multiplier would be if we went to the point of abolishing APD for domestic flights in and out of Northern Ireland — we have already done that with international flights — and if we went for a lower VAT rate, as our friends here in the Irish Republic have done? What would the net effect be? What can we do to encourage the Northern Ireland Executive and, in particular, the Finance Minister and the Economy Minister to realise that reducing those duties would be of net economic benefit to Northern Ireland and, indeed, these islands?

Ms Joanne Stuart:

One of the first reports that the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance did after it was established looked at APD and VAT. We have used that information to make the case to abolish APD. We have had a 50% reduction, but we want to see it completely gone. One of the main things to recognise — this will be the same for some of the other regions represented here today — is that, when we are talking about short-haul flights, Northern Ireland does not have a choice. We are an island off an island, so we have to fly to GB, and people from GB have to fly here. The ferries are great if people are spending a bit more time. It is a competitive disadvantage that we have no way of addressing in a different way. That is why we are calling for the reduction in APD. I do not have all the figures to hand, Steve, but I can send you that report.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Yes, please.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

The VAT issue is interesting. The UK Government were very good during the pandemic and reduced VAT to 5%. The challenge for us is that that was at the height of the pandemic, when we were just not seeing the business. Businesses were in dire straits and were probably using more of that discount to help sustain their business and keep the doors open rather than necessarily passing it on to passengers. VAT was then increased to 12%, and it is back up now. That has been used against the industry, in that the Government did not really see us passing the reduction on to the consumer. In Ireland, VAT has gone from 9% to 13·5%, but when you compare 13·5% with 20%, that is challenging for businesses. That is a UK decision, and we are part of the UK Tourism Industry Council, so we are supporting UK Hospitality and the Tourism Alliance in England and Scotland, which want to see a reduction in VAT. It is good to have the Executive because we can have a ministerial voice at the UK Government's table: that

is really important.

Business can do so much, and we can provide evidence of that. However, we need that strength of political voice. We have met Conor Murphy, and a tourism strategy is coming out. We need our Ministers to step up on those things and make the case at UK government level.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joanne.

The Lord Faulkner:

Congratulations on the excellent talk, if I may say so. You draw attention to the fact that a lot of travellers are unaware of the rules. Yes, I am here.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

I am sorry. I got a bit confused.

The Lord Faulkner:

I would like to ask you about one particular aspect of that, which is families from the mainland travelling to Northern Ireland with a family pet, usually a dog. They are able to do that if they take the ferry from Larne or Liverpool. They are able to bring the pet into Northern Ireland without any difficulty, exactly as if they were travelling to Scotland or Wales. However, if they wanted to drive south into the Republic, they would be committing an offence. Is that not the case and, if so, what can be done about it?

Ms Joanne Stuart:

It is an offence. It was brought up as part of the Brexit negotiations. It is something that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is looking at. Again, this is where it is so great to have our politicians back and our Ministers in place. It is those conversations that need to be had. We also have an issue with mobile homes, for example. If you rent a mobile home that originates in Northern Ireland or in GB, you need a special certificate to go down South and drive across the island of Ireland. Having these different policies is really difficult when we are really promoting us as one island. People do not expect that they need those things. I put that back to you that those are the things that our politicians, MPs and Ministers need to take to the UK Government.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joanne and Lord Faulkner.

The Lord Murphy:

That was an excellent overview, if I might say so. However, I want to come back to the point that both you and Lord Dubs made earlier about this crazy, ludicrous ETA restriction. It would never have happened, in my view, had the institutions been up and running. However, now that they are, you and others will have an opportunity to put your point of view, which is extremely sensible. I would like your views on how you would do that, first of all to the North/South Ministerial Council, then, as you have just mentioned, to the Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive and, thirdly, to the new bodies that are going to be set up by the Government, in ‘Strengthening the Union’ as it is called — the east-west trade bodies. I hope that there will be input from you on that as well, to try to ensure that this policy is scuppered.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

Absolutely. Thank you very much for your comments. We met Conor Murphy, the Minister for the Economy, specifically on ETA, and he is definitely very supportive. We came up with a compromise of a five to seven days exemption. Ideally, we would like to see a full exemption for tourists. He will be taking that forward with the Executive to the Home Office.

The North/South Ministerial Council was mentioned, but there is probably more that we can do to engage, now that that is up and running. ‘Strengthening the Union’ is not something that I am aware of but I will look out for it. We were disappointed that ETA was not in the Command Paper. I saw that Belfast International Airport and overseas flights were mentioned, but there was no mention of ETA.

It is one of those things where there is a simple solution. The UK approach to security on the land border has always been different. We are not creating any problem as such, and tourists are not the people whom they want to stop coming into the country. That is why an exemption could be a very straightforward way of resolving it.

10.45 am

The Co-Chair (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Joanne.

Ms Sarah Jones MP:

I echo the thanks to you for your speech. I was with a delegation of MPs from Parliament in Northern Ireland a couple of weeks ago, and we went to Belfast. We were encouraged by the optimism at the potential growth of the tourism economy and the wider economy. One of our Committees is looking at the issue of rural housing and some of the challenges caused by tourism and Airbnb, how expensive housing can become and how difficult it is for our young people to have homes in the areas that they grew up in. Is that part of your thinking? Have you thought about how tourism can sit alongside a population that also needs a home?

Ms Joanne Stuart:

Yes, absolutely. We have particular areas where that might be more of an issue, for example, on the north coast. A couple of things are happening, and there has certainly been a push to develop other forms of accommodation, such as hotel accommodation. We are seeing more of that, and self-catering accommodation as well. We need government to focus on the fact that housing and social housing are in crisis, and that impacts Belfast, where hotels are being used for housing accommodation rather than tourist accommodation. It is about understanding that we need a mix of accommodation.

Currently, the legislation for Airbnb is different from that for bed and breakfasts and self-catering. Tourism NI and the Department are undertaking a review of how properties are certified. We need to ensure that we are not only creating a level playing field but working with communities. Tourism has done a lot of work with communities to ensure that they see the benefits of welcoming tourists and the benefits of the spend that tourists make when they are there. We are talking about that issue, but it is part of a much wider housing crisis that we have in Northern Ireland. Again, that is another positive reason to have the Executive back up and running, because they can start to make decisions and get progress on building more houses, which we need as well.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joanne.

Rt Hon The Lord Bruce:

We all agree that these are beautiful islands, and we all represent beautiful parts of them, but we are identifying all the frictions that come in the way of treating them as a single destination. Some of the frictions have been mentioned, but one that has not is the fact that the hospitality

sector is struggling, frankly, right across the islands. There have been a huge number of closures and failures, a debt hangover from COVID and so forth, and the minimum wage in the UK has just been increased. I did a quick calculation — correct me if I am wrong — and the minimum wage in the Republic is €10.16, which translates currently to about £8.90, whereas it is £11.44 in the UK. When you add the VAT differential, Northern Ireland has a pretty challenging problem to compete.

When you add in the friction of whether or not you can travel North to South, we have a problem in making it a single entity. I wonder whether we need to have a summit, because there are a whole lot of problems that affect the sector. For example, we have an issue in Scotland, where business rates have not been reduced, compared with England, so there is a complaint there. Would there be some merit in trying to get all the relevant Administrations together and have a summit to say, “Let us look at all those frictions in the hospitality sector and see whether we can find common ground”? Picking up on Steve Aiken’s point, there might be some accommodation on VAT. I am not suggesting that we all change our rules.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

No, absolutely.

Rt Hon The Lord Bruce:

I wonder whether you think there may be some merit in raising things to Government level in order to address it. It is a very significant part of the economy everywhere, especially away from the big cities. If we do not address it —.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

I completely agree. As I said, I am part of the UK Tourism Industry Council, which includes Scotland and Wales, and which is chaired by Julia Lopez, the Minister of State for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries in the UK Government. Those are things that come up all the time. We should definitely have a summit. The problem for tourism is that we have a tourism Minister, but tourism is impacted by so much more. Again, as Minister Byrne said, there are things that he could not comment on because they are outside of his control. I will look out for it. We were disappointed that ETA was not in the Command Paper. I saw that Belfast International Airport and overseas flights were mentioned, but there was no mention of ETA. It is one of those things where there is a simple solution. The UK approach to security on the land border has always been different. We are not creating any problem as such, and tourists

are not the people whom they want to stop coming into the country. That is why an exemption could be a very straightforward way of resolving it. Therefore, a summit with all the relevant Ministers would be very relevant, because these are major issues.

The national living wage and national minimum wage saw a significant increase in April. For some companies that I talked to, it is not just about that increase. It means that you are increasing wages all the way up. It can increase costs by anything from 16% to 20%. In some ways, those are sunk costs into the business. That is why we want to look at it. Businesses are saying, "We do not want to not pay people the proper wages, so do not tax us as much." We have to look at other ways of supporting that, but taxes are too high. There is talk about city charges and levies. Manchester has introduced one, and Edinburgh and Cambridge are looking at doing so. We need to be conscious of other things that are coming down the track and to understand the full impact.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joanne.

Senator Emer Currie:

It is lovely to meet you again, Joanne. As you are aware, one of the Committees of this Assembly did a report on the common travel area. One of our biggest priorities was looking at the impact of the ETA. We met Minister Tom Pursglove in the Home Office in February to convey our concerns and yours, which were part of our recommendations. The response was that the ETA is part of the UK's immigration framework and could be communicated effectively through targeted messaging across a variety of channels.

I worked in advertising and marketing for 15 years. Fáilte Ireland was my biggest client during that time, so I know a thing or two about tourism messaging and communications. I am looking at Lord Reg Empey, who was involved in setting up Tourism Ireland. If you are marketing Ireland and Northern Ireland as one island but also have a massive set of term and conditions that is longer than that of mortgages and tries to explain that you need an ETA and why, it completely undermines that proposition. I do not see how it would work. There is also a commitment to work with stakeholders to find a solution. What kind of interaction have you had with the Home Office about the ETA, and do you concur with my view that communication simply cannot fix that challenge?

Ms Joanne Stuart:

There are two strands to our engagement. We continue to engage on an exemption, although that has been at a political level rather than with Home Office officials. We engaged with Tourism Northern Ireland, Tourism Ireland, Minister Byrne's Department and the Department for the Economy about communication in order to mitigate the impact. Again, the challenge is that we are two jurisdictions. The Home Office has no ability to enforce the message being communicated. It wants to encourage all transport providers and tourism business operators to inform people of the need to have an ETA if they are going to Northern Ireland. The first question is: are people going to do that? Secondly, are they going to do it in a way that will encourage people to go to Northern Ireland rather than staying in the Republic of Ireland? That is very difficult. Expecting people to do the Home Office's communication for it is very challenging.

From an Irish Government perspective, the Northern Ireland Executive have very much been about an all-island approach, and ETA is contrary to that policy. We are engaging. I do not believe that a solution has been found. There is another meeting in May, I think, to see how it will be rolled out. I am making sure that tourism businesses in Northern Ireland are aware of it. People who arrive direct into Belfast City Airport, Belfast International Airport or City of Derry Airport will be required to have an ETA, but, as I said, they will know about all that before they travel, so it is a completely different situation. We are making sure that people know what the ETA is and how it works. In the Republic of Ireland, it is different. It is still a challenge, and we still have not found a solution.

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

Thank you very much for coming here today. As I keep mentioning, I come from a border county. There have been a lot of huge challenges on the island of Ireland over the past number of years with Brexit and the pandemic, and, as I said, a lot of people work from the North and the South. You mentioned the border exemption and other supports. It is great to see Fáilte Ireland and Tourism NI working very closely together. When Brexit first came in, people in the South were panicking, especially about working in the North and whether car tax and insurance would be covered. Now, all of a sudden, as a border TD, I am asked about the ETA. There is a lot of confusion about the difference between an ETA and a visa. When overseas visitors come into Ireland, they automatically think that they have free access to the whole of Ireland, which really, they should have. Is there a simple way to explain that to people coming in, especially to Ireland, who want to travel up north to see the Titanic or whatever? Is there a simple way to explain the difference between applying for a visa and applying for an ETA?

Ms Joanne Stuart:

An ETA is a permission to travel. A visa is a permission to stay. That is the difference, although, again, for a lot of people, it is not easy. The confusion comes in with deemed leave, which is part of the common travel area. Deemed leave allows you to stay for up to six months. However, the ETA is needed to allow you to travel into the other part of the island from the South to the North. That is the difference. It is a permission to travel. It is coming in for the rest of the world except Europe, towards the end of autumn, and then, for the rest of Europe, in early 2025. To be fair to the Home Office, there is a lot of information available. There is specific information about how it will work on the island of Ireland. Going back to Emer's question about communication, how do you make sure that you communicate in a way that is straightforward and will not create a barrier for people who will say, "Oh, I cannot be bothered with that", especially those who come for a day trip? An ETA is permission to travel and a visa is permission to stay.

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

As an example, a lot of Americans come to the Republic of Ireland and they automatically want to go up and see their ancestors in the North. When the ETA comes in, what will happen to those people? Will they be fined?

Ms Joanne Stuart:

There are no border checks, but there are many reasons why people could be stopped. There are intelligence-led checks as there will be in the Republic. People could have an accident, for example, or, for a number of other reasons, be stopped and have their ETA status checked. With the way that the legislation is written in the UK, they are open then to criminal sanctions. Yes, that could be a fine. They could be detained or deported, so there is a whole raft of issues. The other problem is that the legislation refers to people "knowingly" being in the UK without an ETA. We do not know what the threshold is for that. Are we going to say that anybody who comes across the land border will be classed as not knowing that they need an ETA? That is where I think that there is unfairness and inequality in the legislation, because those who arrive into other parts of the UK at a direct port of entry will have been told about it. They will not have been able to book their travel without knowing about an ETA. A small number of tourists, just under 2% of the total visitors to the UK, come in via Dublin and go up to Northern Ireland. That is why we think that, to remove this confusion, an exemption is the easiest way. The

people whom we want to stop may not have applied for an ETA, but it is not the tourists who cause the security issues.

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

To simplify it, is it right to say that British citizens and Irish citizens are the only ones at the moment who need an ETA?

Ms Joanne Stuart:

That is right. Well, for British and Irish citizens, there is an exemption for non-visa nationals who are legally residing in Ireland. If you are an American but are legally residing in the Republic of Ireland, you are also exempted but only if you travel within the common travel area. For example — did you say that you are from the north west?

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

No. Louth.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

OK. Take as an example City of Derry airport, where there is a real collaboration around the north west and Donegal. A lot of people from the South will use City of Derry Airport to travel to holiday destinations. If you happen to be an American citizen living in Ireland and you are going off to Spain for a couple of weeks, you are OK travelling out, but you will need an ETA coming back because you have left the common travel area.

11.00 am

Again, there is a bit of confusion for everybody, and that is why communication is so critical. In a way, though, that is simple so that people do not see pages of stuff that they will not be bothered going through.

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

So, basically, you can fly out through Derry and come back through Dublin or somewhere else in the South, and you will not need an ETA.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

Yes.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much. We are running to a schedule, so I will take grouped questions. We have a number of Members wishing to speak. I call Deputy Brendan Howlin, to be followed by Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you very much, Joanne. It is most interesting. I will ask about staffing, because you made some interesting points about the variety of people, including those with disabilities, who are employed in the tourism sector in Northern Ireland. Is there a particular difficulty, as there is in my home area of Wexford, in recruiting staff, particularly trained staff such as chefs, for example? How is that being addressed? Is the issue of migration to recruit foreign workers into the tourism sector a significant factor in providing trained staff in Northern Ireland? Is there a domestic training agency, and is there commonality of training to ensure a commonality of standards across the island?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Brendan, and — Joanne, just one second — I call Éamon Ó Cuív. We will take the questions together.

Mr Éamon Ó Cuív TD:

I welcome the fact that all parties agree that something needs to happen on the ETA. If it is there, it is a problem, because people who come into the South tend to do the whole island in seven days, and that normally includes Titanic Belfast or the Giant's Causeway. In particular, people who hire cars will take a chance to go North. That is fine unless they have an accident. First, it is a criminal matter, and the second problem is whether the insurance will cover them. The exemption is the only route as long as people stay on the island of Ireland during their visit.

We have talked a lot about infrastructure. The Ulster Canal has the potential to connect Coleraine to the Shannon and, via the Grand canal or Royal canal, to Dublin. How important is that to the tourist package for the region from the Erne into Lough Neagh and Coleraine?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Éamon.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

The issue of skills is a challenge for everybody. Immigration and immigration rules are really difficult for Northern Ireland. Before Brexit, we certainly had a higher number of people, particularly from the EU. Recent changes, such as the increase in salary thresholds etc, have been very challenging. I am part of an advisory group that is looking at solutions to that.

On the all-island issue, as I said, Tourism NI is working with Fáilte Ireland on employer excellence. That includes training, so, again, we hope to see consistency of approach.

On the Ulster canal, water is a really important part of what tourists want to do. We are developing our maritime offer in Derry and in Belfast. Lough Erne has been really popular, with people taking out boats etc. Anything that connects us in that way is important. That is why we were delighted to see the potential linking of the Wild Atlantic Way to the Causeway coastal route. We have been calling for that since the Wild Atlantic Way was set up, so great to see. The more of that that we can get will benefit everybody.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joanne. Our final contributors are Lord Empey and Deputy Séan Crowe.

The Lord Empey:

It is good to see you again, Joanne. You mentioned multi-year budgets. You will be aware that we have been trying for a long time to get a multi-year budget for health; in fact, we are struggling to get even an annual budget, never mind a multi-year budget. What do you think are your chances? [*Laughter.*]

Ms Joanne Stuart:

I think that that is something —

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Sorry, we will take Seán Crowe and Cathal Boylan first. Sorry, Joanne.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

OK. Sorry.

Mr Seán Crowe TD:

In your contribution, you touched on the pressure on beds, particularly in relation to the housing situation. We have a similar situation in the South, where there is the International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS), people from Ukraine, homelessness and so on. There is a shortage of beds in the system. On the new beds that you clearly need if the industry is to expand, can you give us a sense of at what level that is happening at the moment? Are there new hotels and new rooms coming on to meet that?

The other factor is that there is practically 100% reliance on the private sector and private investment for those hotels. If that is not happening in the system, the system will collapse. I think that that is what we are seeing, particularly in the South of Ireland, with the huge demand, the impact that it has on the local economy and so on. Can you give us a sense of how many new beds you need to see coming on stream every year if you are to expand your industry, particularly in the North?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Seán. We will take a quick comment from Cathal Boylan MLA.

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA:

Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Joanne, for your presentation. Every time we talk about tourism in the North, it is about the Titanic Quarter or the north coast. Armagh has a beautiful tourism product. My question is this: how do we encourage visitors to other parts that also have good tourism products?

Ms Joanne Stuart:

I will start off on that point, because we actually had a board meeting in Armagh last week, which was lovely. You need to have the big attractors — the magnets. What we are doing in Northern Ireland, with Titanic Belfast, for example, is encouraging people by making information available about where else they might want to go. It is about promoting that. Everybody in Northern Ireland does not represent just their business; they represent Northern Ireland. That is something that people who work in tourism are passionate about, so we ensure that we do that.

Lord Empey, it is lovely to see you again. I think that a multi-year budget is something that every jurisdiction wants to see. We want to try to have certainty over a three-year period, especially where capital projects are involved. Again, I do not know whether that is something

that we can all work on together. I was chair of the Institute of Directors (IoD) from 2008 to 2011, and I was calling for that then. We keep going.

On the beds question, about 10% to 15% of our hotel capacity is taken up with Government contracts, so it is not as high as it is in the South. We have about £100 million of private-sector investment lined up over the next couple of years to increase the amount of hotel accommodation. Things that we need to look at include the planning system and the infrastructure for water and waste water. We need to look at those things to enable us to develop quicker.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joanne.

I remember Senator Emer Currie mentioned the ETA to me previously. Given that we have listened to people with vast experience such as Reg Empey, Lord Murphy and Lord Dubs mention that it is a hindrance to the promotion of tourism on an all-Ireland basis, maybe we, as an Assembly, could write to the relevant authorities, expressing the views that have been expressed here and those of the industry. That may be of some help. With the agreement of the Assembly, Karen and I will write a letter. Is that agreed?

Question put and agreed to.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Joanne, your contribution has been excellent, from your introductory remarks to taking questions. You mentioned the Northern Ireland tourism industry and its competitor in the South. I sincerely hope that we get to the day when we see each other not as competitors but as complementary allies. Others mentioned local areas. I was glad that my colleague Éamon Ó Cuív mentioned the Ulster canal, which is in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. That is being funded entirely by the Irish Government at the moment. Fortunately, our Government is in a position to fund projects on a cross-border basis that benefit all of the island. Take the Lakelands UNESCO global geopark, which is also in my area. We are putting massive further investment into that. You know how important that is for Fermanagh and Cavan. From our perspective in the Government, successive Governments here have continued to promote the idea of cross-border, all-Ireland projects, and we have picked up the tab for that big time. We see that it is beneficial to work together. We should be complementing, not competing with,

one another.

Ms Joanne Stuart:

Absolutely. What is interesting is that, with the Executive now in place, there is more discussion about harmonisation, and that is important. There are competitive differences with regard to cost and policies, and the more that we can discuss that harmonisation, the better. We are co-competitors in some ways. There is collaboration there but, at the same time, we do want people to spend a bit more time in Northern Ireland as well.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I suppose that our industries North and South can benefit —

Ms Joanne Stuart:

Absolutely.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

— from having to be sharper because our neighbour would take the industry or whatever. Joanne, sincere thanks for your contribution. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP):

Before we go to the break, I want to say thank you so much, Joanne. That was a fascinating and interesting contribution, which will help the debate that we are going to have later. Unfortunately, some of us now have to leave and will not be part of that debate. Juan, I am handing over to you directly as the new Co-Chair. Thank you, Brendan, for hosting us. I am so sorry that I cannot stay for the whole event, but I know that it is going to be absolutely fantastic. Thank you, everybody. We will see you soon.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Yes, thank you, Karen. *[Applause.]* We resume at 11.30 am sharp, colleagues, please.

The sitting was suspended at 11.11 am.

The sitting was resumed at 11.41 a.m.

PROMOTING BRITISH-IRISH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Colleagues, I am pleased to invite His Excellency Ambassador Martin Fraser and His Excellency Ambassador Paul Johnston to join us at plenary here today. I know we are all looking forward to hearing them share their views on UK-Ireland relations. We will hear from Ambassador Fraser first, followed by Ambassador Johnston, and then we will take questions jointly for both of our ambassadors. Ambassador Fraser, you are very welcome.

Ambassador Martin Fraser:

Could we switch that around? Could Ambassador Johnston go first, by any chance?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Yes, it is okay. Sure.

Ambassador Martin Fraser:

He is better than me. [*Laughter.*]

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Ambassador, you can speak from the podium if you wish.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

I will do that. Okay, thank you.

Thank you very much, Brendan. It is great to be here in the great county of Wicklow, and fantastic to be back at BIPA. When Thomas Byrne mentioned this morning the BIPA that we held in Westminster back in what must have been the spring of 2022, I was reflecting that the relationship has, as I think the Taoiseach was saying this morning, come a long way in a very positive sense over the last couple of years. When we met in 2022 there was still a great deal of uncertainty, certainly in the minds of the British Government, about the Northern Ireland protocol, the Assembly and the Executive were not functioning, and generally there were quite a few difficult currents running through the British-Irish relationship. We now have the Windsor framework in place, starting to be implemented. We have the Executive, as has been remarked, up and running again, which is very positive. There are still—as there always will be, I suspect, in a relationship as complex and longstanding and multilayered as the British-

Irish one—issues of complexity in the relationship, but there is also a great deal that brings us together, which I think is one of the themes of the event here.

So, a big ‘thank you’ to BIPA for bringing everyone together. I am sure Martin feels the same, that the relationship between parliamentarians across these islands is an important part of the underpinning of the relationship. I am always struck by the phrase the British Council uses in its series of volumes about the British-Irish relationship, ‘lives intertwined’. I think it is the human dimension—whether it is in politics or in business or in government, or tourism or in whatever facet of our lives, it is the human dimension and the very close relationships across the islands that mean so much to the context for the work that we do in Government to try to take forward the relationship.

11.45 am

It is fantastic that the Taoiseach gave us so much of his time both last night and today. It was excellent, and it was a sign of the importance my Government attaches to the relationship with Ireland that the Prime Minister wanted to be one of the very first—I think he probably was the first—counterpart that the Taoiseach spoke to on Wednesday afternoon, his first full day in the job. And it was indeed a very positive and a substantial call, in which they discussed the challenge of being heads of Government with very young families, but also discussed both the challenges and the opportunities that the two countries are looking at together. On the positive side, there is the fact that we have the Good Friday Agreement and all three strands up and running again, with the Assembly up and running and the Executive, the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference will be meeting—i.e. the two Governments—on 29 April. The Tánaiste is meeting the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland later this week. The Foreign Secretary and the Tánaiste had a very good discussion before Christmas, and we have contacts going on the whole time between Ministers and officials. The Taoiseach referred this morning to the work that he and his department, in his previous guise as Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, helped lead to create these new co-centres on research and development, embracing Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and I think, just before our last BIPA at the K Club, we had signed two memorandums of understanding on energy co-operation.

So, there is a great tapestry of work going on between the two Governments, and the Prime Minister, in his call with the Taoiseach on Wednesday, looked forward to welcoming the Taoiseach to Blenheim Palace, the historic home of the Marlborough family, including of

Winston Churchill, for the summit that we are hosting of the European Political Community, which will be the fourth meeting of the community, which was an initiative launched by President Macron originally to bring Britain and other non-EU countries into this wider community of European nations, looking at some big security challenges that we are facing together. I think it has met so far in Prague, in Moldova, in Madrid, and now the UK is delighted to be hosting the fourth iteration, and we want to put the focus in that discussion in July on two areas where I think there is a very particular and important British-Irish relationship as well. One is the massive European security challenge that we see in relation to Ukraine, the need to support Ukraine in its efforts to withhold and resist and ultimately prevail over Russian aggression for the sake of all of Europe's security, and transatlantic security as well, but also the challenge facing Governments across Europe in terms of working together to combat illegal immigration, both at source, in terms of the upstream development and wider challenges, but also trying to improve the co-operation between us on illegal immigration. I know our Ministers, including the Home Secretary and the justice Minister, who are keen to meet as well, want to pursue the very particular dimensions that we have to that in terms of the common travel area.

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach also touched on the situation in the middle east, which has obviously become even more difficult and dangerous over the last couple of days with the outrageous Iranian attack on Israel, which the Prime Minister, as part of the G7 leaders, condemned yesterday. It has been condemned, obviously, by the Taoiseach as well in his message yesterday morning, and by the EU as a whole. So, the premium now and the focus must be on de-escalation, urging restraint, and, as the Irish Government has consistently said, the British Government has focused as well—with slight nuances of language, but I think with essentially exactly the same prescription—that we need to get to a sustainable ceasefire, and we need to get to resurrecting the prospective for a two state solution in relation to the middle east. So, the international situation, if you look at the British-Irish relationship, you can argue, I think, very convincingly that it is in a better position than it was a couple of years ago, and the Taoiseach said this morning that the relationship had improved over the last 12 months. Correspondingly, the world situation is in a bleaker place than it was two-and-a-bit years ago, given what has happened in Ukraine, given what has happened in the middle east, and I think the two Governments will be looking to intensify our co-operation on all those issues.

Underpinning that, we also have, obviously, the very strong business relationship. The Taoiseach mentioned today this extraordinary growth in the British-Irish trading relationship despite all the various external headwinds and challenges and developments of recent years. That is a fantastically important part of the relationship. He cited figures, I think, of over €120 billion of trade in 2022. The figures I have suggest a 10 per cent increase in the trading relationship between 2022 and 2023; both countries making big investments in the other countries as well. If you look at some of the challenges and opportunities of the future, renewable energy being one, sustainable agriculture being another, and the huge opportunities of artificial intelligence, where the Prime Minister hosted a summit that Minister Dara Calleary attended in London last autumn, there is a massive amount we can do together.

We in the British Embassy are extending our presence in the sense of appointing a new Honorary Counsel for the south-west of Ireland to strengthen the trade and investment relationship between the south-west of Ireland and the whole of the UK, and also we are continuing with our so-called ‘Joining the Dots’ programme, which is about finding opportunities for Britain and Ireland outside the capital regions, if you like—London and the south-east and the Dublin area—to strengthen that wider relationship.

Your focus in this meeting is on tourism, I know. It is a hugely important area for Britain and Ireland, as we have heard throughout this morning. I know there are concerns about the electronic travel authorisations. They have been raised before in this forum; they have been discussed by our Ministers collectively. We are in the position whereby anyone who has resident status in Ireland is able to go into Northern Ireland without an ETA. We considered carefully the argument for extending that to tourists as well. The view that we came to was that, in a sense, if we said that anyone who came into Ireland as a tourist was able to go into Northern Ireland without requiring specific authorisation to enter the UK, in a sense, we would be outsourcing the control of our borders to anyone who had the right to come into a separate country, which, given that we have left the EU, is no longer a tenable proposition. However, we want to make the ETAs as easy as possible to access. They are relatively cheap, they are straightforward to acquire in IT terms, and there will be no question of having any sort of border controls. It will be an intelligence-led operation in Northern Ireland, but there will be no controls at the Irish-Northern Irish border. So, we recognise, from a political point of view, and the tourism industry point of view, that this is not a development that people welcome, but it is where we are—or where we will be when they are introduced. However, we want to make the exercise as straightforward as possible.

I want to end in talking about the positive opportunities, not least—Thomas Byrne referred to it this morning—the fact that we will have the joint hosting of the European men’s soccer championships in 2028: a huge occasion, a fantastic opportunity to show the whole of these islands to Europe and beyond. We are very keen to work together on all of that. Sport is one of those things that enflames passions in a very positive way, and I think that the fact of working together on that will be tremendous. As a Scot, I would like to say that I hope Scotland will be successfully defending in 2028 the championship that we win in Germany this summer. That may be hope triumphing over expectation, but, as a diplomat, you are required to be, I think, not least in these very difficult times, a congenial optimist. So, I will leave it on that optimistic note, and hand over to my friend and colleague Martin Fraser. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

Ambassador Martin Fraser:

Thank you, Paul, and Co-Chairs. I apologise for changing the order; I knew he would make a much better speech, and then I could say that I agree with everything he said, and, of course, I do agree with everything he said. I also have the great fortune to follow the Taoiseach, which means that I have to agree with everything he said too, and I do. So, rather than repeat everything that both of them have said, I might just try and give some further thoughts, but I genuinely do think that Ambassador Johnston has summed up the situation very, very well, and it is a positive situation we find ourselves in, as we speak.

As many of you know, I have worked on British-Irish relations for probably 20 years, without interruption, in various capacities, including as ambassador since 2022. It has been an amazing period of history; I was talking to some of the Members earlier on about it. An awful lot has changed, but the first thought that came to mind when I heard the Taoiseach, our newly elected Taoiseach, this morning is that that speech could have been delivered, in its essentials, in its political essentials, by any Taoiseach since 1998, or even since the 1980s, probably. The history would have changed—the context is different, but the principles are the same. The principles of the Irish Government have always been the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, which means, above all else, a peaceful approach to politics in Ireland and everything else that the agreement provides for, and latterly—and the Taoiseach reflected on it—maybe a more proactive engagement on the shared island, with significant investment and also a significant attempt to engage people, without prejudice to their views on the constitution question or anything else, to try and bring people together on the island and on the islands. However, really and truly, for the last 20 years, those essentials have not

changed, and I do not think they will change, and that is what I heard from the Taoiseach this morning.

I sometimes hear commentary in Britain that says, 'This Taoiseach did this' or 'This Taoiseach did this' or 'This Government was harder, or softer', but, actually, I have worked with all the Taoisigh since 1999, really, and the essentials have not changed. It has always been about the Good Friday Agreement and everything that that means for everybody here on these islands. So, I am really, really glad, therefore, that, as we stand now, we have all the institutions back. The North/South Ministerial Council has met, the Executive and the Assembly are fully active. I was talking to a member of the Policing Board, which has never stopped, of course, and we will have, as I think the Taoiseach said earlier on, the First and deputy First Minister back at the British-Irish Council, on the Isle of Man, in the summer. These things are so, so important, and I am glad we have them.

I will just reflect on some of the things that are on my mind. As I say, Paul has captured the essence of where we are, so I am not going to repeat those things. The situation, when viewed by me from London, is similar but different. I used to describe Ireland as being a set of concentric circles: you had the state, you had the island and the islands, and those relationships defined by the Good Friday Agreement, you had the European Union, you had relationships outside the European Union, principally with America and some other countries as well, and then you had a country that was hugely influenced by global forces, hugely committed to the global rule of law, free trade, that really had to act, effectively, on a global stage, and relied a lot on global stability. And, obviously, these are things that are being challenged now.

Viewed from London, the world looks a little bit different, if I am honest. The first thing I should say is that those concentric circles have changed. Ireland and Britain are still bound together by the Good Friday Agreement and all those institutions, including the one we are at here today. Britain is in NATO, but Ireland is not, and that the lends, I think, a certain focus to things in London that are not here. Ireland is in the EU and Britain is not, and so there is that lack of shared engagement. Britain no longer being in the EU is a big problem for us, and, I think, probably a bigger challenge for Britain than is realised, because you do not understand what you do not know. Now, some of our principal fora for international engagement are different between the two countries, and I think that would not matter if the challenges were

the same, but the challenges are changing as well. So, that is something I think we have to think about.

I do, however, come back to the importance of the institutions, the Good Friday Agreement, east-west institutions, institutions like this, because we have to make ever more effort to work together. As a civil servant of many years' standing, the absence of civil service contacts in the EU context is a very big miss. We do our best to address that, as do Members here, but it is something that will, over time, I think, cause relationships not to fray, but to be somewhat diluted, if we are not careful. Ironically, if we had a good run of the institutions in the North operating, we could find ourselves in a situation where the relationships on the island were strengthening, because there would be ongoing sectorals and plenaries and east-west engagement, but the relationship in Europe will, as I say, just get diluted. It cannot but get diluted when we are not in the same forums.

The other thing you notice in London—again, it is not as obvious in Dublin—is the world is a very big place, and the global south is a much more prominent feature of the debate in London. A lot of the people I run into in my line of work are not interested in Europe, never mind Ireland; they are much more interested in the world and how the world operates and has a very different view of the issues that we talk about, like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, like the situation in Israel and Gaza. These things are viewed very differently by very, very significant countries all around the world, and you hear that more and more when you are in London. There are colleagues here in Parliament who I know will be well aware of that. But the world looks different from London, and you hear different things. Actually, some of them, frankly, are much more positive about Ireland's foreign policy than Britain's foreign policy, but I am not trying to point-score there; I am just saying that you can see the world and how it is changing more clearly from London, and you can see the challenges.

12.00 pm

The absence of Britain is a huge factor here as well. Western Europe is not as strong and the guiding instincts of the European Union are different because of the absence of Britain and this switch to the east. So, the world is changing, and you can see it is manifested here, I think, in some of the debate about foreign policy and security policy, which is bubbling up. It is quite an active issue in London, and how that impacts on the British-Irish relationship is something that we are going to see in the future, without a shadow of a doubt. Whatever the constitutional future holds, this sense of threat against western Europe—a smaller place

called western Europe—this threat against democracies, and this changing geography of the world is something that this country is going to have to grapple with.

I will come back to that at the end, but I will just make an observation again, if I may, about the Taoiseach. The Taoiseach is the youngest Taoiseach we have ever had, ergo the youngest Taoiseach I have ever had the honour to work for. I have worked for Taoisigh of various ages. I do not want to do an age thing, but with the last few Taoisigh, there was a 10-year gap between them, and I am in the middle. So, Leo is 10 years younger than me. The difference in perspective between people who are, dare I say it, 74, 64, 54, 44—and 37, as you heard this morning—is very, very significant on our issues, because people remember things. Some people remember things, some people do not; some people are afraid of things, some people are not. Younger generations, I think, are less worried about some of the topics that cause huge anxiety in older generations, because we remember the Troubles and we remember when things can go wrong.

I think, also, arguably, the reaction globally to Israel and Gaza represents a generational shift from people who maybe do not remember the Holocaust or the politics of the post-war years and so on and so forth. I have observed that people are different. Therefore, when elections come and there are people stepping down—there will be elections in America, in Britain, in Ireland and in Europe—it is ever more incumbent on those of us who are still around to make sure that we bring that experience, but also that we listen to the new voices. Sometimes, that can be challenging. Sometime, we hear new voices say things that may cause offence or may look stupid or may sound stupid to our ears, but maybe we should try and explore a bit more what those people are saying, because I think we have to accept that the world is moving on and the world is changing very rapidly in Ireland and in Britain.

On Britain itself, I cannot claim to be a great expert, but it is a rapidly changing society, there is no doubt about that. One of the things I notice in my work in Parliament and in diplomacy is that, in terms of the number of people who have served in Northern Ireland, say, in the British army or armed forces, or the number of people who have worked in Northern Ireland or who have worked as journalists in Northern Ireland and who have served as politicians—there are several of them in the room—in Northern Ireland, that group is diminishing. They have a very deep understanding of Northern Ireland, and future generations may not have that deep understanding of Northern Ireland.

This ETA thing—not to get down to a very prosaic thing—was a very good example of what seems like a relatively straightforward civil service operation that would never have been dreamt up by the Irish Government or by people who understood the border. We have it now, and the ambassador has quite rightly set out the British Government's position, and it is something we are working very hard to change, but it is an example of a small thing. There will be other small things on the EU-UK border as well with travel restrictions and so on and so forth. So this sense that we are not in the same fora internationally is going to be a problem, and this loss of memory is going to be a problem. That is just to say that it is all the more important that we all really work very hard together and find as many forums as we can to talk together.

We can look at the future challenges in renewable energy and climate, as has been mentioned. I think foreign security policy in Europe is going to be a big challenge. Migration is a massive challenge for Europe, and it is only going to grow. Migration from the south and from the east I think is going to grow and grow, and that is before you worry about the possibilities of the Russians doing better than people hoped in the Ukraine war. But all these challenges for Britain and Ireland represent, first of all, a shared agenda. I think they represent shared interests. We are in the same business of global international rules and working together globally. I think there are, it is fair to say, shared threats, and we can feel that in our politics, manifesting in certain ways, and I actually think we have shared objectives as two countries, and Paul outlined some of them. However we do it and however we get there, I struggle to think of any major issue on which Britain and Ireland would want different things, which means we should have ever more shared action.

And finally, I have two observations. First of all, there is the pace of change. This Parliament started in 2020. Since this Dáil was elected in 2020, we have had the pandemic, we have had the completion of Brexit, we have had the Windsor framework, we have had the restoration of the institutions. In Britain, they have had three Prime Ministers. I used to be able to tell jokes about that. Some of you have heard them. We have now had three Taoisigh. They are different circumstances, but the pace of change in world politics, the number of relatively young people who want to step aside from politics and the fragmentation of politics all over Europe—. This is not unusual in Europe. The pace of change in politics is amazing. The pace of change and the challenges that we face are amazing.

I think there are three things. There is the importance of institutions—we have to protect our institutions. We have seen what happened when they come under attack, including in democracies, and they may come under attack in some democracies again soon. There is the importance of relationships and friendships, which, again, is a theme of this organisation over its long history, as was touched upon again this morning by the Taoiseach. And then, finally, if we cannot rewrite history, and we cannot change the geography, we can control the politics.

Politics still represents our best chance and politicians represent our best chance for navigating all these difficult things that we have to do. Like Paul, I am very optimistic about these things. I am not a doom-monger. I was trained to be a doom-monger in my last job. But I just would say that it is so important that we all keep at it—there will be elections soon—and that the next Parliaments on both islands, and indeed in Europe and, please God, in America as well keep at it, keep up the work, and do what the Taoiseach said: build relationships and take on the new challenges and new opportunities. But we have to keep at it, because it is a tricky world out there. Thank you very much.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I want to sincerely thank both Paul and Martin for their thought-provoking contributions. There are plenty of thoughts there for discussion. I have contributions. Annabelle Ewing.

Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I thank the ambassadors for the very thought-provoking and thoughtful contributions. It has certainly given us a lot to reflect on. I would like, if I may, to pose two quick questions to the UK ambassador, Paul Johnston, on the ETA issue. It occurs to me that another way of looking at the issue might be that, when the ambassador referenced that, in effect, this would be the UK outsourcing its border control to a third country, if the UK itself decides to grant this limited exemption, it would de jure, so as a matter of law, actually be exercising its own border control. So, that might be a helpful way to look at the possibility of such a limited exemption. And secondly, would this matter not be an appropriate matter now to be raised at the forthcoming British-Irish Council? Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I will group questions. The next speaker is Lord Reg Empey.

The Lord Empey:

Thank you, Chair. Ambassador Fraser mentioned the question of NATO. In view of what has happened on mainland Europe within the last couple of years and a growing sense within the EU, as I see it, of looking at the defence of Europe generally, does he feel that there will be pressure on Ireland to review its neutrality and defence capability?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Reg. I will take our ambassadors for the two questions, please.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

Thank you very much. Thank you, Annabelle, for the questions on the ETA. The theoretical or conceptual argument against granting what you could describe as a limited exemption is essentially that it would be saying that anyone who had the legal ability to access Ireland for tourism or other purposes would be able to come into the UK without requiring specific UK authorisation. It would essentially be saying that you would be able to come into the UK without specific authorisation from the UK authorities. Effectively, it is the unlimited and unquantifiable range of people who would be getting indirect authorisation to come into the UK that poses the problem. That is why we want to make ETAs as easy as possible to access; after all, anyone who goes to the USA is used to getting ESTAs. As Martin mentioned, the EU is about to introduce its own scheme. Because of the increasingly difficult security and economic problems posed by illegal immigration, this is a trend that will develop and pose some quite difficult problems for our Governments and other Governments.

As Martin also mentioned, the Irish Government have been very focused in raising the issue with our Ministers. I think it would have been at the Kildare BIPA that this was raised with Steve Baker, the NIO Minister, when he was here, and he undertook to discuss it with colleagues. However, the collective view that Ministers came to was that we had to proceed with the scheme in the way that was envisaged. It is obviously open to the Irish Government to continue to raise it with us, as I am sure they will. As I understand it, we have not yet set a date for when the ETAs will be introduced in Europe. We have started to introduce them in the Gulf and elsewhere, and we have a programme that will be rolled out over time. However, I am afraid that I cannot offer any positive response to your questions, except to say that it is something that clearly the two Governments can—and, I am sure, will—continue to discuss.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Paul. Martin?

Ambassador Martin Fraser:

You spotted my unguarded comment, Reg. We are not going to come under pressure to join NATO or change our neutrality policy in that sense. We have a policy now on investment and reform of the defence forces being rolled out under the Tánaiste's leadership, and he also instigated this rather significant conversation about security issues last year with the Consultative Forum, which Louise Richardson chaired and had meetings around the country. There are still neutral countries in Europe, but it would be foolish not to note that Sweden and Finland have joined NATO and are among the ranks of those people who are very worried about the Russian threat. I do not think that we will be under pressure to adopt a particular type of defence policy, but I do not think that we can avoid thinking about foreign security and defence policy in the light of the situation that Europe finds itself in. I think neutrality is completely tenable in that context, but we still must think about the world as we find it, and it is undoubtedly changing and becoming more dangerous.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks very much, Martin. I call Deputy Frank Feighan, to be followed by Kevin Brennan MP. Frank?

Mr Frank Feighan TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I thank the two ambassadors for their interesting and informative contributions. I put on record my thanks to ambassadors and their staff for the degree of work that they are doing for east-west and North-South relations. Ambassador, you mentioned that because of Brexit, there are fewer meetings in Europe. It is a little-known fact that since we joined Europe more than 50 years ago with the UK, there were 23 meetings a day on average between officials. That certainly brought a lot: the Good Friday Agreement, the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Downing Street Declaration that brought peace to our two countries. What I am asking here is what exactly is being done to fill that void to get more meetings between officials and between Ireland and the UK?

Mr Kevin Brennan MP:

Thank you, Chair. There are fresh press reports that the UK Prime Minister is coming under increasing pressure from some of his colleagues to make a commitment for the UK to quit the European Court of Human Rights. What, in the opinion of the ambassadors, would be the

implications for the Good Friday Agreement and for British-Irish relations if the UK decided to quit the European Court of Human Rights?

12.15 pm

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

I will take the more straightforward question first—on the ECHR. I am joking. The more straightforward question is Frank's question about official-level contacts. I gave an interview to *The Irish Times* last year and said that Brexit had been a structural shock for the relationship. Part of the structural nature of that is that there was, over many years, clearly a pattern of intense official contacts. When I was the UK Ambassador to the EU for political and security affairs, I would see my Irish counterpart every day at meetings, and that would be true at ministerial and prime ministerial level. In the Europa building, the delegation rooms were next to each other. So there was this constant dialogue across the whole of EU business, which was therefore across the large areas of domestic and international policy where we engaged with each other, and bilateral contacts as a subset of that.

There are many ways of replicating that and there are regular dialogues between officials and Ministers across Departments. The permanent secretaries and secretaries general have cross-cutting meetings as well. That is something that started when Martin was the secretary general to the Government. It obviously does not replicate fully the intensity of the contact we had as EU members but given the more and more complex and difficult regional and international situation, there is therefore ever more requirement to talk to each other. It is one of the roles that we both see for ourselves and for our respective embassies: to spot opportunities where we need to talk more and to spot opportunities where people are perhaps talking past each other. What we do in our respective capitals, as well as in encouraging our own systems to engage more, is part of that.

On the ECHR, I do not want to get into domestic political speculation. That is always dangerous territory for any ambassador. The Government set out on the record our position. I think there are some very important illegal immigration challenges, which both countries face and, as Martin was saying, is one of the big emerging policy challenges. I am sure the Government will want to tackle those challenges consistent with our ECHR obligations for all sorts of reasons, but also we recognise that there are some very real and growing pressures.

We have been one of those who has encouraged the need for a debate. The Home Secretary made a speech in New York a few months ago about the need to look at a range of international frameworks—UN and others—because the migration challenges of today and tomorrow are wholly different in scale and nature to what they were when many of the post-war frameworks, whether at the EU level, the wider European level or the UN level, were conceived. We are not doing our job properly as officials and politicians unless we look fairly openly at the trends, the processes and the challenges and opportunities that will evolve, whether we like it or not, in the next 10 years because of conflict, climate change and demography, and see whether we can adapt our processes nationally and internationally to look at that. That is the context in which the British Government and British politicians will have to look at those challenges over the next period.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Paul. Martin.

Ambassador Martin Fraser:

I will take the easy one first as well. It is what Paul said. We take it as our job together and separately to make sure we find any opportunity for people to come together as much as we can. Given my former role in the Irish civil service, I have always said that, in a post-Brexit world, the relationship with Britain is arguably on a par with the relationship within the EU and that external relationship with the US plus other countries that I talked about. But our system is not designed to do that. Our system is still designed to operate around the EU. It is difficult to get resources, time and attention for the British relationship.

That is compensated for, however, by the importance that the political system, including the Members of this Assembly but also the Government, place on it. In fact, the Taoiseach was here this morning, in his first week. We are in the fortunate position that it is important politically, and also the policy issues—things like energy are important issues, as are security co-operation and economic co-operation—are very important. The ETA is an example. Okay, it is not going well, but it is important. We just have to keep working together.

An observation I made—this is more for British colleagues, and I sometimes get challenged when I say this—is that if you are not at the EU meetings, you do not know what you are missing. You might know what the EU is deciding, but you do not know what it is talking about or what it is thinking. If I may say respectfully, I agree with how Paul framed the

migration debate as seen by the British Government. It is an awful pity that the British Government is not in the EU, because I think the EU would probably see it somewhat that way as well, or more like that, if Britain was there, but Britain is not there so we cannot do anything about it. We have to work on it. I would ideally want more people working on it, and I will make that case, but I also know how busy everybody is. We are doing okay, but we have to keep it up and build on what we have at official level.

On the ECHR, I am less experienced than Ambassador Johnston, but I do know not to get into it. All I would say about the ECHR is that it underpins the Good Friday Agreement and it also underpins the Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the UK and the European Union, so if there were any changes there, people would have to explain how those changes would affect the Good Friday Agreement and the Trade and Co-operation Agreement with the European Union. They are the two questions that would be on my mind, but they have not been proposed yet, so we have not asked any of those questions.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Martin. Lord Paul Murphy, to be followed by Steve Aiken MLA.

Rt Hon the Lord Murphy:

Thanks, Co-Chair. The ETA actually offends strand 2—it goes against the spirit of strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement, but I want to ask a question about strand 3, which Liz O'Donnell and I chaired in the negotiations that led up to the east-west strand, which is strand 3.

Since our departure from the European Union, which brought us together in a very special way as two Governments, in my view, that is now much more important than we originally thought it was, but I suspect that at the moment it is not being used properly.

My view is that the ETA would not have happened had there been a proper strand 3 relationship. There are the formal bodies—the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference and the British-Irish Council and so on. Post Brexit, this bilateral relationship through the Good Friday strand 3 mechanism is so very important. I would hope that both our ambassadors would stress that to the respective Ministers; that it is of as much importance and as much a part of the Good Friday Agreement as strands 1 and 2.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Paul. Steve.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

Thank you very much indeed. I was very struck when Martin Fraser said that you do not understand what you do not know. For my sins, I sit on the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee in the Northern Ireland Assembly. We are supposedly dealing with the hybridisation of EU regulations as they reflect to Northern Ireland. It is running into the sand already. We are already struggling.

Is there a recognition among both the United Kingdom and the Irish Governments that we need help? As we move towards the rest of this year—some Members may not be aware, but at the end of this year, we have to vote on articles 5 to 10 of the Windsor Framework in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I would doubt that we are even going to get that far with the Stormont brake being applied at least once or twice and, more applicably, motions not going forward.

I do not get a sense from what I have heard from the Taoiseach and from other people that there is a recognition that we are in trouble. I just want to know whether you have been able to relay those views, as ambassadors in both your positions, that we do have real significant difficulties and we need help.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Steve.

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

On Lord Murphy's question—the first question about strand 3—I think it is completely recognised how important the east-west relationship is. I remember an Irish colleague once saying to me that one of the asymmetries in the relationship, and I think this is still true, is that, on the whole, Irish people know more about Britain and follow Britain's affairs more closely than the reverse. That is a factor of several things. Notwithstanding the fact that both Governments have to grapple with an immense range of challenges—Martin referred to the EU agenda for Ireland and, obviously, the NATO agenda for Britain, but Britain has a big interest in what is going to happen in the EU, and Ireland has a big interest in foreign and security policy—there is more to the British-Irish intergovernmental relationship than just strand 3, because it exists between Treasury Ministers, Prime Ministers, Energy Ministers;

there is a range of bilateral activity. It is no longer structured in the way it was as a subset of EU activity, but it is strong.

Part of the challenge has been a very practical challenge over the last few years: first of all, the Brexit negotiations, then hard on the heels of that, covid, both through all the bandwidth that it took up, but also the practical limitations that it imposed on people meeting. Then there was the war in Ukraine, the crisis in the Middle East and the global economic problems as well. Both Governments have had a huge amount on their plates, but I think there is still a very strong readiness and understanding that we need to be talking constantly. I do not think myself that it is necessarily the case to say that the ETA policy development would not have happened if somehow strand 3 had been more active; I think it still would have proceeded in the same way.

On Steve's point about the Windsor framework, I have picked up from NIO colleagues that there are some new important issues there about how the Assembly is able to digest and process the strands of legislation, whether new legislation or evolving legislation that comes with the Windsor framework. I cannot speak formally for the whole of the British Government system, but I think there would be tremendous readiness to be able to look at providing whatever technical or other support might be needed to assist that process, because we recognise that it is both technically complex and, obviously, politically sensitive. On the politically sensitive bit, there is probably a limit to what we can do, but in terms of trying to support the analysis and understanding and getting as much upstream engagement as possible, I think colleagues would be happy to look at that.

Ambassador Martin Fraser:

To Lord Murphy's point, regrettably, on this occasion, I agree with the ambassador. We raised this ETA thing when I spoke to Cabinet-level and other Ministers responsible for this policy in great depth on multiple occasions, and not just me. It is understood; it was just either too far gone or, more likely, too important for the internal politics in Britain to prevent it. Once it had gotten as far as it did, we got pretty significant concessions on residents—Joanne talked about that earlier—but we could not get the last bit done. I go back to my point about politics and so on: this did not have to be like this, but there was an active decision made, ultimately, that that was what was wanted.

I understand your point, Steve, and it is something I have mentioned. If you will forgive me, we did not want to send the cavalry up from Dublin to help you on the Committee, lest we

run into the strand 1 invisible border. We had recognised that, but we have had internal discussions at official level about how we can help as an EU member state. I think we would be open to helping, but you know as well as I do what the politics are of the Irish Government being involved in that. We do have very good relations at official level and, obviously, if anyone wants any help from us, they will be given it, but it is a scrutiny Committee of the Assembly. To the extent to which we could be in that, I suppose, we are certainly open to suggestions, and we do recognise the problem. It is a big, big task. It was a big task for the British Government back in the day and is a big task for the British Government now, frankly, and therefore is a very big task for the Assembly.

If I may make a slightly more challenging observation, you may well be right that we are going to have a number of applicability motions, use of the Stormont brake and so on and so forth. That would not surprise me out of my standing. I would say, though, that there is tremendous goodwill for Northern Ireland in Dublin, London, Washington and Brussels. That will not disappear if we have all of these developments, but what it will do is drag people down, and they will get weary. If energy that might be applied in those capitals to the benefit of Northern Ireland is applied to giant committee meetings about applicability motions, craft indicators, geographical indicators, dog food or whatever—if Northern Ireland successfully drags those four capitals into that debate—the four capitals will manage that debate, but they will do it at a mid-ranking, bureaucratic level, and they will not be helping Northern Ireland. They will not be hindering Northern Ireland in the process, either.

12.30 pm

I would urge—you would expect me to say this—you and your colleagues in the Assembly to try to make the best of the situation now that we are all in it. I certainly recognise your point, but as I say, you would recognise that the Irish Government helping is not the same as the British Government helping.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Martin. Unfortunately, even at this early stage of the day, we have gone way beyond time, so I ask for as much brevity as possible in our final two questions from Rose Conway-Walsh TD and John Lahart TD.

Ms Rose Conway-Walsh TD:

Thank you both for your contributions. My main question is on the renewed efforts of both Governments as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, particularly in relation to the Bill of Rights, the implementation of the Bill of Rights, and the all-Ireland Charter of Rights. Too many people are being left behind by the Good Friday Agreement, or perceive themselves to be left behind. That is one way of protecting citizens across the island, but particularly in the North.

The other question is on your thoughts on bringing education under the North South Ministerial Council. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr John Lahart TD:

Thanks very much, Chair and Ambassadors. In relation to the political and economic manipulation of the movement of people across Europe, and with the recent announcement of the EU migration pact, is there common ground between Ireland as part of the EU, if it signs up to that pact, and the UK? What potentials or synergies might be there to assist both countries in relation to the challenge of the political manipulation of the movement of people?

Ambassador Paul Johnston:

On Rose's point, I guess it is not a question for me whether the North-South bodies embrace education. I was struck by what the Taoiseach said this morning about the work he was leading in his previous role in the higher education and research field. I know he was personally involved in responding to some of the work that the British Council and others did on higher education mobility and making it easier for people from Northern Ireland to qualify to study in Ireland and vice versa. Generally speaking, the more interchange mobility you have across these islands and beyond with young people, the better it is for shared understanding and growing the relationship in all its dimensions. That comes back to Martin's point, which is so true in many respects, that as generations change, some of the assumptions that people have also change. That can be for the better if people do not have some of the old binary attitudes of previous generations, but if people forget some of the sacrifices and the really difficult evolutions of previous generations, then you lose something. That is a long-winded way of saying that the more educational interchange we can achieve, the better.

I confess that I do not quite know the answer to your question about the Bill of Rights. I would need to look into that.

On John's point about the migration pact, we do not see the EU migration pact as an issue for us directly, as a non-member state, but it is a significant development. It has been under discussion for a long time in the EU. I remember that, back in my own days there, it was a contentious and difficult thing. As I said earlier, we want to use the European Political Community summit that we are hosting in Blenheim in July to look at the whole issue of the illegal migration challenge, and more broadly the challenges of asylum and migration and how we modernise the way we deal with that. It is an area where we see the scope for really important partnerships with individual European countries, and hopefully between the UK and the EU as well.

I do not pretend to have any easy or quick answers. I am struck by the increasing salience it has had in the debate here over recent months. It has had that in my country for a long time. I think that there was a time—I remember this from when I was ambassador to Sweden 10 years ago—when talking about the challenges of illegal immigration and of immigration generally was almost regarded as politically unacceptable. I think that now there is no choice but to discuss the issues head on. If we want to confront xenophobia and populism, we need to look at some of these difficulties directly in the face. I hope that that can be part of an ongoing UK-Ireland dialogue in a broad sense, and of the UK-EU discussion as well.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you. I call Martin.

Ambassador Martin Fraser:

The Bill of Rights and the Charter of Rights are long-standing things that we wanted to do. I am quite sure that the Irish Government would be happy to bring it along. I cannot speak for the British Government, obviously. It is in the agreement, but as ever, Rose, as you know, it is getting agreement in Northern Ireland that is one of the great challenges. It is certainly the type of thing that we cannot get to the end of unless we get agreement in the North.

On education and the NSMC: the NSMC does some education stuff. On North-South co-operation, outside the NSMC we do some education stuff, but it depends if we are talking about primary, secondary or further and higher. The Taoiseach was the Minister, and he has done quite a lot in the further and higher area. The Shared Island initiative has done quite a lot of research into educational outcomes and disadvantage on the island, so it is definitely an area where we could do an awful lot more together, North and South. As ever, as you know,

anything can be brought to the NSMC by agreement in the Executive, so I suppose ultimately that is where it would have to come from, but I am quite sure that there would be a willing ear in the Irish Government.

John's point is interesting. This goes to the heart of the observations that I was making—the good and the bad. I think we probably we have shared problems and shared geography, but the politics is different. Paul is right: the politics is much longer-standing and much sharper in Britain on immigration. Arguably, it was at the heart of Brexit, but certainly it is at the heart of the political debate in Britain at the moment. It is a relative newcomer to the debate in Ireland, but it is getting there very quickly. I know that you were doing some work yourself on it that reflects that.

We have common ground—common geography, the common travel area and everything else—but the difficulty is that we are now in the EU, and EU policy is evolving. On what Paul is describing, the thoughts of the British Government are one thing, but the vehicle through which they want to develop those thoughts is the European Political Community, which we are certainly members of—there are 45 members—but Paul will not mind me saying that it is a reasonable bet to make that that will not necessarily be the most popular forum for dealing with this matter in the EU, among EU member states. We will have to see.

There is historical evidence. This is inside baseball stuff, but in Granada there were rows not over what to do, but over how to do it and where to do it. This is one of the problems that we face, and it is quite a knotty problem; our policy-making forums on migration are not the same, other than our shared work on the CTA. The big migration stuff that you are talking about—the mass migration issues—has to be dealt with at the level of Europe and the world.

I should have mentioned earlier, when I was talking about the forums that Britain is in, that a very important forum for Britain is the G7, as well as to a certain extent—although I think it is fair to say that it is less effective—the Security Council of the UN. Those are big places where Britain operates, but Ireland does not. That is good, because we are friends and we are close to British thinking on things, but at the same time it is another place where they go and we do not go. We have too many of those places. That is not a fixable problem in the short term.

Sorry, that sounds very bureaucratic, but that is the reality. It is not that we would not do some of the same things, but finding ways to do them is more complicated than it used to be, as well as the problems getting more difficult than they were.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Martin. I sincerely thank our two ambassadors for their insightful contributions this morning and for their willingness to engage with a wide range of questions. I also thank them on behalf of the Assembly for their ongoing support for our work and their accessibility at all times to parliamentarians across our legislatures—a sincere thanks.

CURRENT INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

It is a great privilege for me to co-chair this next session. I believe it is the first time that we have had a Co-Chair from the Isle of Man. We will see how the next half hour goes; it could be the last.

We now move on to our debate on current international events. Two years ago, this Assembly met as Russia's full-scale of Ukraine was just beginning. On that occasion, we agreed a motion condemning the attack and expressing solidarity with Ukraine. Sadly, that conflict continues to rage, and it is proposed that the Assembly adopt a motion reiterating that support and calling for accountability for Russia's war crimes.

We would also be remiss if we did not address the situation in Gaza, where events are unfolding rapidly. I should inform Members that this was subject to significant debate last night in the Steering Committee, and it was decided to go with a shorter motion around which most parties could coalesce. I appreciate that there were many things that could have been added, and points of disagreement that I am sure will be aired in debate, especially on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Israel, and the wider region. On some aspects, however, I hope we can all agree. We are witnessing a devastating humanitarian situation causing immense suffering, which must be ended. We can agree on the need for unconditional release of hostages, and we can agree around the need for a ceasefire and the importance of respecting international law.

We will now commence our political debate on the motion on the situation in Gaza, as approved by the Steering Committee. I call Mr Brendan Howlin to move the motion and open the debate.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

I beg to move:

That this Assembly calls for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza leading to a lasting sustainable ceasefire, for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, for a massive and sustained surge in humanitarian aid into Gaza to respond to the catastrophic humanitarian situation; and urges all parties to comply with their obligations under international law.

As we did in the aftermath of the illegal invasion of Ukraine, it is important to have a view on this. As the Co-Chair has rightly said, there was extensive debate in the Steering Committee on the content of this motion. Before the Assembly now are the four essential elements on which we have absolute consensus: the need for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire leading to a sustainable lasting ceasefire; for the unconditional release of all hostages; for a massive and sustained surge in humanitarian aid into Gaza, where obviously there is an extraordinary level of distress right now; and to stress the obligation of all parties to comply always with international law. On behalf of the Steering Committee, I formally present the motion for adoption.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

The motion is now open for debate. Given that the clock is most definitely ticking, I ask Members to keep their contributions as succinct as possible.

Ms Pauline McNeill MSP:

I thank the Steering Committee for reaching a consensus and putting what I think is a crucial motion for us to reach consensus on. I raised this six months ago. There have been tens of thousands of deaths of children, and the hostages themselves are no doubt in danger. I believe that this is a moral question of our time: what did we do as politicians and countries to try to stop what I believe is a massacre in Gaza?

I have visited Gaza on five or six occasions, and I broke the siege in 2010 with other European politicians. It has a population of which 50% are under the age of 18. They cannot flee from this dreadful massacre and bombing, and there are no safe places. You yourselves have all witnessed what has happened, with no functioning hospitals. I believe that South Africa has been brave in taking Israel to the International Criminal Court. Israel will have to answer for the question of plausible genocide.

The innocent people of Gaza are not responsible for the actions of Hamas on 7 October, and I think we as a council should be clear about that. The decimation of all hospitals and the use

of starvation as a weapon is one of the most horrible things we have seen in any war. I hope we can all agree as members of different parties that the dangerous situation with Iran, which I think was rightly referred to by ambassadors, and the context of this is very dangerous, but it should not be a distraction for us as humanitarians to call for an end to the siege in Gaza and a ceasefire now, for the release of all the hostages and for a long-term solution for the people of Israel and the people of Palestine. The failure to reach an independent state for Palestinians who need justice and a state of their own is a failure of the entire world. Well done if the Irish are going to recognise the state of Palestine; I hope that some day the UK will follow suit.

12.45 pm

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

Thank you. I call Ross Greer MSP.

Mr Ross Greer MSP:

Thanks, Chair. I associate myself with Pauline McNeill's remarks. I congratulate the Steering Committee on the motions, but I want to contrast them. I am in no way arguing against the strength of the motion on the situation in Ukraine. I associate myself with it. I have been sanctioned by the Russian Government—my position of solidarity with the people of Ukraine is in no doubt. But the contrast between the two motions highlights western hypocrisy in the extreme. We talk about our

“support for Ukraine's sovereignty, freedom and territorial integrity”.

Not only can our motion on Gaza not bring itself to recognise Palestine's right to territorial integrity, but it does not even use the word “Palestine”.

Palestinians have a right to territorial integrity, but they do not have it. Gaza has been under blockade for almost 20 years. The west bank is overrun by Israel's illegal settlements. We are further away than we have been for decades from an independent and sovereign Palestinian state because of the actions of Israel, and yet we cannot say it. Israel is clearly breaching international law; that is the conclusion of multiple UN resolutions. It is abundantly self-evident not just in its actions in response to 7 October, but for decades before that.

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the UK Government and devolved Governments quite rightly put a huge amount of pressure on businesses to end all trade with Russia lest they be complicit in that. Where is the pressure to end all trade—not even with all Israeli businesses? The UN maintains a list of Israeli businesses that are directly complicit in illegal west bank settlements, and yet the UK Government is about to pass legislation through Westminster banning any attempts to divest from those businesses that are engaged in international illegal activity. We cannot even have a UK arms embargo on Israel.

As Pauline said, we look back on genocides. I am sure everybody in this room has been in events commemorating the victims of the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda and Srebrenica. It is unbelievable that nobody stopped that. It could have been stopped and nobody did it. This can be stopped. This could have been stopped months ago. It did not need to start in the first place. It could have been stopped decades ago by a just and peaceful settlement, yet it has not been. We are all going to be judged for decades to come on what we are doing right now to stop an unfolding genocide.

As soon as Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, the UK Government, like many others across Europe, introduced resettlement schemes for Ukrainian refugees. There is no equivalent for Palestinian refugees fleeing that conflict. Why not?

One area that I do not think is remarked on enough is the damage that it is doing to the reputation of the UK, the US, the European Union and all western nations in the global south, because they can see the hypocrisy of our Governments. That is massively undermining our moral authority, or what is left of it, on the global stage. That is great news for China and other anti-democratic forces.

Is it really worth it for us to allow Israel to continue committing this genocide? I, like Pauline, welcome the moves from the Irish Government, the Spanish Government, the Maltese Government and others to recognise the state of Palestine. I hope the UK will join them, because there is absolutely no route to peace that does not start with the recognition of Palestinians' right to self-determination. We might well end up in some other place than a two-state solution. That is for the people of Palestine and Israel to decide, but there is no way to get from here to there without recognising the right of Palestinians to their own state in the here and now as a first step towards that just and lasting peace.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon. Juan Watterson SHK):

Next is Kate Nicholl MLA.

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA:

Thanks, Chair. In Northern Ireland we are familiar with flags demarcating parts of our society, and there are Israeli and Palestinian flags to be found across my constituency of South Belfast. As an Alliance party MLA, this is perhaps something that people do not expect us to talk about because it is so polarised, but I think it is especially important that people from my party speak out about this.

In South Belfast I work with a number of refugees and asylum seekers, and I am working with a number of Palestinians at the moment who have family members in Gaza. The fear they are going through is hard to articulate. What is happening is just appalling, but for me one of the most harrowing parts of this awful humanitarian disaster was Hind Rajab, the five-year-old girl who was trapped in a car. It was well documented. I am a mother of a child of a similar age, and what I keep thinking about is the silence that followed—the silence around the devastation that is happening and that we are facilitating with our silence.

What is happening at the moment with the Iranian drone and missile attack must be condemned, of course but, if anything, it just highlights how important diplomacy is right now. We know that violence only brings further suffering and creates wider instability, so I really welcome this motion. I support it. I think it is right that we discuss this and call for a humanitarian ceasefire, the return of hostages and sustained humanitarian aid.

I would also like to say that the healthcare workers in Gaza have displayed unparalleled heroism. They are risking their lives to provide essential care against collective punishment and a systematic destruction of the healthcare system. I hope that the international community is braver in speaking out against violations of humanitarian law and that peace and a two-state solution can be found soon.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

Thank you. I call Johnny Guirke TD.

Mr Johnny Guirke TD:

Thank you. I would like to be associated with the words of Ross and Pauline. I think the hypocrisy of the world with the difference between Russia and what is happening in Gaza needs to be called out. Fair play to anybody who is calling it out. There have been 33,500 people

killed in Gaza, 12,000 of those children, and 430 people killed in the West Bank, which is supposed to be not even involved in this conflict. Hundreds of aid workers have been killed, and 75,000 people have been injured, 5,000 of those in the West Bank. Israel is stopping food, water and fuel from going in, starving the people. Men, women and children are living with the pain of hunger. And the world looks on. It is very hard to take it.

While the motion deserves our support, I agree with Ross that it is completely different to the one on Ukraine. That needs to be called out as well. We need an immediate ceasefire. We need uninterrupted access for food and medicine going into Gaza. All this is happening on Palestinian land. That needs to be called out. We need a two-state solution.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

Thank you. I call Heledd Fychan MS.

Ms Heledd Fychan MS:

I would like to associate myself with a number of the comments made. It is crucial that we discuss this. I fully support the motion and also echo the comments about the contrast.

When we had a vote in the Welsh Parliament on a ceasefire back in November, I received 600 emails over the course of a few days from constituents of mine, many of whom have relatives in Israel and Palestine. One email stands out. A person living in Cardiff had lost 18 members of their family in a few short weeks. I met with them recently and they have lost count by now of how many members of their family and friends they have lost.

This is not just something that is happening somewhere else; it is affecting people in our communities, day in, day out. They are dealing with this terrible grief and are facing this silence from too many politicians, because people are scared of speaking out and calling it out for what it is. It is imperative that we ensure that support is there for people. How can we say that we care about people when we choose to do nothing? The silence has been deafening.

I echo the comments about healthcare workers as well. The trauma that people will face now, if they survive, will be considerable for generations to come. Support will be needed for generations, so it is imperative that we continue to discuss but also call for action. The question was asked earlier by Pauline and Ross: what did we do, for we will be judged? Yes, we will, and we should be judged on this issue. We cannot pretend that we do not know. We all, I am sure, studied history and wondered why people did not speak out during the first world war,

the second world war and so on, so many times. We know this: we see things directly on our phones immediately—as they happen—so there is a duty. I agree and would have liked to have seen a strengthened motion, but I will support the motion and I am glad we are having this discussion.

Connétable David Johnson:

The States of Jersey had a motion some weeks ago, and we thought through the wording very carefully. In fact, there was an amendment that referred to the word “genocide”, and that was deemed to be inappropriate. I therefore endorse the Steering Committee’s proposal to confine this motion to the humanitarian aspect. That doesn’t mean to say I dissociate myself from some of the comments made.

Ross referred to the two-states solution. I spent some time out there some years ago, and that might well be the solution. It has to be remembered, of course, that when the State of Israel was created, the idea was that they would co-exist. I do not necessarily believe that it is for the western powers to seek to impose something without the co-operation and agreement as per the Camp David agreement—without those authorities. What I am really saying is that I support the motion. I support confining this particular motion to humanitarian prospects, and without comment as to what we might do in the wider picture.

Ms Rose Conway-Walsh TD:

I support the motion, albeit it is limited. I do welcome the fact that we are discussing it here today, because I was in Geneva a couple of weeks ago at the Inter-Parliamentary Union and it could not even be agreed what motion would be put forward.

The point I want to make is that we have two pieces of legislation before the Oireachtas at the moment—the occupied territories Bill, which has been there for way too long, and the Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill 2023—and those pieces of legislation need to be enacted if we are serious about what we want to achieve here.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

I am going to allow three very short contributions, if that is okay, because I am conscious that we also have the motion on Ukraine.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thank you very much, acting Co-Chairperson. Unlike some people in this room, I was actually in Israel just last week; I returned to the UK in the early hours of Friday morning. Like others, I have been a regular visitor to both Israel and the West Bank—although not Gaza—in the past, and I share the grave concerns about the humanitarian crisis that is taking place and unfolding before our very eyes on our TV screens. Clearly, there needs to be more access to aid for those innocent civilians who are suffering in Gaza.

While I was in Israel, I challenged the Israeli authorities to get that aid in, and there has been some progress. I think that about 400 trucks a day are now getting over the border. The challenge we were told about is getting that aid distributed in a way that gets it to those people who are in need. The reality, unfortunately, is that Hamas are intercepting much of that aid and trying to sell it to the civilian population, which has no resource to be able to purchase it, and are hijacking the aid once it gets over the border. That is a problem. Hamas are a problem. That must be dealt with for the future, or else there is frankly no prospect of peace between Israel and a future Palestinian state.

I will end with this, because I know that my contribution needs to be short. Like all democracies, Israel is far from perfect, but given the choice as to whether to stand with Israel or Hamas, I will stand with Israel every time. Given the choice of whether to stand with Israel or the Iranian regime, I will stand with Israel every time. And that also goes for the Houthis and every other menace, like Hezbollah, that Israel is also having to contend with. While I have a great deal of sympathy, and I want to see a ceasefire as quickly as possible and an end to all the bloodshed, it is simply not going to be possible while Hamas have the capability and the desire to continue to commit the sorts of atrocities they did on 7 October.

1 pm

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

Many people think that things changed in the Middle East on 7 October. Regrettably, they did not. I have heard contributions from across the Floor; the words that came out were about silence and devastation. When we as an Assembly are considering the situation, we think not to consider the 617,000 people who have perished in Syria, whom we have not mentioned, or the 377,000 people who have perished in Yemen, whom we have not mentioned—all to do with an ongoing conflict between Iran and the west and western allies. We need to put the conflict properly into context; it would be remiss of us as an Assembly not to realise the wider issues here.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

Finally, Senator Fintan Warfield.

Senator Fintan Warfield:

Go raibh maith agat, Co-Chairperson. I think Israel's behaviour must be utterly condemned. The entire thing is a horror. Israel's behaviour has been preceded by years of illegal settlements, imperialism, colonialism and the mistreatment of people in Gaza—all things that have been calculated to make the two-state solution extremely difficult.

It is never wrong to aim for what is right. In the end, politics will come in and decide the outcome. The political process has to arise, and we have to use our position to speak about a political process and about de-escalation. Here in Ireland, we obviously came to the Good Friday agreement, which should be a world example. We must collectively stand firm for a two-state solution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza leading to a lasting sustainable ceasefire, for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, for a massive and sustained surge in humanitarian aid into Gaza to respond to the catastrophic humanitarian situation; and urges all parties to comply with their obligations under international law.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

Thank you, colleagues. Our Clerks will arrange for the text of the resolution to be sent to the ambassadors of Israel, Ireland and the United Kingdom, and to the Speaker of the Israeli Parliament.

We now commence our political debate on the second motion, on the situation in Ukraine, to reaffirm the Assembly's position taken in February 2022, as approved by the Steering Committee. I call on Brendan Howlin TD to move the motion and to open the debate.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

I beg to move:

That this Assembly condemns in the strongest terms Russia's unprovoked, illegal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine; stands in solidarity with the Verkhovna Rada; unreservedly supports the freedom of the people of Ukraine; and underlines its support for Ukraine's sovereignty, freedom and territorial integrity, and the right of the people of Ukraine to determine their own destiny; supports efforts to build for a just and sustainable peace in Ukraine based on the Ukraine peace plan; calls for accountability for Russia's war crimes.

As the Assembly will appreciate, this motion caused rather less debate last night. I think we all understand and are in agreement with the sentiment of this particular resolution, and are mindful of how critical a phase the invasion of Ukraine is in right now. It is timely that we pass this motion.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

In that case, I call Darren Millar.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

I want to say that I think it is appropriate that we reaffirm our commitment to the cause in Ukraine, particularly given the views of some across the Atlantic, where there seems to be a wavering in the support for the nation of Ukraine in the face of the illegal invasion by Russia. This issue, of course, is not entirely unlinked to the conflict we have been talking about in the Middle East. We know that the Shahed drones that are currently in the air over Ukraine, having been sent there by Russia, are the same as the Iranian drones that were launched in their hundreds against the state of Israel, some of which were downed and intercepted by the Royal Air Force in recent days—I am very proud it did so.

It is absolutely essential that we show solidarity from all our jurisdictions to ensure that we send this message, again, not just to our own Governments but to those others around the world who are having internal debates about whether to continue their support for Ukraine. We all know that if we give in and allow Russia to win this war, there will be dire consequences for the rest of the world as well.

Mr Ross Greer MSP:

The Ukrainian people and their Government and Parliament need our continued political support, but what they need more than anything is artillery shells and long-range missile systems. They have been given all the equipment they need to defend themselves from Russian air attacks, but we are not giving them the equipment and supplies they need to hold their territory, never mind take it back. Ukraine has lost a couple more towns in the last 48 hours to Russian advances in the east—not because Ukrainian soldiers are not capable of winning this war, but because we are not giving them the equipment and the ammunition that they need to defend their territory.

Out of many nations, the UK was actually strong and robust in its initial support for Ukraine, and the supplies that the UK gave to Ukraine were critical to holding Kyiv in the early phase of the war and halting Russian advances. We are now in a position where despite the consensus—the almost complete unanimity across many western nations—in support of Ukraine, we are about to fail them. That is not because of a breakdown in that political agreement—albeit with the significant exception of America—but because, despite that political unanimity, we are not giving them what they actually need to defend their territory and their people. It is not complicated. They will not win this war without equipment and ammunition—it is as simple as that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns in the strongest terms Russia's unprovoked, illegal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine; stands in solidarity with the Verkhovna Rada; unreservedly supports the freedom of the people of Ukraine; and underlines its support for Ukraine's sovereignty, freedom and territorial integrity, and the right of the people of Ukraine to determine their own destiny; supports efforts to build for a just and sustainable peace in Ukraine based on the Ukraine peace plan; calls for accountability for Russia's war crimes.

The Co-Chairperson (The Hon Juan Watterson SHK):

Thank you, colleagues. Our Clerks will arrange for the text of the resolution to be sent to the ambassadors of Ukraine, Ireland and the United Kingdom, and to the Speaker of the Ukraine Parliament.

Members, a buffet lunch awaits us in Hugo's restaurant. This concludes our proceedings for this morning. The sitting is suspended until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.06 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 2.30 pm.

GROWING TOURISM TO THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I ask colleagues to take their seats, please. We are delighted to have Alice Mansergh, the chief executive of Tourism Ireland, address our Assembly this afternoon. As we all know, Tourism

Ireland was established as one of the six areas of co-operation under the framework of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Alice was appointed chief executive following a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council last week, having held the chief executive designate role since October 2023. Recruitment to North/South bodies is impacted in the absence of the North/South Ministerial Council, so we are delighted to see the re-establishment of the Council and confirmation of Alice's appointment as chief executive, and we wish her well in her new role.

I now call on Alice to give her address. *[Applause.]*

Ms Alice Mansergh (Tourism Ireland):

Co-Chairs and British and Irish parliamentarians, thank you so much for having me, and thank you for excusing my voice. I am a little bit hoarse today, but I hope that everybody can hear me.

I am very pleased to be CEO at Tourism Ireland and I thank you for the invitation to be here with you today: It is truly an honour. I would love to talk about tourism as a force for economic and social good across the island of Ireland. It truly is one of our island's most valuable shared industries.

Tourism Ireland was set up following the Good Friday agreement 26 years ago, and our role is to market the whole island of Ireland overseas. The consumer insight to keep in mind is that, if you are hundreds or even thousands of miles away and are planning a holiday, you are likely thinking about the things to see and do when you are on the island more than you are thinking about exactly where the border lies. Marketing the island of Ireland means that we can grow tourism responsibly for both jurisdictions while supporting economies and communities across the island and helping Northern Ireland to reach its potential.

Overseas tourism generates €6 billion, or £5.1 billion, per annum in revenue, and that revenue has grown by 70% over the past couple of decades, and at almost twice that rate for Northern Ireland specifically. Tourism supports over 300,000 jobs across the island, and 70% of those jobs are outside Dublin or Belfast, so it is also an industry that enables significant rural entrepreneurialism.

To the Assembly, I would like to say a huge "Thank you" for all that you do. Tourism Ireland and the growth that I just spoke about are with us today because of the vision and the support

of parliamentarians, from the Good Friday Agreement onwards, so I thank you for all that you do.

Let us take a look at the industry as it stands today. Tourism on our island has some significant strengths. Awareness of Ireland as a holiday destination overseas is high, relative to our size. We are seeing year-on-year recovery post-COVID and revenue from overseas tourism is back to pre-COVID levels—albeit that that is partly due to inflation. Hotel occupancy has recovered. Air access to the island is the strongest it has ever been, which helps visitors to get to us, because people need to sail, fly or swim to get to us.

We are an award-winning destination, with Donegal recently being named a Lonely Planet top-five destination in the world to visit, and with the Wild Atlantic Way and Belfast on National Geographic's "cool list" for 2024.

That is the good news, but there are, of course, also some challenges to keep in mind. Cost-of-living concerns lead 41% of our target consumers overseas to consider taking fewer short breaks over the coming year in favour of their main holidays. Capacity, whether it is airport or hotel capacity, is strongly in our minds: roughly 20% of accommodation is out of use by tourism for humanitarian reasons. Businesses face increased costs and are balancing remaining viable in terms of their margins with the need to be competitive on the global stage.

Global uncertainties can also impact on travel, and we have uncertainties closer to home, as well. The roll-out of ETA, or electronic travel authorisation, must be thought through in order to limit the friction in tourists' ability to visit Northern Ireland from Ireland, so I am delighted to hear that the Assembly has already had in-depth discussions on that topic this morning.

Nonetheless, there are significant opportunities ahead, so our vision at Tourism Ireland is that we will grow the value of overseas tourism to the island of Ireland while sustainably supporting economies, communities and the environment. We will do that by inspiring visitors and strengthening partnerships.

To get to the numbers, we are targeting 5.6% year-over-year revenue growth on average from overseas tourism each year out to 2030. In regions outside Dublin and in Northern Ireland, we aim for a higher rate of growth of 6.5% year over year.

I mentioned a second ago that hotel capacity is an issue; it is, but there are still opportunities for growth. Hotels are at 88% occupancy in the summer months and at 73% occupancy from

October through to May, so even with the hotels that we have today, there is an opportunity to grow in the spring and autumn seasons faster than in the summer months, which helps to spread the goodness of tourism through communities for longer portions of the year. That is where Tourism Ireland will be deploying our marketing spend.

Key to what we do is inspiring visitors in our target markets to travel to us, so all of our investment is tied to measurable goals around stimulating awareness, consideration, research and so on. We want to win hearts, minds and, of course, trips to support the €6 million in revenues that I spoke about earlier.

I thought that the Assembly might have a little look at one of our campaigns: the “Fill your heart with Ireland” campaign is currently live across 14 markets and features Sharon Horgan and “Derry Girls”.

2.45 pm

[Members watched a video presentation.]

Ms Alice Mansergh:

That ad has won awards overseas. It plays to the main motivators for visitors to come to our island, which are shown by research to be scenery, heritage and people. We love to encourage screen tourism as well. “Derry Girls” has been a huge win for Derry, just as “Star Wars” was for the Skellig Islands and as “Game of Thrones” has been for Antrim.

I have talked about stimulating tourism where we have strong capacity to grow in spring and autumn. St Patrick’s day is always a landmark moment in the calendar. It is a time when we invite everybody around the world to feel a little bit Irish with us for the week. This year we reached 180 million people, and we made the festival the hero. We live streamed parades from around the island to 50 million television viewers in the US alone. In Europe, Ireland week brought Irish dancing and culture to the streets in Paris and Milan.

St Patrick’s Day matters for tourism because it inspires future trips to the island. Did you know that up to four times more people search online for “Ireland” during St Patrick’s week than the spring average? It really tees up travel for the rest of the year.

If we flip to the autumn season at the other end of the year, we think that Halloween can play a landmark role. Did you know that Halloween is more celebrated in the US than St Patrick’s Day is, but not everybody knows that it originated here on this island in the Celtic tradition

2,000 years ago? Derry Halloween is Europe's largest Halloween festival. Púca is a boutique festival in Meath, in Ireland's Ancient East. Imagine that anywhere a visitor might go across the island in the autumn season they would get a flavour of the unique heritage and history of one of the world's favourite moments, here in the home of Halloween. That will be a big focus for us in the latter part of the year.

I will now say something about publicity. While we are very proud to advertise Ireland, we also work hard to inspire others to create long-form content promoting the island. Coverage that we have achieved over the past 10 years in publications such as The Guardian, The New York Times, The Telegraph, Le Figaro, Die Zeit and others would have cost €1 billion in equivalent advertising value if we had tried to buy it as advertising space. We achieve very valuable coverage through storytelling and our work with journalists.

We also co-produce TV shows that have a travel theme so that viewers watch long-form immersive content at home, and can see what we offer. We will now take a look at a little snippet from a show that we co-produced with Channel 4 and Julia Bradbury last year, which was watched by 2 million people in Great Britain.

[Members watched a video presentation.]

Ms Alice Mansergh:

I realise that the sound was probably not particularly intense for you at the back, but I hope that you got a little of the flavour.

Tourism truly is teamwork. Although Tourism Ireland can inspire visitors to travel, we do not fly the plane, man the hotel front desk or run the tours, so our strong partnerships with our sister agencies in Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland are really important, as are our partnerships with industry. We encourage regional air and sea access through advertising partnerships with carrier partners. The little graph that representatives can see shows the dip in access during COVID and, now, its recovery to over and above where it was. Indeed, air access for the island this summer will be 105% of last year's level, having already exceeded pre-COVID levels. If we want access to continue healthily, we will want to look at capacity at our airports. I am sure that Eoghan O'Mara Walsh will touch on that shortly.

We love to give the global stage to local businesses. We bring 750 distinct local businesses with us to our overseas travel platforms, and we introduce them to the kind of tour operators

that can bring visitors to the island at scale. Overall this year, we will facilitate 25,000 commercial meetings of that sort for businesses from right across the island.

I close with the thought that tourism, while sustaining economies and communities, has a further important sustainability brief—the environmental aspect. This year, with our partners in Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland, we are launching a new sustainability assurance scheme. You can think of that as a badging scheme for the industry. It means that the businesses that take the greatest strides forward in terms of their sustainability can showcase what they have done with a badge, or credentials, that are immediately recognisable overseas to tour operators and visitors. Tourism Ireland will further promote sustainable routes and ways to enjoy the island.

I end by thanking you all so much for your attention today and for your support and investment in tourism. They say that peace brings tourism and tourism brings peace. I am very grateful for all the collaboration—North, South, east and west—to maximise the benefit of tourism for communities and economies right across the island. I really look forward to all the collaboration ahead. Thank you so much. [Applause.]

POLITICAL ENABLERS NEEDED FOR IRISH TOURISM TO PROSPER

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Alice, for your excellent contribution. Bringing in “Derry Girls” is inserting a welcome new dimension to parliamentary assemblies and dialogues, so it is.

Alice will stay with us, because Eoghan O’Mara Walsh, chief executive officer of the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation, will now address our Assembly. The Irish Tourism Industry Confederation is the representative body for Irish tourism and hospitality interests. When Eoghan concludes his address, both Alice and he will take questions from colleagues. Eoghan, you are very welcome.

Mr Eoghan O’Mara Walsh (Irish Tourism Industry Confederation):

Thank you very much, Chair. I am delighted to be here and it is great that the Assembly is here and that we are talking about tourism. As I said when I was chatting to Alice Mansergh earlier, I am delighted to see that the theme of today is, largely, tourism. Alice and I talk about

that every day, but it is great to know that we have as many experts in the room now, after a full day of tourism.

I am not going to do death by PowerPoint, you will be pleased to hear. I know that you have had a long day and that there has been an awful lot on the agenda. I am with the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation. I understand that you heard earlier from Joanne Stuart, who is effectively my equivalent north of the border. We represent the industry. Whereas Alice's is an island-of-Ireland organisation, I represent the industry in the South of Ireland and Joanne represents the industry in the North. In many ways, the easiest way to describe it is that we are similar to IBEC for the business community in the South, or the Confederation of British Industry in Britain.

I will take you through a whistle-stop tour of the industry view of the world. The good news is that it complements much of what Alice just talked to you about, so there will be no direct contradictions, but I suppose that there will be a different focus, to a certain extent, because it will look at tourism specifically from a business perspective. Obviously, I will be happy to take questions at the end.

I am also happy to share the slides afterwards. One slide that you will see—it is called the “tourism dashboard”, which we produce on a monthly basis—is an image, but it has a lot of numbers and data and it shows the state of the tourism industry on a monthly basis. There is too much for you to read on screen but, as I said, I am happy to share it afterwards.

As I said, we are the representative body for the tourism industry, so all the big tourism companies—the likes of Aer Lingus and the Guinness Storehouse—are members in their own right but, largely, we are made up of federations such as the likes of the Irish Hotels Federation, the Irish Tour Operators Association and the Association of Visitor Experiences and Attractions. We have about 40 members. In total, there are about 40,000 businesses in tourism and hospitality, and ITIC, which I represent, largely covers them all.

You have talked already about why tourism matters. I am very anxious that tourism is thought of as an engine for economic good throughout the country. We account for 13 per cent of the workforce in the Republic of Ireland. That is a Central Statistics Office number, by the way, not me magicking up numbers. We are the largest indigenous industry and the biggest regional employer by far. Alice referenced the Wild Atlantic Way. In parts of the Wild Atlantic Way, there is very little economic activity but for tourism. There is not so much

foreign direct investment or manufacturing or anything like that. Often, tourism is the only show in town, so it really matters, particularly to regional Ireland.

There are 40,000 businesses in the sector and 254,000 jobs across it. The tourism and hospitality sector is huge. Look at its 13 per cent of the workforce. Construction as a sector in its own right has 6 per cent of the workforce, and agriculture has 4 per cent. As I said, tourism and hospitality has 13 per cent of the workforce. One of the frustrations that I have—and that I am sure Alice has but is too discreet to share—is that tourism does not get as much attention in the media or in political circles as some other sectors in the economy. I think that it should, by dint of those numbers on screen.

The next slide is the dashboard that I referenced. As I said, I will not go into it in any great detail. The dashboard is quite interesting; it shows the state of the tourism and hospitality sector in Ireland in any particular month. It uses and collates CSO data and lots of independent third-party data.

To a certain extent, the data for February does not really matter because, traditionally, February only accounts for 5% of the annual tourism volume. However, we are inching towards the tourism season; we have just had St Patrick's Day and Easter, so we are getting into the tourism season proper. What is a little bit worrying at the moment is that there are early signs of a softish market. From a survey that Fáilte Ireland did recently—Fáilte Ireland being the state agency for tourism development in the South—we know that 44% of businesses expect business to be up on last year but 56% of businesses expect it to be flat or down. If you look at hotel occupancy in Dublin, for example, occupancy in the first three months of the year is down compared with last year and the average daily occupancy rate is also down. Those early signs of a softish market are causing a few concerns.

To go back to the dashboard, I note that the really interesting month will be next month. The CSO, which I mentioned—it is the statistics agency in the South—collects all the arrival data. It started using a new methodology last year, which has meant that, when it has produced monthly figures, we have not been able to compare them with historical data. However, it has caught up with itself now, so, for this month, it will produce data that will be directly comparable with that of April last year. It will be interesting to see whether our American or British numbers are up or down, because that will give us a good steer.

The good news, which Alice Mansergh referred to, is that the North American market is looking really strong. It is such an important market for the island of Ireland, because those

visitors are big spenders, they tour the regions and they stay for an average of eight days—they spend quite a lot of money. The numbers are driven by good marketing Stateside by Tourism Ireland and really strong air access. If you look at the graphic on my slide, you will see that there are 25 or 26 north American cities with direct air access into either Dublin or Shannon, but predominantly Dublin. That is really encouraging, because it makes Ireland very accessible. The likes of JetBlue Airways recently came into the market, flying from Boston and New York into Dublin. It is a competitive space, too, with very good air fares. Thankfully, the US economy is strong, inflation is coming down and the dollar remains strong, so Irish holidays are good value for money.

The positive news is that the North American market is good. Other markets, though, are a bit soft. Great Britain, the domestic market and continental Europe are all looking a little bit soft, so there is reason for concern.

The industry calls cost, capacity and competitiveness the three horses of the apocalypse, and, at most meetings that I have with the industry at the moment, we talk about those three things as being the current challenges. I will not repeat stuff that you have already heard, so I will fly through a few bits and just point to certain aspects. The good news is that a lot of the issues are within the control of the Irish Government or, in terms of the ETA, Westminster, so many aspects of the situation can be ameliorated. I will highlight some of that, as well.

We tend to use third-party economists to produce reports, because we think that it gives us extra credibility. Jim Power, who is a well-known economist in Dublin, recently produced a report for us on the cost of business and, in particular, on Government-induced labour costs. I will not go through it in full detail, but, in effect, it showed that a lot of the labour measures that the Government has introduced since 1 January—a higher minimum wage, statutory sick pay, pension auto-enrolment and all those sorts of things—will add considerable costs to tourism and hospitality businesses. In fact, €456 million will be added to payroll costs to such businesses in this year alone and €1.4 billion will be added by 2026.

The reason why we want to state that is that tourism is hit hardest by that Government legislation. In that suite of measures, each individual measure is very worthwhile and nobody has an issue with paying staff a higher wage, for example. However, for all those costs to come collectively at the same time poses a huge burden on businesses with thin margins.

Therefore, we are calling on the Government to offset some of the costs. We are looking for the restoration of the 9% VAT rate, for the reform of employer pay-related social insurance—

PRSI—and for an annual enterprise support package. I go back to my earlier point: there are 40,000 businesses in the sector; the vast majority are small or medium-sized enterprises and are in regional Ireland; and they are all labour intensive and have thin margins. To have hundreds of millions of euro of costs imposed on businesses, above and beyond regular wage trends, puts huge pressure on them, which is why we ask Government to offset them for a sector such as tourism, which is disproportionately hit.

3.00 pm

On capacity challenges, which is the other C, accommodation and aviation are the big ones. If you look at tourism accommodation, you see that 20% of all tourism bedrooms in the Republic of Ireland are currently contracted to the Government for Ukrainian refugees and international asylum seekers. Obviously, from a humanitarian perspective, that is perfectly honourable, and the tourism sector is very much prepared to play its part, but it has a profoundly destabilising impact on the sector. Imagine a town in the west of Ireland or in the midlands, where the hotels have gone over to the Government for refugees and asylum seekers. That means that there is nowhere to stay for the visitors whom Alice Mansergh brings to the country. The hotel is OK, because it gets a cheque from the Government for the services that it provides, but all the downstream tourism businesses — the restaurants, pubs, tourist attractions, adventure centres and cultural experiences — miss out on the tourism spend. The analogy that I often use is this: imagine if the Government took one in five cranes off a construction site or decommissioned 20% of tractors from farms. It has a destabilising effect on the broader industry, and that is a cause of concern.

I believe that you had the Taoiseach here earlier. When he took over as Fine Gael leader, he announced that a number of reception centres were going to be built, and that up to 14,000 state beds are going to be created for refugees and asylum seekers. We welcome that, because that is a more appropriate place. After all, a hotel is not the best place for a family fleeing war. Remember also that the Ukrainian war is not going to end any time soon, and that those people have no homes to go back to. They are going to be in Ireland for a considerable period, but I do not think that the Government can continue contracting with hotels, because it has a massively destabilising impact on our sector.

Also, short-term letting legislation is coming down the track from the Irish Government. That has been done across Europe, but the fear is that, here in Ireland, it is going to be particularly onerous and it risks denuding rural, coastal and regional Ireland of self-catering properties. It

is one thing to take Airbnbs out of cities because we want to bring them back into the long-term rental market. That is perfectly understandable. However, if holiday homes and the like are unable to trade because of short-term letting legislation and onerous planning regulations, it impacts on regional tourism. Remember that 20% of the hotels have gone out of the system. The third area that I mentioned with regard to capacity is aviation. Dublin Airport is the main gateway to the island of Ireland. The two Belfast airports, Cork, Shannon, Knock, Kerry and so on are all very important in their own right and we all hope that they will grow and we will maximise the utilisation of those airports, but Dublin is the main gateway to the island of Ireland. Think back to that transatlantic image that I showed, with all the flights coming across the Atlantic. A lot of those flights use Dublin as a hub and continue on to, or connect with another flight to, Europe. If Dublin's cap of 32 million passengers, which it has already met, is not increased, it cannot grow and those airlines are likely to choose an alternative destination, and not one in Ireland. It is likely to be in the UK or mainland Europe. An aircraft, by its very nature, is the very definition of a mobile asset. DAA has applied to the local authority to have that cap lifted. We urge that that be granted and expedited for not just tourism but the whole economy of the island of Ireland.

We have asked for five political enablers, so I have outlined those challenges. The first three — you may not be able to make them out — are in the Jim Power economic report that we did: the restoration of the competitive VAT rate, the pay related social insurance (PRSI) reform to ease the burden on business, and the annual enterprise support package to help vulnerable sectors such as tourism. We are also looking for an alternative approach to housing refugees and asylum seekers and not to be overly dependent on the tourism sector, and at that aviation issue of allowing Dublin Airport to grow in a responsible manner.

A new tourism policy is coming in the Republic of Ireland. It is due in the second quarter. It was due last year, so it has taken a bit longer than we wanted. We are anxious that it sees the light of day because it puts ink on paper as to what the national policy is on tourism. It needs to mirror the ambition of industry. Alice Mansergh put up a slide about growth on an annual basis. If you look at our growth out to 2030, you will see that we are looking for a 50% revenue increase, which is not a million miles away from what Alice put out there.

In our view, growth can live alongside carbon reduction. We talked about aviation a second ago, and one of the examples that I often use is sustainable aviation fuel, which is getting quite interesting. In fact, the first flight using sustainable aviation fuel took place last year across the Atlantic from London to the States. The technology is there, so we think that it needs to be stimulated and incentivised. On the ground — I should say on the water — there is a good

example. The Shannon river, which is the longest navigable waterway across Ireland and the UK, has 240 cruisers on it. They are now all using hydro-treated vegetable oil whereas, last year, they were using diesel. There has been a 92% reduction in the carbon footprint of that sector. That shows that, by using technology, renewable energy and so on, a sector can grow whilst reducing its carbon footprint.

It is important that the national tourism policy here in the South speaks to the tourism policy and strategy in the North. We are an island-of-Ireland sector, as we all know. To a certain extent, we have been the poster child since the Good Friday Agreement, because we have been the most successful. Let us keep it going. Things are happening, such as the ETA, that are not favourable to seamless travel across the island of Ireland. The idea of an international tourist coming to Dublin, wanting to go up to the Giant's Causeway or to Titanic Belfast, having to purchase a visa and go through the bureaucracy of that and facing criminal prosecution if they do not do it and are found in breach of it is an absolute deterrent. In fact, it is a soft border, to a certain extent. As I understand it, it is within the competence of Westminster. All the parties in Northern Ireland, I think, are in favour of a waiver for holiday visitors to the North. That is a sensible and pragmatic solution. The competence, as I understand it, lies in Westminster, but, collectively, we should continue the pressure as much as possible. Remember that there is an election in Westminster. I do not need to remind anyone about that. There could well be a new Government in power in Westminster that may have a different view, but keeping the pressure on the idea of a waiver to the ETA is particularly important for the tourism sector.

Funding is also important. Tourism Ireland is funded by North and South. I stand to be corrected, but I think that, when it started, it was supposed to receive two thirds of its funding from the Republic and a third from the North. Increasingly, the Republic has had to take on more and more of that, so I think that the North should be increasing its funding of an agency such as Tourism Ireland.

I cannot read the last point, but I think that I have covered everything. Yes, it is:

“Carbon reduction can live alongside revenue growth”.

That is it. I am happy to take any questions. I am really delighted to be here, and I am delighted that we are collectively taking tourism seriously. Too often, people think that tourism means, “What is your favourite beach in Ireland?”. A frivolous approach is taken, but it is a really important economic sector. The numbers and the potential outline that. Also, to call it patriotic sounds pompous, but we are showcasing the best of our island to an international audience, and not many other sectors can say that. I think that we can grow in a responsible way. Thanks for your support. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Eoghan, for a very good overview of the industry. You outlined many of the challenges, and Alice highlighted the opportunities. Colleagues, we will take questions, which can be directed to either Alice or Eoghan. Deputy Frank Feighan was the first to indicate.

Mr Frank Feighan TD:

Thanks very much, Alice and Eoghan, for your great work. I will try to be as brief as possible. A lot of great work has been done. There are a lot of hotels around the country, and it is great to have that infrastructure. I represent Sligo, Leitrim, north Roscommon and south Donegal. I come from the town of Boyle, which, when I was growing up, had two hotels and now has no hotel and had planning permission refused for five hotels. We live beside Lough Key forest park, which is a huge tourism area, and there is also Boyle Abbey and the King House. Boyle is on the Shannon, 20 miles from the Wild Atlantic Way. We have a problem: we have no hotel. Despite trying to bring in as many operators as possible, including the local authority and whoever else, we cannot get funding for a hotel operator. There are only about four or five towns — maybe two towns — in the country that are in this unique situation. What can be done to get across the impasse? They tell you that you can buy a hotel in other towns for €500,000 or €600,000 but that they could not build that hotel for €7 million. It is embarrassing. It is worrying. There is nowhere to go for a coffee or after a funeral, or just from a tourist's point of view. Can you come up with something? I have been talking to different developers for six or seven years, and everyone says, "It costs too much". We need to do something. I know that we are in government, but we need to come up with a solution.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Frank.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

I will answer that briefly. We also looked at that. For big parts of the midlands, there is a regional brand that we have not mentioned: Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. In the old days, Ireland's Ancient East stretched as far as Castlebar, and we always said, "No, the midlands needs a regional or a destination brand in its own right". Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is that brand, but there is a huge lack of hotels, and the danger is that it becomes a sort of transit region rather than a touring region. You need places to stay in order for the economic impact to hit

home.

We did a report last year. Yes, it was another report by a third-party economist, but we do that because they have more credibility, and we can also keep shouting about the reports so that they do not gather dust on a shelf. As it happened, we used Jim Power again. We said that intervention, stimulus and tax incentives were needed to encourage hotel development in parts of Ireland. Those are dirty words to a certain extent, because people always remember the Celtic tiger and hotels being built on roundabouts in the wrong places, but, in certain parts of the country, we have an enormous hotel deficit, and, unless we develop hotels or alternative forms of accommodation — the short-term letting legislation worries me because, if you suddenly lose the self-catering properties from a region, the problem is compounded — there is that danger for places such as Boyle and Lough Key, which you mentioned.

Tourism is a hugely important economic aspect of the region, but, if you do not have places to stay, or, if the Government have contracted the only hotel in town for refugees and asylum seekers, you have a problem. We have been shouting about it for about a year. We are getting a bit of traction, but, again, I am sometimes frustrated that tourism is not thought of as an economic engine.

To digress slightly, in the South, the departmental home of tourism in the Government is with media, culture, sport and arts. We think that it would sit much better alongside enterprise, trade and employment. Fáilte Ireland and, indeed, Tourism Ireland should sit alongside IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. There are lots of challenges and opportunities. The challenges can be overcome and the opportunities maximised, but this is a big concern. Again, if public policy and political decisions can enable the industry, it will deliver. We have seen that in the past, and it can happen again, but, if there are blockers out there, some of the enabling infrastructure will need to change.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

To come in on that briefly, I spoke with the president of the Irish Hotels Federation a couple of days ago and will add a thought from that into the mix. Under current lending conditions for hotels, they have to pay back anything that they borrow within 15 years, based on the idea that you have to update hotel rooms every 15 years. That makes it difficult to make the sums add up: you invest all the money in building costs, and you have to be able to pay everything back in 15 years. The Hotel Federation's additional idea is that, for investment in the main bulk of the hotel — the reception areas and main infrastructure — there be a 30-year payback period, with only the money lent for investment in hotel rooms to be paid back over 15 years.

Without going too far into the detail, part of the cause of the problem might be a lending issue, because, when you look at the opportunity, you see that we have the second highest hotel occupancy of any market in Europe, so there is demand to come and stay on the island of Ireland, in Roscommon and the Hidden Heartlands. It is a question of economics: how we ensure, whether through incentives or lending criteria, that it makes sense for the developers to come in and then go ahead and do it.

I will share one final thought. When it comes to planning, it is also about being ready to think through short-term lets. As we said, they are an asset in accommodation: let us not rule them out in rural areas. There is also alternative accommodation. We are increasingly seeing younger visitors in particular wanting to stay in glamping pods, treehouses, shepherd's huts or whatever other alternative accommodation. There is a big EU scheme in the midlands called Just Transition, with funding going into Fáilte Ireland. A portion of that will be for a scheme to encourage smaller-scale, sustainable accommodation developments. So, that is one to keep an eye on: alternative forms of accommodation that can be developed at a lower cost but still be very charming and make the most of beautiful areas of the landscape. Thank you for the question.

3.15 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much. Next is Juan Watterson, our Isle of Man Member.

The Hon Juan Watterson SHK:

Thank you very much. I am Juan Watterson, Speaker of the House of Keys on the Isle of Man. I hope you do not mind if I move on to a slightly more niche area of tourism: cruise ships. I do not know whether they are a big part of the overall Irish market or what sort of impact they have on the sector. Are there any particular initiatives, working across the Celtic fringe, to try to develop that market around Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man in order to provide a more immersive Celtic offering? Perhaps that could go all the way up to Orkney.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

Thank you for the questions. Cruise ships can be helpful, particularly in developing emerging destinations. Take somewhere like Cobh, for example; it is now one of the most photographed

places on Instagram from across the island of Ireland because cruise ships started coming to it, and people got off the ship for a couple of hours to take pictures. I love your idea of collaboration. You often see that with cruises to Scandinavia or parts of the Mediterranean. Maybe we could take a look at what that would look like holistically around these islands. I am happy to take that conversation offline with you.

The only thing that I would say about cruise ships is that, sometimes, when you are talking about more congested destinations, there is a balancing act to be performed. If there is any hint of overtourism in a location, would you rather have somebody at an attraction for an hour who then gets back on a ship, or somebody who is staying in the locality for many days who goes to that attraction and stay there?

My personal view is that that type of tourism is very useful when you have an emerging destination and are building a place up, but that, when places become a little bit more congested, you may want to prioritise the visitor who stays longer and spends more in the region. That can be better from the point of view of environmental sustainability, as well. Why do we not take up your idea about islands across the British Isles and Ireland and have a look at it offline? Thank you.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

I will echo what Alice said. Dublin Port used to take a lot of cruise business, and then something called Brexit happened and the port changed its whole landscape, putting in a lot of direct European routes and customs stuff. Effectively, the cruise business was prevented from coming to Dublin. Cobh does quite well, now, and Belfast does particularly well from cruise business. There is, however, a very strong argument, with which I would be sympathetic, that cruise business is not great business for a tourism destination, because people do not stay in hotels or buy restaurant meals. They are generally on an all-inclusive holiday and go back to the cruise ship. They visit the local visitor attraction and might buy a trinket or two in a shop, but that is not hugely valuable, economically. Again, if you are talking about finite resources, finite funds and finite energy, or whatever, I would argue that the focus could be on alternative forms of visits to cruises. That is my view.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

On that point, has Killybegs taken off as a cruise destination?

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

Not particularly. I think they are doing work to it, but, to my mind, it has not taken off in any considerable way.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Right. Thank you.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

The only other thing that I would say on the subject of the islands is that a lot of the long-haul operators sell the British Isles as a common destination, which is attractive to all parts of Britain and Ireland. Again, however, the ETA will mess that business up. That is the reality. There is an economic impact to the ETA, and the political classes, who have a blinkered approach to it, are missing that trick. There is such a simple solution: give a waiver to holiday visitors.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much.

Darren Millar, Member of the Senedd.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thank you very much, Co-Chair. Thank you for the presentations. It is interesting to see the trends in the market on the island of Ireland. One of those trends, which has been a global trend, is an increase in faith tourism and spiritual tourism, with people wanting to go on a pilgrimage. In fact, there is a BBC series—it is now on its sixth series—called *Pilgrimage*, because it is a popular sort of topic. And, in fact, the most recent series went along the north Wales Pilgrim's Way. I represent part of north Wales, so it traversed my own constituency. It goes all the way from St Winefride's well in Holywell over to Bardsey island—the island of 20,000 saints—and stops off on the way at cathedrals, churches and other places of interest. I wonder to what extent, on the island of Ireland, you are trying to take advantage of the renewed interest in faith tourism and pilgrimage, and whether you are looking to work with other partners. Reference has already been made to some of the Celtic tourism links, but given that many of our saints traversed the Irish sea and the Celtic sea, it seems to me to be eminently sensible to try and work together to try and maximise the opportunities that those might bring. Is that something that you are looking at, and, if not, are you prepared to look at it, and how can we help to move that forward?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Darren.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

I will just jump in, and then Alice can add to it. You are right about the shared history. St Patrick, I think, was Welsh.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Yes.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

But we have claimed him as our own, and we buried him here, and we will claim St Patrick's Day for all its worth. When you initially asked the question, I thought you said 'fake tourism'—[*Laughter.*]—and I was getting worried that I had missed a memo or something. But you are right, faith tourism is important, and, actually, it is a really attractive form of tourism because it is slow tourism. These are not cruise passengers just here for a few hours; these are people who spend a long time, probably travelling very sustainably. One of the ideas we have had—and Fáilte Ireland is putting a lot of development behind it—is the idea of a coast-to-coast greenway, from Dublin all the way over to the Atlantic coast. Imagine finishing somewhere like Croagh Patrick. You could certainly develop a story—authentically develop a story—about that being a pilgrimage or a kind of faith tourism. I think there are loads of commonalities across the British Isles, but also even on the island of Ireland. I would love to see the Wild Atlantic Way, which, at the moment, stops at the border, continue right up to the Giant's Causeway. There is no reason it should not; it is still the Atlantic way, it is still wild. And there are lots of spiritual and historical stuff there that we could tap into. So, I think it is a great idea.

There is a pot of money every year for what we call 'product development', which Fáilte Ireland spends. Often they do calls for interest. I would love to see that turned on its head. I would love to see the likes of Fáilte Ireland, or, indeed, Tourism Northern Ireland, which also has a pot of money, identify an area such as faith tourism and go, 'Right, we are going to allocate €10 million to product development or to an interpretative centre, or to a track or trail, and then get private operators to bid for it.' So, it is not breaching state aid, but, if you like, the state agency is coming up with the idea. It did happen a few years back, with mixed

success. In Dublin, they came up with—. Fáilte Ireland said it wanted a request for tender for an emigration museum, and it turned out to be very successful. It is now the very successful EPIC museum. But they identified a gap in the market.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Right.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

And I think, certainly, faith pilgrims and so on, there is an opportunity there, and, as you say, it is a growing market and the country has so much to offer.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thank you.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

Thank you for the suggestion. I think, faith tourism, we think about in a couple of ways. You can think of it as a specific segment, so you might have dedicated tour operators who are going after this one segment of someone who wants a very spiritual or faith-led holiday, and that's one group. There is then a generalist visitor who is interested in taking in some of the heritage around this topic, and we certainly focus heavily there. If you think about the biggest motivators for people to visit the island, it is consistently scenery, heritage, people, and St Patrick's Day—you are right that some of the saints were role models in hopping around between the islands. If we take St Patrick's Day, we attract 100,000 overseas visitors who stay on average for eight days. And, for some, it is about the parade and it is about enjoying a general holiday. Others will head up to Northern Ireland, for example, and check out all of the heritage around St Patrick in Downpatrick, in Armagh and Saint Patrick's Way, and so on. So, it is definitely one that we try and build into the generalist itineraries that we promote. Another example would be St Patrick's cathedral. Ninety per cent of the visitors there are from overseas, so we know that—even more, actually, than our domestic audiences—faith, spirituality and heritage in this space appeal overseas. So, we keep it in mind in our overall promotions of the island, and then I think you are prompting me to go away and have another look at who our dedicated tour operators are, because a lot of what we do is in partnership—do we have the right dedicated tour operators in the faith and spirituality space? Thank you for the question.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Alice. Steve Aiken MLA. Steve.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

Thank you very much indeed. It is, interestingly, a question about aviation capacity. Obviously, speaking as the MLA for South Antrim, where, of course, we have got Ireland's second largest and best airport, Belfast International Airport, what should we be doing about improving capacity and bringing international routes into Northern Ireland airports, because I do not foresee that the cap on Dublin is going to be raised any time soon, but we do need to do something about capacity and getting people on this island? Now, we will fight very hard to deal with the ETA problem, but we need your support to make sure that Belfast International Airport gets more long-range international routes coming in.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

Absolutely. I absolutely agree. We are taking a two-pronged approach in Tourism Ireland. No. 1, we would love to have more flights and more visitors coming straight into Northern Ireland and the regions because, from the point of view of spreading the goodness of tourism around the island, that is the optimal solution. So, we work every year with the airports and the airlines, and if there is a route that they are interested in exploring, where our dedicated marketing spend to help promote that route with the airline would make a difference, we absolutely do that, and we tend to get above a 10:1 return on investment for the taxpayer when we do that, because it is very effective to both inspire people about what the island has to offer overall, and then work with Ryanair, Aer Lingus, or whoever it is—EasyJet—to say, 'And now, let us just remind you, here is a flight that actually gets you into Belfast International.'

So, we are already working with the airports in that regard, but I would say it has to be also with expansion of Dublin Airport. It is not an either/or. The reason I say that is, when you talk with the airlines, the reason that they fly a lot of their flights into Dublin is not that they are

full of visitors who could go anywhere on the island; it is that a lot of the make-up of the flight is, firstly, business passengers who want to come into Dublin. Then it is also ongoing passengers who are just using Dublin as a hub and will go on to Europe. Those are what make the flights commercially viable, such that, then, a percentage of the plane is your visitors, your valuable tourists who bring in the goodness. So, unfortunately, it is not possible to say, 'Well, let us just put that flight directly into Belfast or into Cork,' because if the flight was being filled with business passengers and people returning home from their holidays and people going on to the rest of Europe, not all of that is portable. So, what I would say to you is I think we need to do both. We need to do everything we can to market with the airlines and make it viable to bring flights into Belfast International and other parts of the island. But we also need to be realistic in saying it will be a capacity blocker if Dublin does not also have a look at its cap. So, I would like to do both.

And the last thing I would say to you is that when we talk to our US visitors particularly, whilst we think of it being a big distance to go from Dublin to the Giant's Causeway, for a US visitor, a two-hour or a two-and-a-half-hour trip in a car is often their daily commute. So, the positive for Northern Ireland is that, thankfully, a lot of our visitors do not think the distances on the island are as big as we think the distances on the island are. So, once we can keep the ETA from being a blocker, we can happily bring people into Dublin and move them around as and when there are specific flights where it is less viable to actually encourage them to move the flight itself. So, 'Let us do both,' would be my summary.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

Just to add to that, briefly, Alice is dead right: airlines would say it is demand led. Maybe Ryanair have a different approach, but that's usually short-haul European, where they can stimulate demand much easier. But, certainly from the US transatlantic, it is demand led, and if you think of a flight coming into Ireland, with a very layman's approach, it might be a third holiday visitors, who would obviously have no problem coming to Belfast, because there are rich things to do and you are only, as Alice said, two hours from Dublin and four hours from whatever—the Wild Atlantic Way, or whatever. But, it is a third holiday visitors, a third might be returning Irish, and a third might be business people or people who want to connect on to Europe, or the UK, or whatever, and unless Belfast has the same connectivity as Dublin, it is always up against it.

3.30 pm

One interesting angle, and I am speaking off the top of my head to a certain extent, is that it is a competitive space as well. I know that, traditionally, Dublin and Cork, and Shannon were actually more competitive in terms of landing charges and stuff than Belfast. So, that could be looked at. But, Brexit does give an opportunity. One of the concerns we had with Brexit was that, with the UK out of the state aid limitations of Europe, whether, for example, an airport could fund or grant aid or give some sort of big incentive to a carrier to fly in. So, that could be an option, but obviously it is costly. But, it could be a proof-of-concept idea. But that is, obviously, down to your own decision.

The Lord Empey:

Yes.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA:

Regrettably, the Windsor framework addressed that and said we could not use that opportunity for state aid.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

Okay. Well, there you are.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much. Deputy Johnny Guirke. Johnny.

Deputy Johnny Guirke TD:

Yes, I have just a couple of quick points. On the 20 per cent hotel occupancy at the moment, does that include B&Bs? And the second one, where you talk about the 9 per cent flat rate, large hotels would seem to be doing fine; it is the small and medium-sized enterprises that need more help. Do you think that should be separated, that the large hotels are okay and there is more support for the SMEs? And then, I suppose, it is great to see global tourism soaring. Electric vehicle infrastructure around the country would need to be improved as well, I would say. And then, in my own area, you have small tourism groups who do great work, but they do it without any funding. A lot of the funding goes through Fáilte Ireland. Some of these groups, if they got €10,000 to €15,000, they could do amazing work with it—across regions, now, not even just counties, but across regions—and I just wondered what your thinking on that might be.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

Yes, just on the first, the 20 per cent does include all forms of tourism accommodation. So, it is hotels, guest houses, B&Bs. About 13 per cent of that 20 per cent is what is called 'registered accommodation'. So, they are the ones that register with Fáilte Ireland, but you do not have to register with Fáilte Ireland. You are not obliged to. So, the other 7 per cent are unregistered but still legitimate tourism accommodation. So, the likes of guest houses, and so on. So, it does include lots of B&Bs, lots of guest houses, as well as hotels. It is problematic. I do not want to go on about it, but you will have seen that Dundalk recently lost its only hotel, Roscrea lost its only hotel. So, the tourism economies, the visitor economies in those towns are gone, possibly for two or three years, unless the state steps in with alternative forms of accommodation and state beds, rather than commercial beds. Fáilte Ireland have done some really good work on this and, for every €1 a visitor spends on accommodation, €2.50 is spent on ancillary tourism services. So, that is the meal, the pint, the visitor tourist attraction. I know I have made that point, so I will not labour it.

On the VAT at 9 per cent, I would be in favour of 9 per cent for the whole of the tourism and hospitality sector, but I think there is an increasing argument that the smaller businesses, particularly the food-related businesses, need it urgently, and I think the Government should look at splitting the VAT rate at this stage. So, leave accommodation, particularly the bigger hotels, at 13.5 per cent, but give the 9 per cent to the smaller businesses, and particularly the food-related businesses, who are really struggling. Deloitte came out recently with data for Q1, which showed that there was a 141 per cent increase in hospitality closures, compared to Q1 last year. So, let us give them a break and restore the VAT at 9 per cent.

On EV, I fully agree with you. The tourism industry is absolutely committed to the 51 per cent reduction by 2030 in carbon, and being net neutral, or carbon neutral, by 2050, but a lot of it is outside the control of the tourism industry. Alice and I were at a conference last November in Ennistimon. That is a carbon-neutral hotel, which is brilliant. The convention centre in Dublin is carbon neutral. There is a lot of really positive stuff. I mentioned the Shannon boat cruises, but there is a lot of stuff that requires enabling infrastructure, and I am afraid that only the state can step in, and, particularly on EV and renewable energy, the state needs to ramp up its investment in that space, because the industry is ready to play its part, but it can only control what it can control.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

I think my voice has completely gone. Thankfully, I agree with what Eoghan said, for the most part.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

We can come back to that question if you want to leave it for a few minutes, Alice.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

Let us see. No, if everyone can cope with the grating sound, then I can cope with answering.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Perfect.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

We have some campaigns going this year to try and help the SMEs specifically and downstream businesses. We are focusing on campaigns that show visitors getting out and about and enjoying the local kayaking, the local cafes, the food scene. We are also bringing publicity partners, like the Julia Bradbury show you saw earlier, out to the downstream businesses, to try and hero what they offer, and encourage people to stay in alternative accommodation and come and see what they have to offer.

The other piece on sustainability to mention is, certainly, electric vehicle charging is important. I also think transport beyond cars is worth thinking about, in any investments being made. Big announcements have been made recently apropos rail infrastructure and rail links between Ireland, Northern Ireland and, hopefully, ultimately, Donegal again. That is all really positive. One of the most visited pages on the Tourism Ireland overseas website is, 'How to get around Ireland by rail.' So, there is a growing segment of younger visitors, particularly from the US where they drive on the other side of the road, who do not want to rent a car when they come here. They often feel that they need to, or it may play into people jumping onto a bus that will take them from one to the next iconic big visitor attraction, but, actually, greater rail links would help get people out into the regions as well. So, that would be the bit to add on to your idea around EV charging, which would be very welcome.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Alice. Deputy Paul Kehoe. Paul.

Mr Paul Kehoe TD:

Thank you very much, Chairman. Eoghan has answered one of my questions, and that was regarding the 9 per cent VAT rate on the hospitality sector and separating the restaurants from the hotels. The problem, I will say, was an issue regarding hotels and restaurants within the hotel sector, and I would be interested in your views on that, and that is specifically the smaller restaurants that might be in a hotel. It could be under the same roof, but operating under a different name just for taxation purposes.

The other issue is the smaller, family-run hotels that have Ukrainians or international protection people in them at the moment. I can never see them coming back into operation again, and perhaps you could give your view on that.

Are we losing out on large conferences? If you take it that the Citywest Hotel is gone now at the moment, and it would have been a very important conference centre just outside the greater Dublin area. We have the national convention centre, a smaller convention centre and another convention centre in the city centre, but having that convention centre with the hotel right on campus and everything like that, you can see the attractiveness of it. Are we losing out on large conferences? What financial attractions are needed and required for more hotels to be built in the country? If you go back a number of years, there were tax breaks for building hotels. Do we need to reintroduce those? If we do, have you spoken to the Department of Finance on the same issue or to relevant Government Ministers to put your points across, and what are you hearing back or what replies are you getting back?

Just a final question, then, is: have hotels overpriced themselves? I speak to people who are going away in Ireland for three or four nights and they are saying that they can go to Spain, get their flights and accommodation and eat out for three or four nights for, often, less than what it might cost them for three or four nights in the Republic of Ireland. I am not sure what hotel prices are like in the North. So, if you could answer those for me, thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Paul.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

Thanks very much. I will just deal with the few I jotted down, so I will deal with them in the sequence that I jotted them down in. If I missed out any, maybe remind me. This splitting of the VAT, 9 per cent, as I said earlier, I am in favour. I would like the accommodation VAT rate to be kept under constant review, because VAT for tourism, for accommodation in Europe, is

all around 9 per cent or 10 per cent, so at 13.5 per cent we are uncompetitive. You mentioned hotel pricing; it does not help when you have a high sales tax on top of the cost of a room. But the short answer is that I am in favour of VAT at 9 per cent for a restaurant.

The feedback traditionally from the Department of Finance, and it is their area, has been a firm 'no' and, in fact, 'Technically, it is not possible.' Now, we have always pushed back and said, 'VAT is split between hotels and restaurants across the rest of Europe, so why cannot it be done in Ireland?' If there is that thing about, 'How will we know if it is a hotel or a restaurant?', to my mind, that is not an issue in Belgium, France, Spain or Italy. I think that it maligns the industry to a certain extent. So, I am in favour of VAT at 9 per cent for hospitality, for food-related services. Of course, the finance department, the finance mandarins, would again say that there is a cost to it, and they are right, there is a cost to it. With the food-related element, I think it is around €400 million per annum. But, again, I go back to that Deloitte figure that I mentioned of 141 per cent increase in hospitality closures in Q1 compared with Q1 last year. That is a huge cost for the state, and I think the cost-benefit analysis would show that the benefit far outweighs it.

I do think we need incentives and some tax write-offs or whatever for hotel development. As I mentioned earlier, we did an economic report in the summer. It focused particularly on the midlands, where it is most acute, but there are lots of parts of the country where there is a hotel deficit and construction and development costs are too high. So, again, we need a sort of stimulus there and a carrot.

Again, the feedback has been quite negative, because particularly the finance mandarins will remember when the previous iteration of that scheme sort of, not went out of control, but was exploited and we had an oversupply. But I think we learn from that and we just put together a better scheme, and one that is more geographically focused and time-bound, because there are developers out there, there is demand, as Alice has referenced, but at the moment, the issue is the cost of construction. We are missing out on large conferences, undeniably, and I think we could do more on that front.

And, overpricing hotels, well, in terms of demand and supply, if you had more hotels, it would moderate price. That is the best way to moderate price. I am very critical of individual hotel operators who charge excessive prices on the Taylor Swift concert, or whatever. And that, I think, gives the industry a very bad name and actually makes our lobbying asks very difficult. But if you look at it in the round, the overseas visitor actually sees Ireland as pretty

decent value for money, and if you look at it in the totality of a full month—for example, June, July or August—the average daily rate of a hotel room in Ireland is comparable with competitor cities or countries. But on those individual high-demand nights, there are a handful of operators, a small minority of operators, who charge excessive prices, and they are the ones who are on the Joe Duffy show, or whatever. And we, as an industry, I do not think that we defend them, because, to my mind, the consumer should go elsewhere and I do not think they are doing anything for the industry's reputation, but we are on the back foot. But the best way to moderate price is competition, is more hotels, and that would equalise demand and supply as well.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

I agree with that, Eoghan, apropos supply of hotels. I think the other thing, from a Tourism Ireland point of view, we are investing in marketing, and this is why, also, you will hear us talk so much about trying to stimulate demand for spring and for autumn. Because, if you think about it, if you go to the trouble of having the infrastructure that you have for your hotel, sitting in a town, what you do not want is that it is full, with uncompetitive pricing, in the summer months or for the Taylor Swift concert, but then relatively empty or running at a loss through the rest of the year. So, I think, also, just trying to moderate when we are generating demand for, so that you get a more even tourism season from spring right through to the end of autumn and, ultimately, we will tackle winter as well, which will be a positive.

Apropos events, we have got a Meet in Ireland group and, again, we operate all Ireland, between Tourism Northern Ireland and Fáilte Ireland, and Tourism Ireland takes the overseas piece, stimulating demand for conferences and business events. That actually plays very nicely into the point on seasonality as well, because, if you think about it, business travel, by definition, tends to be off season. It does not happen in the summer months as much because people are on their holidays, and it tends to be midweek, and the spend per visitor also tends to be higher than with consumers. So, there are many reasons to love the concept of business travel, and we have put together our Meet in Ireland group and we are overseas promoting to event organisers to bring their events to Ireland. Belfast is a heavy hitter here, as is Dublin, but increasingly, there are new large-scale event places to visit, conference centres, et cetera, that are emerging across the rest of the country. And Fáilte Ireland, actually, has a fund to stimulate the building and development of some of those larger scale event spaces as well. So, I think, positive moves being made there, and for reasons of seasonality, for reasons of

value per tourist, getting visitors to meet here, business visitors to come here, is a really good opportunity for the future, for strategic reasons.

3.45 pm

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

And just one last point, all the areas that we are talking about, you know, the vast tax breaks for developers, the importance of business tourism, shows the economic value of tourism and that is—. I go back to one of my earlier points that tourism within the Government architecture, I do not think that it sits comfortably alongside media, arts, sport and all the other things. I think it should be in an economics portfolio. Enterprise, trade and employment would be the obvious one, because, I think, if you want a decision on VAT or you want a decision on the impact of refugees in a town on the local economy, it is an economic decision, so it should be taken by an economic ministry. So, I know that might be difficult in the current Government because there are only a few months left, but, certainly, for the next administration and any party political manifestos that are being written around the table, I would love to see tourism moved alongside an economics ministry.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

I feel I must add on to that to say, 'That said, huge thanks to the departments that do fund Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland and Tourism Ireland today.' So, not to undercut your provocative question, we are also very grateful for the support we get from the relevant Ministers and departments today.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Alice. Lord Reg Empey. Reg.

The Lord Empey:

Chair, I would just like to follow up on Steve Aiken's point. When I was dealing with tourism, we had a thing called the 'air route development fund' and that was designed to attract a North American airline, and we got Continental to do it. But it cannot be done on tourism simply alone, because the only thing that makes it pay is the 15 or 20 seats at the front. So, it would have to be a joint operation: business and tourism. And, yes, state aid is still—. We are subject to EU state aid rules. But that does not mean that you cannot have state aid; it just means you have to have it agreed. So, the question I would like to put to colleagues would be: to make it work, it has to be a joint business and tourism operation—

and it does not necessarily have to be an end destination, it could be a drop-off—so, I am just wondering if there could be communication between both business and tourism sectors, and if the respective Governments put a case together to see if you could get state aid, what that would mean. You would have to get agreement. But, given that we do not really have anything other than a KLM flight to Amsterdam and holiday flights at the moment—there is nothing transatlantic—I just would have thought, Chair, it might be worth seeing if that could be explored.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Reg. Alice.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

I think that is a really good long-term strategic point that often foreign direct investment and hubs of overseas businesses that have departments based on the island of Ireland—. It goes very well with also then getting the connectivity in place. I came from the tech industry, and I can tell you that Google and Meta lobbied hard to have a direct flight to San Francisco, and I am now very happy they did, because I am sure that benefits us for tourism as well.

For Northern Ireland, I have to say, the First Minister and deputy First Minister did a tremendous job in Washington DC of getting the message out that Northern Ireland is open for business and ready to work with investors in the US. And I think staying joined up with Invest Northern Ireland and the relevant departments, and maybe, as you say, getting together some more joined-up plans on how we make sure the foreign direct investment and business stimulus packages, and then also the thought of air connectivity, that they go together quite well as a package, is a great suggestion, thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Alice. Eoghan, did you want to come in?

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

Nothing particularly to add. I think it has to be a collective, it has to be business, leisure, tourism; it has to be connected to work, and connectivity is vital. As we have referenced, the full aircraft does not disembark at Belfast or Dublin and enjoy an Irish tourism product; they continue on somewhere else. And unless there is the connectivity, a business person going to Europe or whatever is not going to fly into Belfast and then travel down to Dublin

and continue their route. So, it is multifaceted, but the only way is a collective collaborative approach.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you. Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh. Aengus.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD:

Go raibh maith agat. I think, as Alice mentioned, it is a balancing act. There is one other balancing act where there is a host community and, as mentioned there, short-term lets. There is a dilemma, especially in the west of Ireland, where communities feel under huge pressure, where they are trying to grow, where couples want to live in those communities, but short-term lets are preventing them. For instance, we had before the committee I chair only last week a group called Bánú—‘bánú’ means ‘clearance’ or ‘depopulation’—it is a community group set up to advocate for housing solutions. Because, to give the example of February this year, which is not, obviously, the height of the tourist season, there were only four houses for rent in an area between Barna and Carna—that is the Connemara Gaeltacht, most of it—and 197 Airbnbs. So, the community understands tourism and they benefit from tourism. They want to benefit more, but we have that dilemma of how do we square that circle? It is a big challenge, especially with, as you mentioned, hotels closing, similar smaller bed and breakfasts closing or guesthouses and the like, and the need not just for a strategy around tourism, but obviously we need to link it to the housing crisis.

One of the big changes that we have had in the last 20 years in particular is that whereas before, and there was mention made, there was very little else, there was no industry, but especially in the last five years, people have, because of COVID, realised that they can work at home, with the rollout of broadband and that, so they want to stay in those areas. And especially from my point of view, and the committee is to do with the Gaeltacht and the Irish-speaking areas, we want to try to ensure that that stays. One of the selling points for tourism is that here you have, in the west coast in particular, an area where people are speaking Irish continuously, and we want to make sure that the young generation, the next generation, stay there rather than going to Australia or be left out. The dilemma is how do we square that, or at the very least that people understand that there is this, not conflict, but there is this dilemma there.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Aengus.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

I think that is a great point to make also. Tourism should never exist as a goal in and of itself in isolation from the rest of society. Of course tourism should exist in order to serve and enrich the rest of society and the communities in which it exists. I think the point you are making is that there is definitely a balance to be achieved on short-term lets. Probably where—well, I will not speak for Eoghan, because I know he will jump in in a second—probably where we would be coming from is to make sure, when planners get to look at short-term lets in rural communities, that they are just having a thoughtful process where they consider on the one hand that you definitely want to have housing for local people so that they can stay, they can stay in Gaeltacht areas, they can stay in their communities, but equally you want those local people to have options of jobs, and often the jobs will come from the tourism industry. So, it is going to be a balancing act of what kind of capacity you think you need for long-term rental properties or properties for sale within a community for people to live there permanently, and then, to support the tourism jobs that keep people in the area, how much accommodation you need from a tourism point of view also. But you make a great point that, even in rural areas, it is a balance to be achieved and it will require planners to think about it in a nuanced way and not just think in a black or white way that either short-term lets are good or bad. Basically, you want to have enough accommodation for people to live locally, but also a healthy tourism industry that supports their jobs, employment and ability to stay and thrive in the region.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

Yes, it is a balancing act. I think our concern heretofore was that there was a broad-brush-stroke approach being taken, driven by the department of housing, because it is a housing-for-all issue that short-term lets were taking up lots of available accommodation for long-term rental. We just argued that, particularly in coastal and rural and regional Ireland, you need that accommodation stock for tourism purposes. So, there needed to be an element of discretion that local authorities would have. I think Government are coming round to that way. I heard Minister Catherine Martin on Radio Kerry, I think it was, last week, because I think it was Meitheal, the big trade show, that was there, and that Alice was at, and Minister Martin was on Radio Kerry, and she more or less said the same. So, I was pleased to hear

that, because at least the tourism argument was now being made at departmental level to the department of housing, because it was just us shouting from the sidelines up to now.

And I am very, very aware that it is a luxury for me, with a helicopter view, to have an opinion on this, hopefully an informed opinion, but I do not have to make the really difficult policy decisions. And I get that these are really difficult things, but, again, I go back to my central point: tourism has got to be considered. The impact on tourism has got to be considered. So, it needs to be weighed up—an analysis of the area, the available accommodation and the importance of tourism to that particular area. Because remember, if tourism accommodation stopped because you have lost the Airbnbs and the self-catering units and whilst the local hotel is given over to refugees for two, three or four years, then you have a tourism problem in the town for the restaurants, for the shops—that busy summer season is jeopardised, and that is not good for anyone.

So, it is not easy, but my issue, or our issue, has been that, for too long, it has been talked about purely at the department of housing, but I am pleased that tourism is getting—belatedly, because the legislation is due to come into effect this summer—considered. So, I hope a pragmatic conclusion comes to the surface.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you. Senator Emer Currie. Emer.

Senator Emer Currie:

Thank you very much, Chair. These have been excellent presentations, and I hope you can circulate the slides with us all, because I think it is something that we will be coming back to in our respective Parliaments. You spoke about barriers from an infrastructure perspective, the hotels and the cap at the airport. What about planning? How often do you come into issues in relation to the planning system, and also, specifically in relation to greenways and walking tours, is that on your radar, because I know that they would say that just within these jurisdictions in the room there might be different approaches to, say, rights of way? So, if you have got any information to share on that.

The other related question is in relation to products themselves. Do you feel that there is enough capital available for new products? Shared Island funding has put a lot of money into the border region and the north-west, which is excellent, but do you feel that there is enough available funding for new types of products, particularly, I think, in the space of sustainable

tourism, where I think there are lots of opportunities around the country and, actually, probably, we only scratch the surface in terms of actual product delivery?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Emer.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

I am happy to start off answering that as well as I can. If you talk to a hotel developer—and, again, I am no expert in the area—their two big gripes are cost—. Now, if it is Dublin, Cork or whatever, or I am sure Belfast, the costs are still extraordinary, but the demand is really strong, and they know they will get a return on their investment. Outside of those urban hotspots, there is a problem. So, it is cost, and that is where we say tax incentives or some sort of stimulation is needed, but also the other big gripe is planning—the length it takes, the objections, the An Bord Pleanála. Certainly in Dublin there is a feeling that Dublin City Council have a view that there are parts of Dublin that are overconcentrated with hotels, and that is taking away from other—. There should be more flexibility on the height in certain parts of the country. So, planning is a big gripe.

The aviation issue is a planning issue. That 32 million passenger cap at Dublin Airport is actually nothing to do with the environment, it is nothing to do with the capacity at the airport, it is to do with the infrastructure around the airport—getting to and from the airport, the M50, all that sort of stuff, and it has obviously gone to the local authority. But the idea of one local authority, Fingal, deciding on the capacity of such an important strategic asset to the island of Ireland is an issue. Maybe for key strategic assets, there should be a reformed planning system, and there should be a different planning system.

4.00 pm.

On the capital sums, Fáilte Ireland disperse the capital money, and there is a pot of money for capital money each year. Fáilte Ireland would argue that planning is a problem for them, because if they have got €30 million to spend in one year—. But if the planning is not sanctioned or actioned, some of that money might actually end up going back to the Exchequer because it cannot be paid out. Fáilte would often make the argument that they need a multi-annual capital fund, so not necessarily an increased annual fund, but if it is €30 million per year, give €150 million over the five years, and that would give flexibility rather than having to spend every cent that you have been allocated in capital money by 31

December. And, of course, the incentive then is to just spend it—it has to be spent wisely. That multi-annual funding for tourism capital, I think, would be important. And there is multi-annual funding for other sectors, so I do not see why tourism could not achieve it.

On your point on the greenways, again, farmers are holding out for this and that, and I think there is a slowness sometimes from getting greenways completed, but they are so, so powerful, and it is a really attractive way to see Ireland, by bike or by foot. We only need to look at Waterford or the Achill greenway to see the success of it, and this idea of a coast-to-coast greenway I am particularly excited about. You can imagine Alice and her colleagues marketing that abroad and having some fancy title on it or brand on it, but it is really appealing. Land in Dublin, or go to Belfast and come down to Dublin, and then leisurely go across, through Roscommon and all the places that have been mentioned earlier, to the west coast—very appealing. But that is product, that is investment, that is strategic. It requires funding over time, it requires planning—allowances for planning. So, it is complex.

Again, I go back to the point that I am glad that, to a certain extent, I am not the policy maker. But I have all the answers.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

On greenways specifically, I think this forum is doing a great job problem solving on some of the opportunities ahead and some of the challenges. Greenways, I think, have been a huge success, and a little bit of a revolution in tourism in Ireland, because if you think back to 20 years ago, where you had a lot of short-hop visitors heading to Temple Bar and then heading home again, the transformation helped a little bit—if we look for a silver lining from COVID—from COVID, with COVID helping people to realise how healthy and refreshing it is to spend time outdoors, to walk, to cycle. And now we see the majority of visitors who come to the island of Ireland intent on some time hiking, cycling, getting out on waterways. There have been over 1,000 km of greenways opened up. Some of them have reached a really iconic status. You mentioned Waterford or the great western greenway. So, I commend everybody here who has been involved along the way in encouraging the development of those. I am excited to see many more in the pipeline, and we are specifically marketing those more sustainable ways to get out into the environment and enjoy the scenery.

And then you mentioned capital. I think we have talked a lot about accommodation. There are limits to how much capital can be used for accommodation, so what you will find is that the development agencies will tend to put the capital into developing new visitor attractions and

wonderful places to see, and there have been some huge successes on that front, for example the Avondale Beyond the Trees experience, if anyone has visited that—that was partly Fáilte Ireland-funded over recent years. But the issue along the way is, if you are investing the capital in attractions but there is nowhere for people to stay or people are having trouble flying into the island, that is a real blocker.

So, there is huge value in what the development agencies do in investing capital, and we should absolutely keep that investment up, but I think that, at the same time, just to keep it in balance, we do always need to look at access and accommodation alongside that, otherwise you are building things but there are blockers for people getting to come and see them. So, I think all of the conversations here today are really relevant to that point.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Alice. Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív. Éamon.

Mr Éamon Ó Cuív TD:

Go raibh maith agat. It was just a number of issues. I live in a very scenic area in Connemara, between Ashford Castle and Ballynahinch—some fairly iconic spots. But the reality is we are critically short of all-weather facilities, particularly for families. You can look at the scenery, fine, but if it is a wet day, it is not great. You can go to beaches, but if the weather is not suitable, that is not—. And people, in my experience, tend to go to destinations. So, when people come into Connemara, they go to Kylemore Abbey, because even though they have seen the scenery on the way, they want a destination. So, I was wondering, are there any thoughts on making sure that areas of high attractiveness but low numbers of all-weather facilities would get particular assistance?

And the second one—you mentioned planning. The big issue in our area is getting planning for visitor attractions—anything—because of the nature, and the ecology. That is a major problem.

One final point—a lot of Ukrainians came to Connemara, and they are very welcome. But the numbers are beginning to drop, and there is consolidation. Looking at the hotels, the top-end hotels that are open all year did not take them, but a lot of older hotels took Ukrainians. My view is that one reason for this is that these hotels had really come to the end of their useful modern life because they had not been rebuilt or refurbished for many years. I am sure this will be true all over the country, but has any thought been given to a programme that makes

sure there are budget hotels—not necessarily the top-end ones because they survive—strategically located so we can attract people into the region? Otherwise, it is all day trips, and day trips do not leave that much money behind them.

Mr Eoghan O'Mara Walsh:

Thanks very much, Deputy. On the hotels and Ukraine, I often think: what if I was a regional hotelier with a seasonal business, worried about the increases in VAT, costs, energy, insurance and all the other stuff, and saw that the North American market was not attracted to my product and the European markets were a bit soft? If somebody from the Department of Integration suddenly picked up the phone and said, “I am going to guarantee 100% occupancy for the next two years. Here’s a cheque every month”, it would be quite a tempting offer. I can understand why regional hoteliers sign up to it. The risk is that it denudes the tourism offering in that area. I do not think the Government should be making that phone call; they should be providing alternative forms of accommodation, whether that means state institutions or modular housing, local authority buildings or vacant dwellings—now they are talking about reception centres.

You mentioned that the number of Ukrainian refugees has dwindled a little in your area but, as I understand it, the run rate into the country is still relatively high. I am lucky enough to have holiday home in Louisburgh and there is a Ukrainian family staying in the village. They are brilliant people who are working locally and all that sort of stuff. But when the local hotel is no longer a hotel, there is a problem. I know I am repeating myself, but Failte Ireland came up with some economic analysis and reckons that the number of beds lost from the system is costing the Board of Tourism economy about €1.1 billion per annum. The majority of that pain is being felt in regional Ireland. It is a call-out to politicians and policymakers that an alternative form of accommodation needs to be found, because we cannot keep on using hotel stock.

On your point about attractions and stuff, people go for destinations and there needs to be a cluster of things to see and do, which includes beds but also a really good visitor attraction, natural scenery and a restaurant. It is a kind of complex ecosystem, to a certain extent. As I said during my presentation, you are showcasing the best of the country to an international audience and in due course that has a knock-on effect on things such as the FDI and so on, because people can suddenly go, “Wow, Ireland is in Europe, and it is really appealing. It is easy to get to, with really nice people”—all that sort of stuff.

Looking at development, the private sector will do so much, but certain parts of the country require state investment and I would love to see some of the capital money that we mentioned

earlier. Rather than a call to the market about how they want to spend it, we should be a bit more proactive and say, “Right, this part of the country needs it”. I have often thought that the north-west, for example, lacks built visitor attractions, like a Bunratty Folk Park or something iconic—a visitor attraction that can attract more than 100,000 people. Maybe instead we have to be proactive and identify a product gap, allocate money towards it and then ask the market to run and operate it for 20 years, or whatever—something along those lines.

Ms Alice Mansergh:

To share a recent issue, one of our biggest tour operators in Great Britain over the past 30 years was with us last week. You mentioned Bunratty Folk Park; many people have experienced the Bunratty Banquet. The banquet is a great example of the downstream business issues when accommodation goes out of the system. Our tour operator would previously have had two hotels co-located. Both those hotels are gone, so the operator was then programming Limerick as the place to stay. You would take people to the banquet and then bring them to Limerick, but that hotel has gone. You are right that we are hearing that the net number of Ukrainians is dropping, but the Limerick hotel that pulled out is now housing Irish people and mixed-origin people on a humanitarian basis.

4.15 pm.

We have all become comfortable using Ukrainians as a byword for when a hotel is used for humanitarian purposes, but it is worth keeping in mind that it does not particularly benefit tourism if Ukrainians leave but then somebody else with a humanitarian need comes in. As Eoghan said, the solution is thinking through, for the long term, where we need to accommodate people and how we do that without taking hotels and accommodation offline. We are doing some problem solving in the case of the Bunratty Banquet, to keep it going, but it is a good illustration of the kind of topic that we heard about earlier.

Lastly, on attractions, we often hear from folk that there is a frustration that there are a handful of iconic 100,000-plus visitor attractions around the island, be it the Giant’s Causeway, Titanic Belfast or the Cliffs of Moher. There is a sense that you have visitors coming here and going to the attraction, but are they really spreading the goodness around the island? That is another big focus of our marketing spend overseas this year. If you are a consumer, the reality is that if you go to Paris for the first time, you are going to want to see the Eiffel Tower. Maybe if you come to the island of Ireland for the first time, you are going to want to see the Cliffs of Moher.

What we can do now, through database marketing, is understand when someone is researching the Cliffs of Moher online, and then we immediately start to surface to them, through our digital materials, other things nearby. You are going to the Cliffs of Moher; have you thought about the Aran Islands, visiting Doolin and the traditional pub scene? Have you thought about greenways nearby or Bunratty Castle, et cetera? We can start to use data to tap into when someone overseas is researching something on the island; we can think how we surface more of the cluster of things to do nearby so that we are starting to elongate the bucket list and get people to stay for longer and spread the goodness across the existing attractions. Once people get out and about, it is often the small and medium-sized local businesses that provide the most magical experiences or interactions with people. It is the local tour guide, or the person doing a sheepdog demonstration on their farm who you really remember. There is a huge benefit for everybody if we can spread the interest from the iconic attractions to all the other great things nearby, and support people.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I think I have called everybody who offered. I sincerely thank Alice and Eoghan for excellent contributions, right from your initial contribution through to answering and engaging so well with our members, across such a varied subject. It is a very upbeat message about the industry throughout all the island, and that is not ignoring the challenges that are there. A lot are principally due to the war that has unfortunately been inflicted on Ukraine, and the resultant increase in costs, et cetera. I thank you sincerely for your contributions and we wish both of you well in your work. We have come across Eoghan quite often, particularly in the aftermath of Covid. He was a constant advocate, along with other colleagues in the tourism and hospitality sector. As parliamentarians, we will continue to support the tourism industry throughout our respective jurisdictions. We very much appreciate your presence and contributions today.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Good afternoon, I am acting Co-Chair for the next couple of sessions. I hope that the behaviour will be as good as it is in the Scottish Parliament. I shall just leave that comment there in case I get into trouble when I get back home. The next item on the agenda is a progress report from Committee D, Environment and Social. I therefore now call the chair of Committee D, Lord Dubs, to bring the Assembly up to date on the work of the committee.

PROGRESS REPORT FROM COMMITTEE D (ENVIRONMENT & SOCIAL)

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you very much, Co-Chair, and thank you for arranging to have this item today rather than tomorrow, because I have to fly back tomorrow for votes on the Rwanda Bill in the Lords. It is also timely because I am following on from the previous sessions in this report, and there is quite a bit of overlap between tourism and housing in rural areas. The only problem is that Committee D is halfway through its work, so you will have to hear from us again when we have finished, but bearing in mind that quite a lot can be said even at this stage.

We felt that looking at the topic of rural housing was appropriate, particularly as our previous work had been on minority languages, and there is some overlap between local housing needs and not diluting the use of minority languages by having so many people coming from elsewhere. That is one separate point.

We have taken evidence twice so far: once in County Kildare in conjunction with the last plenary session, and once in Edinburgh. We propose to take evidence in Cardiff, then we will go to Cornwall to look at an area where there are tensions between housing and tourism—incomers and local people—and will be taking evidence in Belfast all day. This is bearing in mind that the co-chair advised us that, where possible, we should go to the areas where there are pressures or tensions and where it is more appropriate. We tried to do that in Scotland and it did not quite work out for geographical reasons, but we think it will work out in Cornwall, which is, after all, one of the high spots of tourism in England.

We have some sessions to come and we are looking at a number of things. There is the need to balance and increase the availability of rural housing while keeping local communities intact where possible, including their language, heritage and sometimes even crofting communities. We want to look at the different needs of coastal, inland and land-based communities. There is a question of rural poverty, including fuel poverty. There is the impact of second homes, holiday lets and Airbnbs on the availability of local housing. There is sometimes a lack of opportunity for key workers to live in the communities where they want to be able to do their work. There are possibly the impacts of Brexit and Covid. There is also the need for sustainable development and the refurbishment of vacant properties. The thing has got much more complicated since we started. We thought it would be fairly straightforward, but there are far more wide-ranging issues now.

We have looked at all BIPA jurisdictions, or the main ones anyway, and work is being done on the issue in all five of them. That does not mean that we will simply duplicate what has been done, but it does mean that there is quite a lot of awareness in the jurisdictions of the problems that there are.

We occasionally hear about debates and of issues emerging in the local papers. For example, the Welsh Government had a report on developing new policies on second homes in Wales. In Scotland, they published *Housing to 2040*. They were concerned with supporting communities to thrive and stem rural depopulation, which we had not come across anywhere else but is an issue in parts of Scotland. In Ireland, quite a lot of work has been done on rural development policy from 2021 to 2025. In Northern Ireland, there is a rural framework, which was more focused on tourism than housing overall. In England, issues have been publicised to do with second homes, holiday lets and Airbnbs.

I will look at the evidence sessions that we had. The session in Ireland produced particular challenges in the Gaeltacht. There, if we dilute the presence of local people who speak the language with people from elsewhere who do not, we are weakening the people who wish to maintain Irish as a spoken language. Some of the witnesses were very keen that we should be careful about how we make recommendations. For example, we learned from Donegal County Council that there were 9,373 holiday homes in Donegal, which is quite a large number in relation to its size and population. We learned from Maynooth University that, in 11 rural counties examined, there are 37 times more short-term lettings available than long-term lettings. The whole point, of course, is that short-term lettings are only for tourists, whereas long-term lettings are for local people. I felt that that was a fantastic imbalance. There were also some policy responses, which I want to come on to in a little while.

Some of the evidence in Scotland that came forward also said that short-term legislation is a distraction—in other words, the bottom line should be that there have to be more houses. However, although we have not come to that yet in our committee work, it is fairly clear that, in some areas, there is no land capacity to build more—for example in the Lake District—or the policy is not to build more because of weakening the national park. Building more to deal with the pressures is possible in some areas but not all.

We looked at the different models, with the tensions that there may be between local people and tourists or others, and we hope to come up with some more. These overlap with the last talk and are to be covered in a Motion in a while.

Some of the models deal with methods of planning, because planning controls, exercised wisely and judiciously, can help to achieve a sensible balance. But it depends on how they work and they are not easy solutions in all areas. Then there is the possibility of taxation. One can have differential rates of local taxation. The tourism industry may not like that, but some of this is to help local people or to give them a chance of access to housing. The problem with that is that, if you have a tax, you tend to weaken tourism, so our speakers may not have been pleased to hear that.

There is also a model that we are going to look at, which I came across in the Lake District. In the national park, very little new building is allowed, as I said, but quite often there are updates, conversations and improvements. Attached to the planning permission is a stipulation that the property must be let or sold only to people who will be local—defined as living there 11 months out of 12. That is pretty stringent but hard to enforce, so we shall have a look at how it is done. It links planning to this whole issue, the idea of course being that, if you achieve that, you have a two-tier housing market, with lower prices for local people and higher prices for people who want to come in from outside. That may or may not be socially acceptable, but local people will certainly be given more of a chance to have access to housing. I personally find that quite an interesting model, as well as looking at whether it is possible to increase the amount of housing altogether.

We have quite a lot more work to do. I hope that the outcome will be useful to all our jurisdictions, because it may help them to look at models of approach that have been found to work, or maybe not, elsewhere, all of which should be there the next time you hear from Committee D in a report on our findings.

There is a tiny difficulty of course: we have dates for Cardiff but, given the proximity of elections, I am not sure whether we can quite do our remaining visits before an election. The problem with going to Cornwall, a prime example of an area with tension between local people and holidaymakers, tourists or offcomers, is that, if we go in the summer during tourist season, it would be nice but might be difficult even to find a hotel to stay in, so we have decided to go out of season. We will have to see whether we can manage to go before the election. I am sorry that I cannot give you a date when we will have completed it all.

I thank you for your attention to this, and I thank the committee members, who have worked pretty hard so far and will now go even further. There will be a chance to discuss some of these issues in the Motion that will shortly be moved.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Lord Dubs, for that update, which was very interesting. I would also echo the thanks on the hard work of your committee members. I wish you all success as you continue your work on the subject. We will now move on to the next item on the agenda.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM AND PROVISION FOR HOUSING IN RURAL AREAS ACROSS THE BIPA JURISDICTIONS

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

We will commence the debate on the following motion which has been approved by the steering committee.

The motion is:

”That the Assembly will consider the relationships between the development of tourism and provision for housing in rural areas across the BIPA jurisdictions.”

Mr Seán Crowe TD:

I move the motion.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

The motion has been formally moved so I now call on Members to make contributions on the motion. As ever, I call for succinct contributions to the extent possible from all those who wish to speak so that we can get in as many Members as possible. First, I call Darren Millar.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thanks to Alf Dubs and his committee for the hard work that they've done already on this particular topic. There's no doubt that there are tensions in some communities where tourism is, if you like, overtaking the needs of the local community. We've certainly seen that in some parts of Wales where local people have been priced out of the housing market and those people that can afford those properties are very often from outside and use it as a base at the weekends or just for holiday periods. One of the instruments which is being used by the Welsh Government to try to address this particular problem is the imposition of council tax premiums on second homes and, I have to say, that seems to be having only a marginal effect at the moment. Unfortunately, it's such a blunt instrument it's also impacting on some people who

find themselves caught up with second home, sometimes through no fault of their own because a family member may have been bereaved or some other such situation. We need to get to grips with this and I think that trying to find examples of good practice across our jurisdictions and being able to share that is something very positive.

Reference was made earlier though to the lack of accommodation in some of our tourism areas because of the use of overnight beds for non-tourism purposes. We do also encounter these problems in some parts of Wales. One of the reasons, of course, that people have exited the rented housing market in favour of self-catering accommodation is because of the additional burdens that some landlords feel are preventing them from being able to make a decent return on their investment properties, and as a result of that, they are choosing to pursue self-catering lets as an alternative to the income that they can generate. Clearly, there's a financial incentive for them to be able to do that, so it is imperative that there's engagement with the residential landlords, and indeed with the self-catering let industry, in order to try and overcome some of these problems and to get a better balance in local communities. I do wonder whether the planning system may be a more effective way, certainly in the UK, to try to address the abundance of self-catering lets in some places versus the availability of decent housing for local people rather than the blunt instrument that is council tax premiums, which seems to be the favoured one of the day.

I'm looking forward very much to seeing the committee complete its work. I hope that it will be able to do that in a timely fashion, with the continuity of the current members of that committee. I look forward to seeing its findings and recommendations when it comes forward with them. Thank you, Chair.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Darren. I now call Lord Bruce.

Rt Hon the Lord Bruce:

Thanks very much. Thanks Alf for that. I accept that it's complicated and it is variable across different communities but, at the risk of stating the obvious, we used to have quite a simple housing policy. Basically, in regard to council housing or social housing - without re-entering the debate about the right to buy - but the consequence of the right to buy was that a lot of the asset was disbursed and not replaced - so I just wonder whether, where it is appropriate, we should go back. I have two suggestions. One, is we revert to providing that kind of housing,

whether that is through local authorities or housing associations. In Scotland, we have the key workers. The Scottish Special Housing Association no longer exists. We must also consider planning because the other issue is that a huge amount of money is being made by developers simply by managing to get non-approved land approved. Then you get a massive increase in the value of that land, and yet the value has not been delivered by the developers, it's been delivered by the community, by changing its use. That value should surely be captured by the community.

I just wonder if we should just be exploring whether or not we should be providing the framework for acquiring and developing social housing and removing the right to buy. For those who think there should be an incentive for people who wish to graduate from rental to private property, you could build in some kind of a year-on-year premium that says you would acquire the right to a contribution to a deposit if you wish to move, but you don't acquire the house you're living in because it's going to be required for other uses. I'm sort of confused as to how all of the political parties seem to be wrestling with this problem when we've actually done it in the past quite effectively in a quite simple and straightforward way, so why don't we just do it again?

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Could I make an intervention, as a point of information?

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Yes. Darren Millar.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

The right to buy has been scrapped in Wales for a number of years and we have an even more acute problem now that we had previously, so I'm not sure if that would be a solution.

Right Hon the Lord Bruce:

No. I said I am not disputing the issue of the right to buy or if it was the right or wrong thing to do. I can see the advantage but that wasn't my point. My point was that a lot of the houses have been sold on and the provision of social housing has changed and, in many cases, they haven't been replaced. That's my point. I am genuinely not trying to make an issue about whether the right to buy was a good or bad thing. I really don't have very strong views about it. What I am concerned about is that we seem to be going round and round in circles, wrestling

with lots of problems when they are relatively simple solutions which we've used in the past, which, while not the whole part, seem to me to be at least a significant part of the answer.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Lord Bruce. I call Tess White.

Ms Tess White MSP:

Thank you. I'm on Committee D so I said I'd speak today. It's very important to us in Scotland. I sit on the health committee in the Scottish Parliament. We're undertaking an inquiry into rural healthcare. We're experiencing significant problems, which I don't think are unique to Scotland. Let us take nurses, for example. I met the Royal College of Nurses and as a committee we met with it several times. Two thirds of student nurses are considering dropping from their courses due to financial pressures. A few months ago, we heard from students who had secured places. There was one student from the Isle of Skye and she couldn't take up her place because she couldn't afford the housing. That is common, so unless we do something about it, we won't attract or retain doctors, allied health professionals and nurses. I am specifically focusing on healthcare right now. The recruitment and retention crisis that we have in the healthcare sector will just get worse, so we need to do something.

On the point that Lord Dubs raised in terms of the short-term versus long-term lets, we do seem to be going round and round in circles. It's not that we should do either-or, we should do something that that is fundamentally different. In our committee, we've had two early thoughts. Senator Victor Boyhan came forward with a paper on community-led housing initiatives. He put forward a paper that we're going to consider at our next meeting. At our committee meeting in Edinburgh, we had a discussion about derelict properties.

4.30 pm

There are examples in Europe, for example in Denmark, where they have to sell certain properties, if they're left vacant for a certain amount of time. I know within Scotland there is move towards tightening up so that councils can purchase derelict properties. In our committee as well, there was a discussion about properties above shops. There are potential solutions that we can look at. One of the advantages of coming together is that we can look at best practice in regard to solutions. I did talk about the Danish model, but our committee decided that our budget didn't extend to going to Denmark.

The Lord Dubs:

We might still.

Ms Tess White MSP:

We might. There are examples for key workers, which Lord Dubs talked about. We do need to come up with a solution for them. There are examples in London for key workers. We're going to look at models and then something concrete and very helpful will come from our committee. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Tess. I now call Mattie McGrath, Deputy.

Mr Mattie McGrath TD:

Thank you very much. We have huge problems with this issue throughout the Twenty-six Counties. We have a number of issues. We don't have our new planning guidelines that we were promised for years. They haven't been upgraded in 20 years. We have the added problem in literally dozens of small towns, villages and settlements that don't have the infrastructure to allow a person to build there, and we cannot build outside the settlements. I was speaking to people recently, not in my own constituency, but in Ardmore in County Waterford. It is a beautiful seaside village. People there cannot get planning permission for new houses. They can't afford to buy houses because families that can afford them are buying houses in tourist locations. Schools and teams in the community are being devastated because the people who buy are not living in the community – they come for the summer - so they are in danger of losing teachers and everything else. I was amazed at how serious it was. I am 25 or 30 miles away from it. and I always thought it was thriving. That is a big problem.

The other problem is evident if we go in the road from here to Bray. It is a fine town about 15 minutes away. I actually stay there when I'm in Dublin. Three of the hotels there have been taken for IPAS (International Protection Accommodation Services) accommodation and for Ukrainians. The footfall is affected because people are not there. People cannot come to socialise, stay or whatever else. That is the same in Youghal in County Cork. The big hotel on the seaside there went the same way two years ago. People who have holiday homes there do not even go to Youghal any more because that hotel is not open, although there is a smaller hotel. There is no big venue to get food, to congregate or to attend a wedding or anything else. There are a number of pressures. I acknowledge the ongoing work of the committee. We need to be able to do something because it's a very serious situation. I always thought that in Great

Britain you had a community gain aspect to planning, which we do not have here but that seems to have slipped somewhat. I do not know if I am right. Maybe somebody could correct me if not. We have a big issue. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Mattie. I now call Lord Wrottesley.

The Lord Wrottesley:

Thank you, acting Co-Chair. I have to start by making a confession to the Chair of Committee D, Lord Dubs, and the rest of my fellow Committee D colleagues, my guilty secret is that I'm a second home owner in Cornwall. As Lord Dubs' mentioned, Cornwall is one of the destinations for our further exploration into the issues that relate to rural housing in the UK and Ireland. Seemingly, I may be part of the problem, not the solution. I hope to make amends, at least partly by assiduously studying the issue and seeing if I can't in some way contribute to being part of the solution.

One of the contributors our committee heard evidence from in Edinburgh in February - kindly hosted by our friend and colleague, Tess White MSP – was Anna Gardiner from Scottish Land & Estates, who had an interesting take on the subject of second or holiday homes. She felt it was not the main issue. For her, empty homes, second homes and holiday lets can have a key impact on the rural housing market and economy, often creating localised imbalances but also offering opportunities for supporting local tourism. However, the real issue is generational underinvestment in the sector, something that has been ongoing for decades. She also felt the affordable housing had to be protected in perpetuity, much like my esteemed colleague on Committee D, Seanadóir Victor Boyhan, whose written submission was mentioned by Tess White. He presented a report to the committee, and I believe to the Oireachtas, about formally establishing a community-led housing sector in Ireland to meet the housing need through a sustainable long-term policy. These are maybe ways to mitigate the response to the Flemish decree that prevents local housing policy from pursuing positive discrimination in favouring local residents when looking at housing allocation.

We also heard from Donna Young of Rural Housing Scotland about the Smart Clachan model on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides, a place that I remember fondly as a 12-year old. My first experience of Scotland made quite an impression, not just because there wasn't a tree on the island, except one lonely apple tree outside the local hotel in Lochboisdale, or maybe it was

because it was the first time that I'd played a video game called Pacman, but the sheer romance of such a ruggedly beautiful environment was what really stayed with me. Unfortunately, Uist has seen a significant depopulation recently. Donna described an exemplar for revitalising a small community through exploring mutual home ownership and cooperative housing housing models, the so-called Smart Clachans, which resemble small hamlets, that if grouped together could provide many of the needs of an island or rural community, particularly in some of the more isolated areas in our islands.

We heard some of the largest scale macro issues and options for tackling the problems involved in rural housing to the smaller scale, but nonetheless viable, solutions to rural housing need. The committee's work, as Lord Dubs has said, is ongoing and, as mentioned, we will be visiting Cornwall in the future. I'll be listening intently to find ways that I can indeed be part of the solution and not the problem. Thank you, Co-Chair.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Lord Wrottesley. I now call Maurice Bradley MLA.

Mr Maurice Bradley MLA:

Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you Lord Dubs for your presentation. I have a few points, some of which have already been raised, about rural housing and sustainable communities. Too much in Northern Ireland, we have houses dotted here, there, and everywhere. We have gone away from the clachan model, on which we used to model our rural dwellings, as has been alluded to by my colleague sitting behind me. We need to have another look at developing clachans in Northern Ireland, as opposed to having houses here, there and everywhere. That is a problem in the rural area. Rural communities must be sustainable.

The Lord Wrottesley:

Yes.

Mr Maurice Bradley MLA:

Any development in a rural area must be environmentally friendly. Too often, some people think it's nice to move out of the towns and cities into the rural countryside. They are not used to that type of living, and they find it difficult to deal with the, shall I say, the smells of the countryside, and I often get complaints. It needs to be sustainable.

In our coastal areas in particular, we're facing massive problems on the north coast, the Causeway coast and the Glens. Young people can't buy a house. They can't afford it. The whole area is coming down with holiday homes. I say that with no offence to second-home owners who visit for maybe two or three weeks in the year and the house lies empty thereafter. That's not good.

Another problem we have is land banking, where speculators will bank land and sit on it for years. Therefore, what we need to be looking at is some system where we allow our public authorities to vest land for housing development. That would alleviate some of the problems.

The other problem we have is our planning system is abysmal. It is not fit for purpose. One example I have in my area is a hotel that is coming into its third year in the planning system, not because of the planners but mostly because of objectors.

4.45 pm

Also, our biggest housing manager, the Housing Executive, is not building houses. We need to allow our Housing Executive to borrow money on its assets — it has quite a few assets. It is losing about 500 properties a year through the right to buy scheme. That is not sustainable. Our housing stock is going down steadily instead of increasing. Those are merely the problems that face Northern Ireland; I am sure it is the same in other areas across the Assembly area. Thank you very much, Chair.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Maurice. I now call David Johnson Connétable.

Connétable David Johnson:

Thank you, Co-Chair. Jersey does not have quite the same problems as have been shown in other jurisdictions, in the sense that there are restrictions on new people buying properties for their own personal occupation. What we do have is a tension in the residential market between letting long term to residents and letting for holiday lets. In fact, that has been changed in the last month or so, to a certain extent, by the Environment Minister announcing that he would no longer require planning permission to let holiday lets for periods of less than three months. There is a tension, and Government Departments are fighting each other. We have a shortage of holiday let properties, and it seems that the Environment Minister's decision in this case may well be to the detriment of residential lettings.

I have personal experience of a recent case in which the owner of a property, who was in fact myself, sought preliminary figures for letting a converted outbuilding on a holiday let basis and letting it residentially. On those figures, you could make as much in four or five months on a holiday let as you could in a whole year on a residential let. So there are temptations for owners to steer towards a holiday let, to the detriment of the residential letting market. We did residentially let to a full-time occupier, so my conscience is clear. As an aside, the holiday let market in Jersey is dominated by two firms, and I am sure that the material is readily available if Lord Dubs and his Committee want such information. The offer is there.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, David. I call Emma Harper MSP.

Ms Emma Harper MSP:

Thank you, Chair. I want to pick up on the point that my colleague Tess White spoke about, because we are on the Health Committee together in the Scottish Parliament. I am also on the Rural Committee. There are the same issues: it is about recruitment and retention. We have the same challenges with clinicians, whether they are doctors, nurses or care workers, but in rural areas it is also the recruitment of forestry workers and our dairy workers: 48% of Scotland's dairy herd is in the south-west of Scotland, which is the patch that I look after.

I have been looking at some of the issues in relation to renovating, regenerating, occupying and taking over vacant, abandoned and derelict buildings. We have a lot of those in south Scotland — old mill buildings and other vacant properties. Right now, if you wanted to build a new build on green space, there is zero VAT attached to it, but if you want to regenerate a vacant, abandoned and derelict property, there is 5% VAT attached to it. In Scotland we cannot do anything about that, because we do not have control over VAT. That is something I would be interested in pursuing: whether an alteration in VAT would incentivise the further reclaiming of vacant, abandoned and derelict sites. Architecturally, some of them are pretty nice.

There are some other issues around things that are being taken forward in Scotland, such as compulsory sale orders rather than compulsory purchase orders. It is hard for local authorities to purchase buildings, sit on them and do something with an empty building. The councils are telling me they do not have the funds to do compulsory purchase orders, but compulsory sale order legislation is coming down the line. That means you also need to know who owns that

property as well, so the Land Register in Scotland is tracking who owns all these properties that might have been sitting empty for a few years. There are things that I am interested in pursuing because of things on my doorstep around vacant, abandoned and derelict properties. I think that is something that we could pursue.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Emma. I call Hilary Jeune, our colleague from Jersey.

Deputy Hilary Jeune:

Sorry, I did not put my hand up, but I am happy to contribute.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

I am terribly sorry; I thought you had put your hand up.

Deputy Hilary Jeune:

No, not at all, but I am happy to contribute on a few points. What is interesting in Jersey is that a lot of our hotels are starting to convert into apartments, and they are often luxury apartments as well, so they are not even necessarily affordable. There is tension there because our hotels are in decline, especially if they are in prime location, for example on the seafront—I have personal experience of that because I have shares in a Methodist hotel. There are a lot of shareholders, and there was a big discussion about whether we should also be selling up and selling the location to a property developer, because it would provide substantial amounts of money to help the shareholders. A few others and I had to really fight hard and say, “No, this is not what Jersey needs. We need to keep our hotels and we need to keep these prime locations, instead of giving them over to private residents, and we need to keep it as a public space.” In a way, hotels are a public space because many can utilise the facilities and have access to the beaches and those views, versus private individuals having that access. It is really important.

From when we discussed it, one thing we should do—this is really interesting and is very connected to small islands—is on the connectivity and the fact that, as our hotels and the number of beds decline in Jersey, that will disincentivise the airlines to come to Jersey. It is about having not only a variety of destinations—we came directly to Dublin on Sunday, so it was fantastic to have that direct connection—but the airlines flying our main routes to Gatwick and Heathrow. They are starting to have discussions about those and whether Jersey

is a place they can put on a number of flights to. For local residents, it is really a problem that airlines and that connectivity are linked to tourism rather than to ourselves as residents. Whenever that balance goes the wrong way, we can really see a massive decline in our connectivity to what some would call the mainland—although that is debatable, because some of us say that that is France. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Hilary, for your contribution, and apologies for the initial confusion. I call Sarah Jones MP.

Ms Sarah Jones MP:

I think I was the confusion—it was me with my hand up! It was good to hear your contributions, so thank you. I am also on Committee D, so I am also taking part in the inquiry, although I was not able to go to Scotland, so I missed some of that. There are just a couple of things that have struck me. First, every jurisdiction talks in a similar way about the housing crisis generally, and it is striking that we all have the same challenges and crisis. We all call it a crisis in the same way, although in some ways it has different manifestations in different jurisdictions and in different parts. Secondly, to Lord Bruce’s point about needing to build more homes and not losing the number of social homes that we have, I agree with that up to a point. Absolutely, we certainly need to be building more housing. But the challenges in rural areas, when it comes to tourism, are very specific as well and we need to have solutions to those.

As an example, people might know that there is a programme on Radio 4 called “Any Questions?” that I did a few weeks ago in Swanage, which is a beautiful part of the country on the south coast of England. It is very much struggling with these issues with second homes, tourism and affordability. Somebody in the audience made a point that we did not want to be building over any more parts of Swanage or the surrounding areas because it was such a beautiful landscape, and everybody applauded very loudly at that. The next contribution from the audience was somebody saying, “But of course, nobody can afford to live here any more and our young people are moving away”, and everybody applauded very loudly at that. That is the challenge that we have as politicians, but how do we provide a solution to that challenge? Everybody knows that we do not have enough affordable homes, but everybody also knows that we need to protect our areas—those green and beautiful parts of all our jurisdictions—as much as we can. That is the challenge for us.

I was struck in particular by some of the information I had about Ireland. The percentage of the population in Ireland living in rural areas is very high compared with other European countries. Some 40% of people in Ireland live in rural areas, and many of them live in one-off, self-build homes. The challenges that come with that are very significant. Homes are older, with high energy costs, and people are very reliant on cars. Most homes have two or three cars because the public transportation is not in place. Access to services is very difficult. If you are vulnerable or a victim of domestic abuse, for example, access to services is difficult and there are huge challenges there.

We will come up with the solutions, and of course planning has to play a large part in that. I was interested in some of the submissions about what they are looking at in Ireland to try to create more new builds in those rural towns and very small villages. The shops and post offices might be closed, but you want to encourage communities to be reignited through incentivising people to move into the empty homes and build around those small towns and villages.

There is a lot to be said for models of ownership, and what Governments and jurisdictions can do to incentivise people to be able to afford a home. Part of that is building those homes, as we have already talked about. Then how do we link housing with other issues? How do we link housing and tourism, housing and the economy, and housing and energy? It is interesting to look at the Highlands and Islands in Scotland, where the renewable energy possibilities are creating jobs in areas where we need to protect our homes and have more homes. How can those two different parts of Government work together to make sure that we are not only creating jobs in areas where we need them, but creating housing?

In summary, each jurisdiction can learn from each other both in terms of the mistakes that we have all made and the successes that we have all seen. Coming back to my first point, we need to take people with us on this journey, because you cannot force things on communities. It is really important to think about how we are consulting people about local housing developments and involving local community organisations to make sure that we get this right.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Sarah. I call Frank Feighan.

Mr Frank Feighan TD:

Thanks very much. I will try to be brief. As a politician, I have represented a rural constituency. Twenty-five years ago, we had a lot more influence in planning, unfortunately, because we were used by developers and agents. There was a time when I would spend three days a week in the planning office. I do not think a TD now would be allowed into the planning office once a year, so we have lost that influence. To be honest, it is probably no harm because the planning regime in Ireland has got much more streamlined, but it does not take any huge political influence.

Regarding one-off housing, I do not know whether anybody has mentioned it, but we have the Croí Cónaithe grant for one-off housing of €70,000 if the house is derelict and €50,000 if the house is vacant. It is certainly making an impact in rural areas and small towns. There are a few conditions, but in one or two counties there are 300 or 400 applications already. It is very welcome. I think it is going to work in the Republic of Ireland. If you want people to do something, you have to give them a lot of money up front, but it is beginning to make a difference.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Frank. I call Éamon Ó Cuív, Deputy.

5.00 pm

Mr Éamon Ó Cuív TD:

Go raibh míle maith agat. Ireland traditionally has had a very dispersed population. Even now, 30% live in villages of fewer than 1,500 people or in the open countryside. A very large percentage are in the open countryside. One of the big mistakes in the Irish context, and I cannot speak in any other context, is to see dispersed housing as not living in communities. Those of us who live in that type of community—I originally came from Dublin, but I live now in a dispersed community—know the delineation of that community to the last field. We know who lives in our community.

A lot of what makes Ireland what it is and a lot of the things that attract people as tourists to Ireland are invisibly defined by a settlement pattern. We have brought in rules; I was party to this way back in the 1990s. We pioneered the idea that if you wanted to get permission for a house in our rural area—it has spread to a large part of the country now—you had to have a housing need: a social and economic connection to the area. That complies with the Flemish decree. We also inured those plannings, so if you go in there and say, “I want this because I

have had this social and economic connection” and you pass the test, they then put the condition on the planning that for seven years you cannot sell it, and you can never sell it if you have not complied for those seven years with the condition.

I have been working on this issue, as Brendan will know, for a long time. I live in a particularly scenic area and I do not want to destroy it. Lesson No. 1 is that, left to their own devices, most people are very conscious of their own community. They do not need Big Brother or Big Sister to tell them what to do.

Planning policies have done a lot of damage, visually, to our areas. For example, planning policies have encouraged linearity along the roads and that gives a very urban effect, particularly on the tourist routes if you travel to the area. Rural people building on their own land will tend to build in a more clustered design—houses beside each other, behind each other and so on—and they will use the landscape extraordinarily well, so that most people will not even be aware that the houses exist. Siting using the topography has not been a part of our planning by planners. We need to attend to that.

There is another issue. There seems to be a presumption in some parts that housing or built features in the landscape are always destructive. That is interesting for us in Connemara, because probably one of the two most iconic buildings in Connemara is Ashford Castle, which is in an absolutely iconic landscape. People travel the world to see Ashford Castle and stay in it. We also have Kylemore Abbey. So it is the siting, the design and the placing. There is a famous landscape artist called Paul Henry who nearly always put houses or habitation in the landscapes because he believed that that formed part of the landscape.

There are challenges and we are working on them. Wastewater is a challenge in difficult sites. On sustainability as a challenge, I personally believe that we can make dispersed rural communities as sustainable as comparable urban communities, if not more so. There is no problem with a solar panel in a rural area, no problem if you want to grow your own firewood on a half-acre site—I have done it—no problem with an electric car, and no problem with public transport. We have proven that. When they do provide the public transport, the only problem is that they do not provide enough. The buses are full in the morning because most people are going, if they are not working in the area, to the same big towns.

I really welcome this debate. I think we need to be awfully careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Our rural communities and the people in them tend to have a lot of what

in the jargon they call social capital. We would lose that social capital if we decided to run down rural communities.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Éamon. I call Seán Crowe.

Mr Seán Crowe TD:

I think the Committee taking on the issue of rural housing was a logical extension of looking at minority languages, the impact of people who have not got the language going in, and the challenge for local people to then get housed. We all know of places in our own jurisdictions that are sites of beautiful scenery that have been destroyed by overdevelopment. As part of our look at the issue, we need to come up with what works in areas and what does not.

Clearly there is an idea that we will try to rebuild communities. I think across all our jurisdictions we have a housing crisis—some are more difficult than others. We have that crisis. A simple thing to look at would be how jurisdictions deal with vacant homes.

One of the key recommendations, if we are talking about building society and communities, has to be about how we need those key personnel. Tess mentioned the health service. But if you want a police officer in your community, and they cannot afford housing in that area, do you look at that in relation to your planning guidelines? The police officer, the crèche—all those things make a community. If we can get some different examples from the jurisdictions, it will be worthwhile and useful for all of us. Every jurisdiction is trying to deal with the issue, and many are coming up with solutions that are actually working, so it is a matter of pulling those solutions and ideas together and maybe putting together a paper that will work for everyone.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Seán. I believe Lord Dubs wanted to say a few words.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you. I do not think it would be appropriate for me to respond to all this, partly because our report is not finished and there will be a chance to do that then, and partly because it would take a long time. I give enormous thanks, on behalf of all the Committee, to all Members present and to those who have contributed. I think we have a lot of great ideas. I am almost tempted to invite you all to join the Committee, but that might not work too well. We

have had some really useful ideas; if any of you who are not on the Committee feel like submitting your ideas in writing so we can take account of them more fully than we can through the notes taken on this occasion, please do so.

I think there is a difference between areas where there is no space for housing—Swanage or Cornwall, for example—and areas where there may be space, but the sort of approach that Lord Bruce suggested in terms of housing, for which I have enormous sympathy, would work. We have not been there yet, but it is difficult to see where in Cornwall a lot of housing could be built. Maybe there is space; maybe that is just what local people are saying. Certainly it is something that we need to examine. There are differences between areas where there is a lot of land pressure, and areas where there is not any land pressure. I fully take the point about key workers: if there are no key workers available, communities will die because they are not sustainable.

I thank Members for their contributions. I repeat my request that if there are thoughts, ideas and experiences that you would like to send to the Committee, please do so, because we would be delighted to receive them. Watch this space for when we finish the report.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

Thank you, Lord Dubs. I thank all Members for their interesting contributions. The offer from Lord Dubs as Chair of Committee D to receive written submissions that Members wish to make to that Committee towards the report is to be noted. That concludes this afternoon's debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly will consider the relationships between the development of tourism and provision for housing in rural areas across the BIPA jurisdictions.

The Co-Chairperson (Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP):

That concludes our programme of business for this afternoon. There is some free time now until the next event, which is a reception at 7 pm and dinner at 8 pm. Both events take place upstairs, in the Oscar Wilde and Beckett suites.

Adjourned at 5.10 pm.

Tuesday 16 April 2024

The Assembly met at 9.41 am.

ANNUAL REPORTS

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Good morning. We resume our deliberations today. I look forward to the remainder of our Assembly and to the same stimulating engagement as we had yesterday.

This morning, we will deal with some Assembly business. We will consider the annual report for 2023. We will also hear updates from Committee A and Committee B. Committee C will update the Committee and present its report to the Assembly, and our session will conclude with an address from Grainne O'Connor, manager of Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Programme of Business agreed.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

The Steering Committee has agreed the draft annual report for 2023, copies of which were circulated electronically to all members. I ask that the plenary session take note of the 23rd annual report, which is for 2019-22. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Report Agreed.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I welcome Steve Aiken MLA as our acting Co-Chairperson for today's business.

COMMITTEE REPORTS ETC.

COMMITTEE A (SOVEREIGN MATTERS)

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Thank you very much indeed. The next item of business is Committee updates. We will now hear an update from the chair of Committee A, Senator Emer Currie.

Senator Emer Currie:

Thank you, Co-Chair. On behalf of Committee A, I will provide a short update on our work since the Assembly adopted our report, “Protecting the Common Travel Area in the post-Brexit era” in October. In our report, we examined a range of issues, including the introduction of the United Kingdom Government’s electronic travel authorisation—ETA—scheme, policies that relate to visa nationals across Ireland and the UK, and implications for the common travel area.

Many of the themes raised in our report, particularly around the ETA, have been discussed during this plenary in our discussions on tourism. We believe that the ETA requirement is at odds with long-standing CTA arrangements, undermines the all-island tourism proposition that was set up under the Good Friday Agreement and will have a negative impact on tourism in Northern Ireland. Our report also highlighted difficulties for visa nationals with regard to cross-border travel, even for short visits, due to their type of visa. We put forward practical suggestions, including ETA exemptions for tourist visits across the border, visa exemptions for legal residents for short visits and joint work visas in essential sectors.

On 19 February 2024, a delegation of the Committee visited London and met with the UK Minister of State for Legal Migration and the Border, Tom Pursglove MP, where we had robust engagement and raised concerns with regard to the ETA, its impact on tourism and issues that impact visa nationals, such as cross-border travel and social integration in border regions. Our next step is to seek a meeting with the Irish Department of Justice to discuss our specific recommendations around short-term exemptions and shared visas.

The Committee has also agreed to write to the UK House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee regarding its on-going inquiry into electronic border management systems to highlight the recommendations and findings in our report, for which we heard strong support yesterday from stakeholders across the tourism sector. We welcome the plenary support in relation to sending a letter to the British-Irish Council regarding the same.

Ahead of the next plenary, and building on issues that were raised in our CTA report that relate to cross-border working and staff shortages in key areas such as healthcare, the Committee has agreed to scope a further short inquiry into the registration of professional health and social care qualifications across the UK and Ireland, with a view to hosting meetings with relevant bodies and officials in the coming year.

The effective functioning and ethos of the common travel area is of vital importance, as it facilitates the cross-border nature of many people's lives on these islands, and we look forward to updating members at the next plenary on our continued work.

We want to thank Rebecca Coyle, who has been our Clerk for about a year. She has been promoted in the Oireachtas. We welcome Emma McCarron, whom we all know, to the Committee.

9.45 am

COMMITTEE B (EUROPEAN AFFAIRS)

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Thank you very much, Emer. I call the Chair of Committee B, Darren Millar MS.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thank you, acting Co-Chair. I am pleased to provide an update on the Committee's work in relation to UK defence and security co-operation post-Brexit. Members will be aware that we tabled an interim report on this matter in St Helier back in May 2023, and it has been very busy since then, with a number of different evidence sessions being held in different locations across these jurisdictions and beyond. We took evidence in Dublin in July of last year from the Garda Commissioner, from a panel of academics, from those responsible for some of the critical infrastructure around these islands and from representatives of both the Irish National Cyber Security Centre and the Department of Justice.

Last month, we held further evidence sessions. There was one in early March with the UK National Crime Agency. In late March, we visited Helsinki and Tallinn in order to take evidence from the European Hybrid Centre of Excellence and the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, alongside a meeting with the head of the Estonian Defence Committee in the Estonian Parliament. Those evidence sessions have been extremely useful in helping to crystallise the views of the Committee. We will be including a number of findings in a report, which we anticipate will be published in time for the Edinburgh plenary and tabled for discussion at that time. Over the summer, we will be issuing a call for evidence on our next inquiry in relation to migration, which is a hot topic across these islands, too.

We look forward to continuing to engage on those matters and to reporting in due course.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Thank you, Darren. Over to you now, Brendan.

**COMMITTEE C (ECONOMIC AFFAIRS): “GOVERNMENT ENERGY
STRATEGY and CONSUMER ENERGY POLICY”**

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Steve. I now call on the Chair of Committee C, Deputy Brendan Howlin, to update the Assembly on the work of the Committee and to present the report “Government Energy Strategy and Consumer Energy Policy” to the Assembly.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

Thank you very much, Co-Chair. It is my pleasure to present our report on energy strategy and consumer energy policy for the consideration of the Assembly and, hopefully, for its approval. I thank members of Committee C for all their hard work in putting together what I think is a very instructive report. In particular, I wish to thank our Clerks Stephanie Bollard and George James for processing the enormous volume of material and submissions that we received in the course of our work.

The Committee agreed to commence its inquiry in the context of rapidly increasing energy consumer costs, with an increased focus on the security and sustainability of energy generation in each of our jurisdictions. The aim of the inquiry was to examine the policy responses of the BIPA jurisdictions to those changes and to share conclusions and recommendations for best practice with the Assembly and our Administrations. The Committee sought written submissions and held virtual and in-person meetings with stakeholders to discuss Government energy strategy and consumer energy policy. We held meetings in England, Ireland, Jersey, Northern Ireland and Scotland. A full list of all the meetings held and the submissions received are included in the appendices to the report.

The inquiry was based on the following terms of reference, and the questions that we asked were as follows. What are the main challenges that Governments in the BIPA jurisdictions face in meeting energy demand into the future? Do the Governments in the BIPA jurisdictions have

effective strategies for meeting that energy demand? Do the Governments' policies take sufficient account of climate policy objectives? Which sources of power generation within the BIPA jurisdictions are best placed to be pursued? How can co-operation and interconnection between our jurisdictions help to meet demand for energy and keep prices low? What actions have the Governments taken to support consumers and businesses with rising energy prices, including for vulnerable households and isolated communities? How helpful can Governments be, and how successful have they been, in addressing rising energy prices and issues of energy supply? How helpful can energy companies be, and how successful have they been, in addressing those same two issues of rising energy prices and supply into the future?

After all the deliberations, we have produced a number of conclusions and recommendations. There are 13 conclusions in all. First, across the BIPA jurisdictions, Governments have set clear targets to decarbonise our energy supply in order to meet our stated objective of net zero emissions. As well as being vital to address the threat of climate change, those targets will help to secure the long-term future of energy supply and provide households and economies with sustainable and affordable energy into the future. All BIPA jurisdictions are facing the same set of crises, and they have an urgent priority to meet net zero targets and to decarbonise electricity supply in particular.

A mixture of initiatives will be needed to achieve that, including increasing capacity to generate electricity from renewable sources, new solutions for the storage of such generated electricity, and significant upgrading of the electricity grids. The BIPA jurisdictions' net zero targets present both challenges and opportunities.

Electricity generation is only one part of the challenge in meeting future energy needs. The nature of renewable energy sources such as wind and solar means that output will vary during the year, and so the ability to store power for times of peak demand will be essential. Developing storage will also mean that less excess generating capacity needs to be built to ensure that we can meet peak demand.

One of the most pressing challenges that is facing the United Kingdom and Ireland is ensuring that the electricity grid is ready to serve the market by accommodating new sources of renewable energy. It is clear that grid capacity across the BIPA jurisdictions needs to be significantly strengthened in order to make possible the planned expansion in renewable generation. That will require both careful long-term planning and major investment, and co-ordination to ensure that the grid is capable of supporting that new capacity.

Interconnection between different parts of these islands helps to make energy markets more flexible and responsive, and it allows co-operation that may ease the pressure on individual countries' networks. The Committee welcomes the memorandum of understanding that was signed by the Irish and UK Governments last year.

We also noted that electricity generation is becoming less centralised, and smaller, community-owned energy projects are increasingly playing an important role. However, there are obstacles for communities that wish to pursue such initiatives, such as the limits on grid capacity. More widely, at the moment, many communities that host energy infrastructure have informed the Committee that the benefits to their communities are not manifest. That makes residents less likely to embrace energy projects for their area. Energy projects are more likely to be pursued if communities can see direct benefits for themselves.

Government interventions during 2022 and 2023 helped to mitigate the difficulties that households experienced as a result of surging energy prices. However, energy poverty actually rose during that period. One reason for that was that energy bills were just one of the many pressures that households were facing at that time. In some cases, the level of payments from the state did not fully offset the impact on household budgets. In others, households were actually not able to access the payments that Governments provided.

We noted that, in the absence of the Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland, there was a delay in the application of the UK's energy bills support scheme, and as a result, households in Northern Ireland did not access support for months after the scheme had been available in Great Britain.

While Government support reached the vast majority of consumers, some households were not easily reached. That occurred in instances where people had to apply proactively for support, or where they did not have a typical relationship with their energy supplier, such as people who were using home heating oil. Often, those who did not access support were those in the greatest need. That impacted in particular on marginalised groups, including the Traveller communities in Ireland and Scotland.

The delivery of consumer support schemes is as important as their design. It is important that support can be made available quickly and easily in the event of sudden energy price surges, particularly to vulnerable households who are unable to meet the cost of higher energy bills from their own resources. The schemes that were able to deliver support quickest were those that used existing systems or data. Examples of that included the delivery of support through

consumers' existing relationship with their energy supplier or by using the state's knowledge of households' existing eligibility for benefits to determine their eligibility for additional support.

Rising energy prices have affected not only households but businesses, too. Those price rises have been particularly challenging for energy-intensive industries. Direct support is not the only part of the solution when it comes to helping consumers to cope with rising energy prices; energy-saving measures should also play a significant role. Making homes more energy efficient is costly and challenging, but it is necessary to help to reduce household energy bills and to enable us to reach our net zero targets.

The current home retrofitting grant schemes have been found to be complicated and not attractive to consumers. It is important that Governments address those barriers and design schemes that make home retrofitting an attractive and affordable option for households and landlords.

It is clear to the Committee that there are potential economic opportunities for all BIPA jurisdictions in supporting a significant increase in retrofitting. It is important that Governments invest in training schemes to ensure that a sufficient number of skilled tradespeople are qualified to install the necessary systems, particularly as technologies evolve.

Finally, I turn to the recommendations that the Committee made following our deliberations. There are 11. The first recommendation is that the Governments of the BIPA jurisdictions should make it their mission to foster and grow the industries that will transform their economies into net zero economies. To do that, they must set clear long-term strategies that encourage investment in renewable technology and infrastructure by identifying the specific energy sources that need to be developed in the future.

The BIPA jurisdictions must assess how much storage capacity will be needed to ensure that the electricity networks can continue to meet demand in the coming decades. In line with that objective, Governments should consider carefully how to support the growth of industries that can develop such storage solutions and how to develop the necessary infrastructure. We looked at some old technologies, such as the technology that is used at Turlough Hill power station, which is not too far from where we are sitting now, where off-peak energy is used to pump water into a high reservoir, from which it is released when additional energy is required. That is one of a number of complicated storage solutions to an issue that we identify as being critical to address in the coming years.

Governments in the BIPA jurisdictions must ensure that they have a clear plan for developing a power grid that is able to accommodate the growing proportion of energy that is generated from renewable sources. They must ensure that the planning system is fit to support rapid development of the grid so that it can meet future demand. As part of our deliberations, we discovered that one of the biggest pressures was the lack of grid capacity, and we were deeply worried and concerned about the timelines involved—particularly those associated with getting through the planning processes—in addressing that ongoing challenge.

10.00 am

What he says here is "The Steering Committee has agreed the draft annual report for 2023, copies of which were circulated electronically to all members. I ask that the plenary session take note of the 28th annual report 2018. Is that agreed?" However, CB tells me that, according to the programme of business, it's supposed to be the 2023 annual report and the 2019-22 annual report that they're considering. If you look at the numbering of previous annual reports, the 2019-22 report should be number 23. Anyway, I've changed it along those lines. I imagine his script would clarify matters, but we don't have it. Maybe there should be a motion at this point? At any rate, I think it should be flagged to the final compiler.

We also recommend that the UK and Irish Governments should update the Committee on what actions have been taken to advance energy interconnection between the BIPA jurisdictions following last year's signing of the Memoranda of Understanding, to which I referred earlier. They should take every opportunity to build on that arrangement and deepen co-operation on interconnection between our islands.

Governments in the BIPA jurisdictions should work with the energy companies, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders to improve the availability of public information on community energy projects, impressive examples of which we saw in Scotland, including where there is grid capacity available to support small-scale community energy generation. They should also develop programmes to deliver clear benefits for those communities.

The Committee recommends that all BIPA jurisdictions should consider establishing and funding specific time-bound targets for reducing fuel poverty, as are currently in place in Scotland and Wales. In the event that future consumer energy bill support is necessary, the UK Government should work urgently with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that it is introduced in Northern Ireland in parallel with Great Britain.

In anticipation of future price shocks, the Committee recommends that Governments work with local authorities and identify households that do not have a direct relationship with an energy supplier, and so might not automatically be reached through an energy bill. If Governments roll out similar energy bill support in the future, those households should be targeted in information campaigns on where supports are available.

The Committee recommends that Governments across the BIPA jurisdictions utilise existing data that they hold about households' eligibility for benefits and economic circumstances to identify the cohort of households that would require priority support in the event of a future price shock. That would enable packages of support to be targeted and delivered quickly.

Governments should work to address barriers to decarbonising industry, such as the lack of infrastructure to support electrification and higher capital costs.

Our final recommendation is that Governments in the BIPA jurisdictions should accelerate their work to address barriers to making buildings more energy efficient and send clear signals that encourage the growth of the retrofit industry and skills base. Each jurisdiction should work to quantify the number of workers who would be required to meet retrofit needs into the future, proactively recruit and train skilled apprentices, and reskill existing workers for that purpose. BIPA jurisdictions should also work collaboratively to ensure the security of supply for the materials for retrofitting and scarce materials, such as solar panels.

That is a summary of our recommendations and conclusions. There is a volume of detailed information about the current state of play in each of our jurisdictions in terms of energy needs and current supply. I recommend the report to the Assembly.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Brendan. The report is very detailed, and great credit is due to the Committee, your leadership of the Committee and the people who partook in so many engagements throughout the jurisdictions. It is a report that it is very worthwhile to consider—indeed, it should not just be considered but acted on by our respective Governments.

May I have comments or contributions from the floor, please?

The Lord Bew:

I want to go back to Committee A, if that is okay.

First of all, as a Member of Committee A, I would like to thank Senator Currie for her excellent introduction. Indeed, I thank all our officials and give them good wishes for the future.

There are two basic problems at the heart of Committee A's work, and they reflect the impact of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement. The first of these, which took up a lot of our time, relates to one of the initial commitments in the Good Friday Agreement, a commitment that was shared by and was uncontroversial to all sides: cross-border co-operation in matters.

We heard a lot of examples and stories about what happened in the Creeslough tragedy that suggested that there could be challenges to normal cross-border co-operation. On the whole, through the correspondence that we have had—particularly with Peter May, the senior official in the Department of Health in Northern Ireland—I would say that our concerns in that respect have been greatly lessened since the meeting that we had in Derry some months ago. I do not think that Committee A is at the moment as alarmed to the degree that we might have been some months ago on cross-border co-operation on health matters.

However, the other key area is tourism, and on that, there is less of a good story to tell. By the way, that is not to say—and Senator Currie referred to this—that our meeting with the Minister of State at the Home Office in London, Tom Pursglove, was anything other than full. He took seriously what we said, and his correspondence with us has been serious, too, but it clearly indicated a number of substantially unresolved problems in this area. Again, cross-border tourism and its facilitation are part of the original Good Friday Agreement, and it is there, I think, that we still have difficulties. Quite apart from the paperwork and so on that is required, there are other unresolved issues; indeed, Deputy Ó Cuív raised the issue of the insurance matters that underpin all of this. I would have thought that such a problem would have been resolvable by the Government putting money aside to cover that grey area.

It is fair to report on behalf of Committee A that we have relatively good news on health co-operation but not so good news on matters of all-Ireland tourism, and there is a potential material threat to the Northern Irish tourist industry.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Paul. I call Sarah Jones MP.

Ms Sarah Jones MP:

Thank you, and thank you to everyone for reporting back.

I just wanted to ask Brendan Howlin a follow-up question. Your recommendations were really interesting, and they chime with absolutely everything that I have encountered in my own brief of industry and decarbonisation in the United Kingdom. I think that you are spot on in

everything that you have recommended, but I just wondered whether you can say a bit more about the Memoranda of Understanding and the interconnections and whether you have any ideas about what the two Governments can do better and how all of this might work better, given that it is an incredibly important part of the whole piece. I am interested to know what you think of the MOU and whether we can strengthen it in some way.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Brendan, do you want to take the questions all together at the end?

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

Sure—whatever way.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

If that is okay with you, Brendan.

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

Yes.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

I call Darren Millar, Member of the Senedd.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you to Brendan Howlin and the Committee for what was a very interesting report. I endorse its findings and recommendations.

One of the issues that we have identified as a matter of significant risk to both the UK and Ireland is, of course, energy security. In the wake of the illegal invasion by Russia of Ukraine, it was something that dominated the headlines. Quite understandably, your Committee wanted to look at the impact of that on energy prices for consumers. However, one of the sessions that we undertook with the critical infrastructure industry as part of our inquiry into security and defence identified massive risks to our energy security as part of the failure to properly organise and monitor subsea cables and infrastructure. One of the things that was suggested by energy partners was that any cables or infrastructure beneath the Irish Sea, particularly the interconnectors between the islands, be laid on a grid pattern, to ensure that, if cables were sabotaged, there would still be resilience in the network to cope with, say, the severing of a cable.

We have seen in the Baltic and North Seas sabotage by what appear to be Russian actors, if you like, in taking out mainly gas infrastructure, but we are just as vulnerable, if not more so, as a result of some of the challenges that we face with policing the waters around these islands and making sure that they are safe and free from our enemies. There is also the issue of cables for telecoms purposes, but I appreciate that that was beyond the scope of the Committee's particular inquiry.

I think that we certainly need to be taking these things forward and ensuring that we have resilience in the network between the islands as well as on the island of Ireland. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Darren. I call Rebecca Long Bailey MP.

Ms Rebecca Long Bailey MP:

Thanks very much. I just want to speak briefly about Committee C's report—it is a fantastic report, Brendan. First, grid capacity is a huge issue in the UK. One of the criticisms that our grid network providers in the UK often face is that, since they were privatised, they have prioritised dividend extraction over investment in critical infrastructure, which has led us to the situation we are in today, where we are not in a position to support local community energy schemes because they cannot connect quickly enough. Is that position shared across other jurisdictions? What proposals does the Committee have for dealing with that?

My second question is on energy pricing, which is a huge issue across all the jurisdictions. In the past few years, with international events and everything else that is occurring, we have seen huge spikes in energy costs but, when the international wholesale costs have dropped, we have not seen our consumer costs drop at the same rate. It is called rocket and feather pricing when costs shoot up and float down very slowly. There is no reason why prices cannot come down quicker than they are at the moment. Is that something that the Committee considered?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Rebecca. I call John Lahart TD.

Mr John Lahart TD:

I will be very brief, Co-Chair. I thank the Chair of my Committee, Darren. Brendan Howlin's report was fascinating because, as someone has already mentioned, it dovetailed with the work of Committee B on security. Watching how the Russians operate in Ukraine, we see that, even with all the cybertechnology that they have available to them, they still engage in crude

bombing of energy facilities, because of how impactful that is on society. If you take out the energy supply, you can suddenly completely destabilise and immobilise a whole city or town.

We had a cyberattack on the Health Service Executive, which our health service leaders would say has caused more damage, stresses and challenges to the health system than Covid did, and they are still engaged in recovering from that.

Committee B did a string of fascinating interviews with really interesting witnesses. We discussed topics such as having closer police co-operation, particularly in some of the jurisdictions in the islands, where similar challenges would be faced. It would make logical sense for a bit of communication to be opened up there.

Another issue is the need to open up a conversation with our citizens and populations to educate them more fully on the fact that security more and more does not necessarily mean physical defence but security in the ether and cyber defence, and that it is in all our common interests to be hyper alert to the threat that that poses. Thanks, Co-Chair.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, John. I call Seán Crowe.

Mr Seán Crowe TD:

Just to go back to my Committee D, when we were in Edinburgh, Scotland, some of the evidence that we received was quite disturbing, and this probably relates to what Brendan Howlin said about retrofitting and so on. One of the people who gave evidence suggested that a problem with a lot of the products that we are using not only for retrofitting but to stop wood rotting and so on is that they contain a type of cyanide. Therefore, if a house went on fire, you would not be killed by the smoke damage; you would be killed by the hydrogen cyanide. Again, the point was made that that is something that would have to be tackled across multiple jurisdictions, because those products are being used in multiple jurisdictions.

I am conscious that a lot of retrofitting is going on at the moment, but are the products that we are putting in our homes the asbestos of the future? We as a society are going down a rabbit hole if our ideas on, for example, saving energy leave future generations with other problems, as was the case with the use of asbestos in the past. That is something worth noting in relation to all the Committee reports. I presume that that will be one of the recommendations from Committee D in relation to the housing situation. Thanks.

10.15 am

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Seán. I call Frank Feighan.

Mr Frank Feighan TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I thank the staff and the members of Committee B for our visit to Helsinki and Estonia. Looking at the cybercrime area, it is a huge eye-opener for ourselves to see how Russia and other players can infiltrate Western values. We have to be very much aware that this is not going to stop; it is going to get a lot more insidious. I again thank the Chair of the Committee and all the officials for the great work that they did.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks very much, Frank. I call Connétable David Johnson.

Connétable David Johnson:

Good morning, and thank you. By way of information, and to repeat a comment I made in the Committee meeting yesterday, the States of Jersey Assembly meets this morning, and the first item of business was going to be to consider the introduction of a wind farm to the south-west of our island. That is topical because, by virtue of the fact that I, and more particularly my colleague Hilary Jeune, who chairs the Environment, Housing and Infrastructure Panel, are not there, the Assembly has agreed to defer that until tomorrow, so people will get a mention in the States of Jersey Assembly tomorrow.

I simply wish to advise this Assembly that, consistent with the recommendations contained in Committee C's report, we are indeed due to investigate the possibility of alternative energy supply to Jersey, whereas at the moment we rely exclusively on the supply from France, and we have concerns as to sovereignty.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks very much, David. That is good. I call Tess White.

Ms Tess White MSP:

Thank you. I, too, thought it was an excellent report. One of the points that Brendan Howlin made was about speeding up the planning process. Part of the reason for the planning process being lengthy in some jurisdictions is to allow for proper consultation. It is important to bring communities along with you. The definition of consultation is not just to say, "This is what we are doing." Instead, it is to say, for example, "This is what we are doing, but we have thought

about undergrounding, overgrounding, offshoring and getting the balance.” The communities should be engaged.

There is also the issue of energy security, which seems to trump food security. Some of the larger power stations or substations are the size of 100 or 200 football pitches and can be built on prime arable land. That is where it is about a balance and first having consultation processes—you almost cannot have both/and. Therefore, it is about coming up with a robust consultation process but also respecting the need to speed things up a little. There is a balance. I just wondered whether that was part of the Committee’s discussions.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Tess. I call Senator Fintan Warfield.

Senator Fintan Warfield:

Go raibh maith agat, Co-Chair, and thanks to Brendan Howlin. I just want to thank and commend my fellow Committee C members. I am a new member of the Committee. I say “Well done” to Brendan Howlin and all the team, and to the secretariat. Particularly useful is the comparative table on page 8 of the report, which shows the electricity generation by fuel type across the islands. I just want to say, “Well done”, and that I look forward to working with you on childcare and perhaps even on the creative industries in the future.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Fintan. Brendan, would you like to make a few comments on those contributions, please?

Mr Brendan Howlin TD:

I thank all Members for a broad range of contributions. I suppose if we were to deal with all aspects of the issues raised, we would have a never-ending inquiry, but all the points were very relevant. Let me deal with some of the points.

To respond to Sarah Jones, the UK-Ireland memorandum of understanding is extremely important. What we have asked in the recommendations is for a report back on its development. We met with senior officials from both jurisdictions. On the grand plan and the strategy, certainly from the Irish perspective, I think that most of us thought it is extraordinarily ambitious and wondered whether it is achievable within the timelines that have been set out. In essence, the offshore renewable energy ambitions of Ireland, with wind, and the onshore

increase in wind and solar are enormous and will create electricity well beyond the capacity of the island of Ireland to consume.

The idea of the interconnectors is that we would export that and that, in times of scarce supply here, nuclear-generated electricity in the UK or even in France—interconnectors with France are being built, as well—would be available to us. We have asked for follow-up on that, to ensure that the intention and the ambition are realisable and are being realised. I hope that future Committees of this body will follow up on that.

Darren Millar raised the issue of energy security. Obviously, the most important way to secure our future is to move away from fossil fuels. That will involve not importing gas or any other fuels from war-torn or difficult areas and, instead, generating our own energy. Darren made the valid point that there is no point in having interconnector cables if they can be sabotaged. That is a real issue. The security issue is not one that we addressed, but it is certainly one that I take note of.

Rebecca Long Bailey raised the issue of grid capacity. From my perspective, the most worrying issue in relation to achieving the objectives that were presented to us was the lack of grid capacity and our view on the capacity to make the necessary alterations. We have talked about a North-South interconnector in Ireland for about 15 years. There is resistance to that. There needs to be community discussion, but it cannot be endless discussion—it has to come to a conclusion. There are trade-offs to be made. We recommended the idea of community benefit, whereby people in whose area energy infrastructure is imposed should benefit from a manifest decrease in energy costs or should receive supports. We must look at that.

Communities must be listened to but, at the end of the day, some conclusions must be reached. In Ireland, we are very conscious of the debate around Shell to Sea and the opposition to the bringing ashore of energy in Mayo, which went on for years and years. Ultimately, the delay in getting energy from the Corrib field ashore cost the Irish taxpayer €400 million. Therefore, although local communities are important, the benefit to the broad community that is not immediately impacted must be taken into account, too. That will be a very difficult balance to strike.

As far as the grid in Ireland is concerned, EirGrid is a publicly owned company that provides the infrastructure across the island, but the planning issues are the real issues there.

I have touched on the issue of energy security, which John Lahart raised.

I was not conscious of the point that Seán Crowe made about the nature of the products that we use for retrofitting, but it is an important one, and I am sure that his Committee will deal with it.

We took evidence in Jersey, as David Johnson indicated. Jersey is in a fortunate situation, in that it gets its electricity from France, and it does so at a very competitive rate, so it is a bold initiative for Jersey to build its own offshore wind farm when it gets subsidised, relatively cheap electricity from France. However, that will give it a level of security, which is something that we were pushing for. We would welcome that.

Finally, I welcome Fintan Warfield as our new member of the Committee. I look forward to working with him on our next project.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Brendan. I again commend Committee C on its very detailed report and its painstaking investigation, which involved numerous witnesses and meetings. That shows the value of good Committee work. It is not always easy for Committee members to travel, given the parliamentary business in our respective legislatures, but one of the powerful strengths of this Assembly over the years has been its Committee work. That is clearly demonstrated by Committee C's good report. I thank all the people who willingly partook as witnesses, gave evidence and provided written submissions, and I also thank the Committee's support staff for their work.

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

Report agreed.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Again, the joint Clerk will arrange for the report to be forwarded to the British and Irish Governments, the Crown Dependency Governments and the relevant Committees in each BIPA legislature.

One issue that I, Karen Bradley and the Steering Committee have been addressing is the fact that there is not enough engagement within our own legislatures in regard to the work of our Assembly. We must try to create better impetus and maybe it would be possible for the report to be considered and debated by the relevant Committees in each legislature. I think that that would be useful. It is very important that others in the parliamentary community know of the work that is being undertaken by this Assembly and its constituent parts.

Paul Bew mentioned the ETA. I thought that there were very heartening submissions with regard to the tourism sector across all of this island. Yesterday, we saw the energy and we listened to the challenges, but we also heard about the potential and the opportunities to grow the industry so much. It is a vital industry for every parish in every jurisdiction. Any help that can be given with regard to easing the difficulties and obstacles that the ETA process would put in place would be much appreciated.

As Emer Currie said, our joint Clerks will be writing to the Governments and to the British-Irish Council in advance of the next meeting to ask whether the matter could be considered.

Ms Tess White MSP:

May I ask a question, Chair? Each of the legislatures has its own Committees. For example, in Scotland, we have the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. Is there any benefit of the lead Clerks of each of those Committees receiving a copy of these reports?

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Yes, that is the idea, Tess.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA): Yes.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

It would be submitted to each relevant Committee in each of our legislatures, and we hope that Members would try to get debates or a presentation on these reports at those Committees. We want that for all reports, if that is possible at any stage. The better engagement we have with our own legislatures, the better.

We will now adjourn for 15 minutes and resume at 10.45 am.

The sitting was suspended at 10:28 am.

The sitting was resumed at 11.04 am.

15. CUILCAGH LAKELANDS UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK – REGENERATIVE TOURISM IN A SHARED LANDSCAPE

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Ladies and gentlemen, the Plenary is now resumed. Our next item of business is regenerative tourism in a shared landscape. I invite Gráinne O'Connor, manager of Cuilcagh—did I get that right?

Ms Gráinne O'Connor (Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark):

Yes.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Well done! Gráinne O'Connor, manager of Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark will address this Assembly on Cuilcagh Lakelands, which straddles counties Fermanagh and Cavan and was designated the first cross-border geopark in the world in 2008. Gráinne, you are very welcome.

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everyone. I have suddenly realised that I am the only thing between you and your lunch, so I am going to rattle through this. Thank you very much for inviting me to be here. I want to give an overview of Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark, which is quite a unique landscape in terms of regenerative tourism. This concept has become more popular in recent years and, in a way, has taken over from the idea of sustainable tourism. I will come to that as well.

To give you a little background, we are a cross-border, transnational geopark, located in the north-west corner of the island of Ireland, straddling the border of counties Cavan and Fermanagh. We were the first transnational geopark in the world, and there are now many. We cover an area of about 1,700 square kilometres.

I will give a flavour of the kind of landscape that I am talking about here. The images that you see here are sites within the geopark, and there are 52 sites within our designated area. To become a geopark, you must have geology of international significance. Often, when people think of Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark, they think of caves, as the Marble Arch Caves in County Fermanagh are one of our flagship sites. Although limestone and cave formations are very important for us, our geology of international significance is based around Cuilcagh Mountain, which forms the centre of the geopark. The border between north and south goes right across the top of the mountain, and that is important for us as well. One of the other areas is a fabulous

area in mid-Cavan called Lough Oughter. The ribbed moraines and drumlins are other areas of international geological significance.

What makes us quite different is that we are a partnership between two local authorities, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Cavan County Council; we straddle across a border and are, as I said, the first cross-border geopark in the world; and we are governed by a memorandum between the two councils in the north and south, and through our development plan, which I will speak about in a minute. Really, the thing that makes geoparks quite different from other UNESCO designations such as world heritage sites is that they are really about the grassroots and how communities can benefit from tourism.

Our mission is really to nurture and protect the place that we live in, from a sustainability point of view—economic, social and environmental—and provide platforms for the communities and enable them to live in balance. We want to protect this unique heritage and add to its preservation, and we want to look at how tourism can, in a way, look at conservation and how that protects the landscape.

It is a set area and quite large at 1,741 square kilometres. We look after 52 sites. You might know sites such as the Marble Arch Caves, Cavan Burren Park and Cuilcagh Boardwalk, all of which are really important tourist sites in a rurally isolated area and really benefit the local economy. We look from a regenerative tourism point of view at how people who come to Cuilcagh Lakelands can leave it better than they found it.

Our visitor numbers—just at sites that we count numbers at—are in excess of 600,000. We have people counters at about 19 of our sites, so we know that the numbers are way higher. How can we get those people to spend in this way, in a sustainable manner?

We run a programme of ambassadors: we have 40 accredited ambassadors across our geopark and 30 accredited businesses, which I will speak about in a moment. We are governed by our development plan, which is adopted by both local authorities. We base ourselves on five strategic pillars, which we do not work with in silos: they are about cross-border governance, stakeholder engagement, education, tourism, community and conservation—tourism is very important to education and communities. These pillars were launched in 2021.

I put this quote here because I think it can sometimes be easy to listen to new concepts and wonder what they are about:

“Regenerative tourism, at its simplest, is about ensuring the visitor economy delivers a net positive benefit for communities, the environment, and the destination.”

We have really been looking at that in Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark: how do we control over-tourism and get people to spend in the area but in a sustainable manner? A survey in the 2023 sustainable travel report looked at insight from 33,000 travellers across 35 countries, and 76% of international travellers said that the global energy crisis and rising costs are impacting their spending plans.

More importantly, 43% of those people said that they were willing to spend extra for certified sustainable travel experiences. That is something that all destinations and communities need to look at.

In terms of our geopark and regenerative tourism, we look at it through conservation, with an emphasis on conservation and the preservation of natural resources, including geology, et cetera. We also look at community engagement, education, sustainable practices, regenerative initiatives and visitor experience. The idea of visitor experience is really important. For example, people want to visit a location and experience what the locals can offer. They do not see borders; people want to visit Cuilcagh Lakelands and experience what it has to offer. We need to engage with local communities in terms of regenerative tourism. This involves empowering residents to participate in tourism and activities, promoting cultural exchange and ensuring that tourism benefits are shared among all community members.

From a sustainable practices point of view, regenerative tourism really promotes sustainable practice such as eco-friendly accommodation, waste reduction and energy conservation. It also encourages the use of local products. This is something we have been very keen on, in terms of our sustainable business network and expanding that.

These are images of some of the businesses that are involved in our sustainable business network. We have the likes of adventure centres, food trucks, accommodation providers, et cetera. This is an accredited programme that allows businesses to look at their waste and energy management, and the concepts of regenerative and green tourism. The concept of regenerative tourism has been well documented in articles on a global scale, but we are trying to examine it on a more local scale. Geoparks are the perfect opportunity to do this. They are resilient rural tourism destinations where income streams should be consolidated through regenerative practices.

How does this work for us? Our ambassador programme trains up local people to deliver our events programme and to act as conduits for tourists who come to the area. They meet with tourists and act as the front point of reference for people who visit the area.

We also have our sustainable business clusters. This is really important in terms of a network that brings together people from both sides, Fermanagh and Cavan, to look at a shared landscape and heritage, and how they can network.

Let me give you an idea of some of the modules that we teach in our business programme. We now have upwards of 30 businesses; the programme began in 2020 and it has gone from strength to strength. Fáilte Ireland now fund part of the programme, which is great. It looks at energy conservation and management, biodiversity, “Leave No Trace”; geopark businesses look at all these.

One of the modules that we added this year was about accessibility. We feel that this is really important for tourism, going forward. How can we make our tourism product more accessible for people and visitors?

I could not do a presentation on Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark without talking about the boardwalk which, in a sense, has become a flagship destination in the geopark, but has caused us huge problems in terms of over-tourism. When this boardwalk was built in 2014, it was put in to mitigate the damage to the landscape. This is obviously a Special Area of Conservation with unique sphagnum moss. The boardwalk was put in because walkers were going to the top of the mountain, and it was to protect the unique landscape. The result was a huge bucket list tourist attraction. A lot of it was down to social media because it was nicknamed the “Stairway to Heaven”. We had to look at how it benefited the communities because we knew the numbers were huge—some 120,000-130,000 people. They were coming, but we knew from surveys that they were leaving and not spending money in the locality, so that is what our sustainable tourism network grew out of. We have had to work with local providers in terms of car parking provision and look at how we provide services for the attraction. I wanted to show those two photos to demonstrate that, in a way, regenerative tourism is hugely important not only for economic benefit but for the social and environmental benefits for local communities as well.

Another thing that we are passionate about in the geopark is changing the narrative around climate action and tourism, and how they relate to each other. We have been very involved in the Shared Island initiative. We have the Cuilcagh masterplan that was developed through the initiative, which looks at regenerative tourism on the mountain itself, on a cross-border basis.

We have been doing some work in terms of recovery of our upland habitats and how this relates to local communities. We really want to change the narrative in terms of how we interpret that, and how it becomes a tourist attraction for people.

Community involvement is obviously hugely important for the geopark collaboration and how tourism aligns with its values. “Intangible heritage” is one of the main areas of interest for UNESCO and geoparks. Obviously built and natural heritage is very important, but so are the cultural and intangible heritage of an area. Really, it is through community involvement and regenerative tourism that we look at this on a cross-border collaboration basis.

We are also looking at the local economic benefits, which involves locally sourced products, supporting small scale businesses and fostering tourism skills. Our ambassador programme and our business network look at these. Most of all, it is about empowering local communities to take an active role in tourism development. I listened with interest earlier to the strategy report and discussion on the energy strategy, and how long the process of consultation can be. I was interested to hear about the concept of “community benefit”. We really need to show how the geopark benefits local communities in Cavan and Fermanagh in that intangible way.

Overall, tourism in a geopark context is about fostering harmony between tourism activities, environmental conservation, community, et cetera. The most important thing is how we determine that visitors leave a place better than they found it. Sustainable tourism is about sustaining a place as it is; regenerative tourism is about leaving it better after you have left, and we are striving towards that.

One of the positive legacy projects that we are involved in at the moment is an exciting partnership between Fáilte Ireland, the geopark, Cavan County Council and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council around the development of Shannon Pot Discovery Centre. This is a multi-million Euro project that is being developed over the next 18 months and it will have a hugely positive legacy impact for the local community, the geopark and local tourism. We have been working very closely with the local community with regard to how it is interpreted, and how the centre markets itself and operates.

To finish, I want to give you an idea of the landscape we are talking about—Cuilcagh Mountain. It is the highest mountain in both Cavan and Fermanagh. It has a beautiful limestone pavement towards the bottom of it, moving towards a sandstone top. There also are the lakes of Lough Oughter, the beautiful drumlins, Cloughoughter Castle on the island, Monea Castle in Fermanagh and the beautiful Calf House Dolmen tomb at Cavan Burren Park.

It is important for us that we continue to grow as a geopark and work in partnership with both local authorities to look at this area as a shared landscape, and how it benefits local communities. Thank you very much.

11.15 am

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Thank you very much indeed, Gráinne. I now invite questions from the plenary floor. First, I invite Senator Wilson.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson:

Thank you Steve and co-chairs, and thank you, Gráinne, for your excellent presentation. As somebody who is from Cavan, the idea of 120,000 people coming to Cavan and not spending money is hard to comprehend.

For the local representatives, Brendan and me, and the wider British-Irish community here, can I ask what facilities are you lacking in the area, from a commercial point of view, that could benefit to both the communities of west Cavan and Fermanagh?

You pointed something out in your contribution. I love going down to the Crom Estate in Fermanagh; it is beautiful. On a number of occasions, when Brendan Smith and I have had international visitors, we often brought them by water from Belturbet to that beautiful estate. You pass over the border a number of times, in and out of the Republic into Northern Ireland on a number of occasions, and it is seamless. Do you see any potential difficulties in relation to that type of travel as a result of Brexit and the new procedures that are being brought into place, which were commented on by Senator Currie and the committee? For anyone who is outside of the common travel area and is not a native of the islands, do you see any potential difficulty as a result of that, because technically you would need a visa to travel between Belturbet and the Crom Estate, which is only a matter of seven miles? Have you given any thought to that, or are we raising fears that we should not be raising?

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

We have been working quite closely with Tourism NI and Fáilte Ireland on the discussions around that, and we would certainly be very concerned about it. As the first transnational geopark operating on a cross-border basis, having checks in place would be detrimental to us

for tourism development. We will continue to work with both tourism bodies and local government in that regard, but I advocate that that would be detrimental to us.

At the minute, travel is seamless across our geopark. It is really important to say that, although it might seem like a cliché, communities in that area really do not see the border. For us to talk and be serious about regenerative tourism, we need to back it up with policy.

It would have a hugely negatively effect on us in marketing it. We work with Tourism NI and Fáilte Ireland, but also Tourism Ireland, on marketing it, from domestic and international perspectives. Even looking at the Shannon Pot visitor centre, we are drafting up the concept brand and how it tests on other markets. We have recently done testing on a variety of international markets and, thankfully, it tested hugely positively. Something like that would be detrimental to us and the investment that we have put into the area.

On the first part of your question, to us, facilities can always be improved. In recent years, we have availed a huge amount of funding, which has been fantastic—this investment into Shannon Pot will prevail—but I suppose it is about the seamless effort of working cross-jurisdictionally, which can be a huge challenge. I work with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Cavan County Council, and there is a road surface in the north, which is within the local authority—you know. The day-to-day operational parts can be quite difficult—I would not quite say that—from a jurisdictional perspective for us to really develop. That is why initiatives such as the Shared Island initiative have been fantastic for the geopark: we have been looking at things on an all-island shared heritage basis. As I said, our Cuilcagh masterplan will look at that as well.

On services, public transport is another issue for us, and we have looked at its provision as part of the Shared Island study.

Mr Darren Millar MS:

Thank you for your presentation. I am delighted to hear about the geopark initiative. I just looked it up and found that we have one UNESCO geopark in Wales, in Fforestfach, which is part of the Brecon Beacons, or Bannau Brycheiniog, national park.

One of the things that struck me when I looked at your last slide was the image of the night sky. It seems to me that there is increasing interest in dark sky tourism around the world, and opportunities for regenerative tourism in simply switching the lights off in some places, so that people can have access to the wonder of the night sky. To what extent have you been able to

monitor the interest in individual activities and the reasons that people come? Obviously, there is the geological interest, which is the primary one, but you have so many other opportunities to attract people in.

Secondly, given that there is a network of these UNESCO geoparks across the British Isles and further afield, what work do you do to network together in some of the marketing opportunities that you might have, given that people who visit one will, no doubt, take an interest and want to visit the others?

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

On the first part of your question, we are currently investing potential dark sky status within our geopark. It has been recommended by DarkSky International that we look at reserve status. Obviously, there are huge implications in terms of core and periphery. We are at the beginning of a process: it can take five to seven years to become designated, and there is a large body of work associated with that, such as measuring lumens in the night sky and everything that goes with it. What makes DarkSky so attractive to us is that, again, like with UNESCO geoparks, it is very much about community and reenerative tourism. This is definitely on the agenda for us. We have been speaking to our colleagues in OM Dark Sky Park and in Nephin, in Mayo.

On your question on UNESCO and Fforestfach, I am very familiar with it: we work very closely and it is a wonderful geopark.

To retain your UNESCO accreditation, you have to adhere to four criteria. It is a really stringent reaccreditation process, and it happens every four years. One of the main criteria is international networking. We are part of the European Geoparks Network as well as the Global Geoparks Network, and we meet twice a year, once online and once in person. I have just come back from the European geoparks meeting in Turkey, where we had various agenda items that we tried to collectively discuss. One of those was sustainable tourism. At the minute, we are trying to really look at the actions within each of our individual parks in adhering to the sustainable development goals. There is a huge amount of networking—next month, I will travel to the UK forum in the English Riviera Geopark—and it is a really important part. We worked with both national commissions in the UK and Ireland in developing marketing around geoparks, so it is integral to our success.

Mr Frank Feighan TD:

Gráinne, thanks very much for the great presentation. As I was telling you before, I spent my honeymoon at your geopark in the middle of November, so thank you. I have just two questions. Thermal spas are very big in Europe. Is there any scope for these in the geopark, or did you ever consider it? It is probably not there anyway, but I was just wondering. Secondly, will the SLNCR Greenway, which goes from Sligo to Enniskillen through Glenfarne, be linking in to your geopark as well?

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

On thermal spas, we have an old Victorian sulphur spa in Swanlinbar—Deputy Smith will be familiar with it—and it is one of the sites within our geopark. It has become almost a holy well: people go and get the water, and it is reputed to have cures, et cetera. We have not looked at thermal spas as such, but those who sit in our management group are regularly in conversation with Geological Survey Ireland and the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland and looking at the potential for geothermal projects. One came up recently around ICBAN and a geothermal project. We feed into that but there is nothing at the minute.

The SLNCR is a very important project for us. We have recently completed an economic visioning study, along with Leitrim, Sligo, Fermanagh and Cavan councils, looking at the economic potential for the SLNCR along the route. That would be of huge benefit to us. We are trying to keep the consultation going with the communities and keep them updated, because it is obviously a very long process. Even though the geopark is in Cavan and Fermanagh, we see tourism as a regional concept. For example, at the minute, we are looking with Leitrim County Council and Cavan County Council at a canoe trail on Lough MacNea. We do not look at county or transnational borders: we look at the region and how we can bring people to this area in a sustainable manner. SLNCR is extremely important for that.

11.30 am

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Gráinne, I have two questions. I shall use my prerogative as co-chair. First, how is the inter-relationship with organisations like the National Trust, because obviously many people who go to Fermanagh will use the National Trust's facilities and then discover, as we have done many times, it is not interlinked?

My second question is of considerable interest, about climate change and the climate emergency and, in particular, their impact on the walks in the area. We have received a lot of

information recently about the impact on peat-lands and wetlands, and the rest of it, and how they are being affected. Tourism is also remarkably affected by the climate emergency.

Please address your remarks to those two questions.

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

We strive to work more closely with the National Trust; I have a meeting with their regional manager tomorrow. There are three properties in Fermanagh which are extremely important to us from a geo-perspective. Florence Court, near Cuilcagh and the Ulster Way, is extremely important, as is the Crom Estate, in terms of the links to Belturbet and the cross-border waterways. Those are both important sites for us, and in the past the National Trust and the geopark would have been seen as two very separate entities, but going forward that is definitely changing.

Climate change is a huge issue for us, including operationally, in the management and maintenance of our trails. We are seeing exponentially more costs going into management and maintenance of sites because of changes in weather patterns.

In terms of positive news, we are very involved with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, in relation to Cuilcagh Mountain and the SAC, and how we can look at habitat restoration. We have just put in a proposal for PEACE PLUS, as a partner for a large-scale peat-land restoration project, in excess of €1 million for us. Conservation, peat-land restoration, upland habitats, climate action are always on our agenda and central to everything we do in terms of tourism.

One of the things that came out of the Shared Island initiative was that we look at how we interpret climate change and how visitors learn about it. We are the perfect environment for that because we have this wonderful landscape. Bogs can hold up to 25% carbon but they only cover 3% of the landmass. They are so important and we are very lucky to have them.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Gráinne, I want to compliment you on your work; I am very familiar with the area and your project, and I know you give the whole Cuilcagh Lakeland UNESCO Global Geopark great leadership, with a very small team. I never thought I would hear, as I did in 2021, broadcasts on BBC Northern Ireland news and on UTV Northern Ireland news appealing to people not to go to the boardwalk that was so crowded and oversubscribed during that marvellous weather.

There were restrictions on people travelling but it was phenomenal to hear, evening after evening, the BBC and UTV appealing to people not to go to the geopark because of the huge numbers attending.

There has been very good co-operation over the years between Cavan County Council and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. Even in the darkest days on our island, that co-operation was going on at a political and official level, which kept on the agenda issues that might not have stayed there because of the political trouble and the non-co-operation at national and transnational level. The work that our local authorities did then was particularly important and it is great that you are building on that reservoir of knowledge and experience.

Yesterday the Taoiseach was with us and we discussed the value of having all the political institutions that were established under the Good Friday agreement up and running again. It is for the benefit of all this island. Cuilcagh Lakeland Geopark is a huge example of a successful cross-border project, building on a natural cross-border resource. I was a member of Government in 2008; Arlene Foster was a member of the Northern Ireland Executive as Tourism and Investment Minister, at the time when both of us had constituency interests in the area. Was it not the fact that we were able to co-operate and work together on a cross-border basis, it would not have happened. We were able to get things done that would not have been done otherwise if there had not been an Executive in Northern Ireland. From that point of view, it is the result of political co-operation and the value of having institutions both north and south working together.

I know the National Parks and Wildlife Service have bought substantial banks of land adjoining the geopark, and that is hugely beneficial at a national level; there is a willingness to develop the geopark even more. Can you give a broad outline of what you hope to do with the additional lands? I know the strength from the environmental protection and I think that is a key part of the purchase of the additional lands and their further development.

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

Climate action and carbon sequestration are extremely important in terms of that large area of land, but also the fact that it sits right in the centre of the geopark, close to the border. There are opportunities for cross-border trails and connectivity of sites. Cuilcagh Mountain is 665 metres high and around the base of it you have all these attractions, and the boardwalk goes up one side. You have the Marble Arch Caves, Cavan Burren Park, Tullydermot Falls and, hopefully shortly, Shannon Pot Centre. How do we connect all these sites? How do we promote

green transport and sustainable travel between sites? The potential trails on this piece of land holds potential for, and their cross-border nature, will be huge. There are also some fabulous attractions on the land, which we would like to show to tourists in a sustainable manner.

You mentioned the cross-border partnership. We have been a geopark for 20 years; we were one of the first in the world. In 2008, it moved cross-border into County Cavan. The partnership and leadership that have been shown by both local authorities is unique, as is the amount of benefit that it has brought to local communities; I commend it. I have been the role of manager for five years and I came into a legacy that had been created some time before that. There was a real base of co-operation and cross-jurisdictional work. Cuilcagh is another example of that, and the lands will really add to it.

Mr Peter Fitzpatrick TD:

Gráinne, thank you very much for a very good presentation. That is a serious amount of land—1,741 square kilometres—to look after. I would like to ask about a point Brendan touched on. What kind of relationship do you have with farmers? I am sure farmers will not be happy with people coming to the area and across their fields. What kind of relationship do you have with greenways? You were talking about linking up the sites. To me, it seems a fantastic adventure. The relationship that Fermanagh and Cavan have is the same that Louth would have with the likes of Armagh and Down and surrounding areas. Maybe it is something you can move into different areas. It seems a big success over a vast area. The two local authorities get on very well together in that area. Why is it going so well? The greenways are a thing of the future, linking up all these fantastic sites. What is the link between the sites, the greenways and the farmers?

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

The farmers, landowners and local communities are hugely important. We have tried to engage with farmers less so on a project-by-project basis and more on a holistic basis. We are just about start development of our new community plan; it will be separate to our development plan and will be specifically about how we engage with local communities and farmers.

A lot of the work that we do with farmers is around peat-land restoration. For example, through the CAN project, which was inter-reg funded, we had officers on the ground working with local farmers around habitat restoration. That was very important to us. Access is obviously very

important also, in terms of trails and our local ambassadors. Some of those are farmers, so they can tell that story and give local experience, which is important.

The second part of your question was about greenways. There are a lot of different greenways proposed for the geopark, or already exist within it, and we work very closely with both local authorities in terms of promoting them. We work very closely with Waterways Ireland; they are one of our key stakeholders in terms of blueways. We have 52 sites and we are trying to see how they can be better connected.

The public transport piece is a big piece around that in terms of green and sustainability, so how can we better connect our sites? If, however, we really want an economic benefit for local communities, we need people to stay for 72 hours, and for them to stay for 72 hours we need an experience and there must be a number of things that they stay for. So that is what we are really trying to develop: these clusters of experiences.

Senator Fintan Warfield:

Thank you for the presentation. I was just wondering: when was the UNESCO recognition achieved and are there ongoing requirements to maintain that recognition? My second question is a geeky one. Administratively or at a governance level, as an all-Ireland project, where does the governance sit? Is there even a board? My other comment is just to commend the arts work that you do, such as the poetry map and the work with the Arts Council.

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

UNESCO accreditation is very difficult to get and retain. It happens every four years. We originally got accreditation in 2001 but that was just for the Marble Arch Caves as a site. Then it expanded in 2004 to Cuilcagh Mountain Park, then in 2008 it became cross-border. I will not go into too much detail on the process, but we get assigned two international assessors who come to us and spend the week with us. There are a whole load of criteria and checklists—101 that you have to go through. It is hugely rigorous and then it goes to the Global Geopark Network Council, which can disapprove the assessors' recommendation or approve it based on their report. To answer your question, it is very rigorous and takes a lot out of the team when it happens. We are very happy when it is over. Thankfully, we have been accredited for another four years.

In terms of governance, we have a memorandum of understanding between both local authorities and then we have a geopark committee, made up of the chief executives and

directors of services of both councils, as well as local elected reps from both councils. We have five from Cavan and five from Fermanagh. You really have that cross-border initiative, with elected reps and senior management coming together every quarter to discuss the strategic direction of the geopark and how it is governed.

Day to day, it is governed through both councils and we are unique in that the employing authority of some staff is Cavan and the employing authority of the other is Fermanagh, but we are all based in the one office and work together. The Fermanagh staff work on a cross-border basis and vice versa. It is very fluid, which is great and the essence of the cross-border work.

In terms of arts, intangible heritage, culture and arts are hugely important for us. We have been involved recently in a project with the Arts Council called Felting the Landscape, a really important project for local communities. The poetry map from the geological survey has been really important and we currently have an application in to Creative Ireland for another. It is something that do particularly through our geopark ambassadors. They usually come to us with ideas and we flesh them out and assist with that. We try to act a conduit for local communities to develop arts projects.

A huge piece of our work is with schools. We try to use the arts to work through the schools and do outreach.

Mr Seán Crowe TD:

I have just a couple of questions. How fit or mobile do you have to be to take part in the walks and so on? Is it age-friendly? Looking at some of the ones around here, would they be able to do it? If you have a disability, is it difficult to take part in the project? Listening to Brendan, it sounds as though you are a victim of your own success. How do you bring in that balance? You are appealing to people not to come—does that happen very often or is it just once a year when we get the sunshine?

11.45 am

You were also talking about people being concerned about their carbon footprint in relation to holidays and so on. I know of some sort of holidays where people, as part of it, put something back into the local environment by planting trees or maintaining or sustaining footpaths—that type of stuff. Is there any role for people in that type of area? Have you looked at that and is there any potential for expanding it in the future? I have never been but, from the pictures, it is absolutely beautiful. From your description, it sounds like something really worth maintaining.

If you are getting such huge numbers, do you have problems with litter and that type of thing? Are there invasive species—aside from the tourists—that come into the area? Again, I am thinking of the park and Killarney. People using that area can get involved in, say, removing the rhododendron plants and so on. There is a market for that. People want to put something back, particularly if you are conscious of the environment and you could assert your role there if you are thinking of expanding your work. Thank you.

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

Thank you. Accessibility is hugely important to us. We currently have two accessible trails within the geopark, which we promote as fully accessible. We are working with local businesses to see how they can make their product more accessible. Sometimes it is around language as well—how you promote sites. We have worked closely with local disability groups in that regard and we work closely with schools and so on. It is really important and one of the core principles of regenerative tourism. I am not just talking about people with limited mobility; it goes across the board in terms of accessibility for all.

We talked about the boardwalk and the huge numbers. Just to say, we were not dissuading anyone from coming. They are more than welcome. We want to welcome people into the geopark. That was at a particular point in time. With COVID and the restrictions on movement that became almost like a bucket list thing to do at that time. Certainly, the numbers have come back, thankfully, and are manageable, but what we're trying to do is to get people to do more experiences along with the boardwalk, not just to come to do the boardwalk and leave, but to come and do the boardwalk, possibly go over to the Cavan Burren, visit the caves, and Tullydermot and spend more in the locality.

In terms of giving back, we're looking at volunteer programmes. We do an annual litter pick. We're working with local businesses on how tourists might like to pledge, so there's all sorts of things. This is an ever-evolving narrative around planting trees and if that is the right thing to do. We're now looking at how, potentially, we could become a net-zero geopark by 2035, and what that might take. We are at the very beginning of that journey, and we work closely with some of the other geoparks as well in that regard.

On litter and the maintenance of sites, for some sites there's no issue at all and for some sites it is an issue. We're a very small team. We have four rangers that maintain our sites and therefore they're very, very busy. So yes, there's a resource implication in terms of tourism. That is why education and "Leave No Trace" is one of the main components of our business

programme. We promote the message that [people] should leave no trace. Actually, at most of our sites now we don't have bins, so we're encouraging people to bring litter home.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Gráinne, thank you very much indeed for that very compelling presentation, and thank you on behalf of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly for coming to speak to us as well. I promise that once Shannon Pot is finished, I will be doing that as well as walking up and down the boardwalk.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

We will invite you to the official opening of it.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

I will hold you to that, Brendan. I will hold you to that.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

We might have a plenary to coincide with it.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Thank you very much indeed. Thank you everybody.

Ms Gráinne O'Connor:

Thank you. *[Applause]*

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

I will now pass on to Brendan, our Co-Chair.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much. We are delighted that Enn Eesmaa from the Baltic Assembly, and an Estonian parliamentarian, has joined us over the past number of days. We also had a representative from the Benelux Parliament with us on Sunday night and early Monday. We would be delighted if Enn would say a few words. It is the first time we've had this type of participation by another sister assembly, and we look forward to further co-operation, collaboration and working together again. Enn, you can explain exactly the composition of

your assembly and, by and large, the work you do and what you hope to do in collaboration with us. *[Applause]*

Mr Enn Eesmaa (Member of the Baltic Assembly):

Thank you, Co-Chair

My name is Enn Eesmaa. I'm representing the Estonian Parliament, and together with our Secretary General, Agnija Antanoviča, we represent the Baltic Assembly. We started our work in 1991. It was a logical co-existence after we gained our independence once more. We thought then that this would be beneficial for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and those years have proved that we were absolutely right.

Sometimes it's good to live and work in a smaller country, especially a country like Estonia, the smallest in the Baltic region. Ministers and Prime Ministers are constant guests in our parliament. Sometimes people and our colleagues from bigger countries wonder if it's possible. Yes, it is possible. I'm representing two committees in the Estonian Parliament, a defence committee, and a European affairs committee. Prime Minister Kaja Kallas is a frequent guest in our European affairs committee.

I think that we have started something quite beneficial for all the countries we represent here today. We have practised working together with a multitude of international parliamentary bodies, mainly assemblies in the Benelux countries and of course the Scandinavian countries. It is quite useful for us to have the possibility to work together with Scandinavian countries, not only parliaments but within the Nordic Council we can work together with their Ministers and Prime Ministers.

One thing more that could be very useful for you is that we have good relations with countries like Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, the so-called GUAM Parliamentary Assembly. They know that we have done a lot to regain our independence and sometimes they say to us that if it is possible that you did something like that - small republics like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - evidently it is possible for us too. That, of course, was before the war in Ukraine. Today, the focus is there and, as you perhaps know, the Baltic states and Estonia have been quite active in supporting our Ukrainian friends.

I think that the co-operation with your parliamentary Assembly could be successful. We hope to see some of you already pretty soon in May in Vilnius where we are going to debate our problems and solutions on energy. This is something quite important for every country.

I mentioned small countries. In today's world, as we know, there are of course, small and big countries, rich and poor countries, but the main thing is that we have friendly countries and unfriendly countries. Believe us, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are very friendly countries towards you. We remember how much you helped us. We trust you, and we are glad to notice that you trust us. So let's work together. We can achieve perhaps even more, having our perspective and our experience in our region and you in your region. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much Enn. Of course our respective legislatures and governments have been and continue to be supportive of Ukraine. You will have heard the text of the motion we passed here yesterday unanimously. We are always conscious of the tensions on the border affecting your own Baltic countries as well. Our thoughts are always with the people of the Baltic countries that you refer to – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Our support will always be there with you.

Our business is now concluded. On behalf of you all I would like to thank our speakers and our secretariat. I want to mention in particular the very valuable work done, as always, by Veronica Carr, supported by the rest of the team from the Houses of the Oireachtas. I also recognise the role of the support staff from across the different legislatures as well.

12.00 pm

I want to also pay particular tribute to our joint Clerks, Regina and Martin, for the preparatory work they do and the support they give to us on an ongoing basis. The line-up they had for this plenary has been exceptionally good. The participation right from our committee meetings early on Sunday afternoon up until lunchtime today has been very good. And, again, I think it was demonstrated very clearly, [for example in] the energy report that Brendan Howlin presented to us, the very valuable and important that is carried out at committee level - the hearings, the witnesses, the value of the presentations, and the huge amount of background work in preparing such reports. I commend the members who were active at committee level in going to hearings. We all know there are constraints on all our time and in getting away from Parliament.

I was explaining to Gráinne that, unfortunately, we lost a lot of our Members yesterday afternoon and again early this morning, as they had to go back to Westminster for votes in

both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. I know that all of those Members who had to leave were most disappointed that they were not able to be with us for the conclusion of this 66th plenary.

We have also to recognise the welcome from the staff of Druids Glen. Regina and Veronica tell me that they have been exceptionally accommodating. We appreciate the value of the good facilities and the hospitality extended to us as well. Would you say a few words, Steve, before we adjourn?

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA): Yes, I would. Thank you very much indeed. May I thank you Brendan and the staff for all their efforts. On behalf of Dame Karen as well, from the British side of it, I say how much we have enjoyed Druids Glen.

On a more personal and pertinent note, I am very pleased to see that this functioning of the North-South and east-west relationship continues to grow. During a period of time when, regrettably, the institutions in Northern Ireland weren't there, there was a slight chill in the relationships at some levels of government, but that is not the case now.

I was very pleased to have the presence and indeed the time of An Taoiseach, Simon Harris, to come and talk to us. I thought that was something very noteworthy. Indeed, it is something we from the British side and will be quite keen to pass on, because I think the interest that has been taken by An Taoiseach and the Tánaiste throughout these proceedings over the years, is something that's been fundamental. It is good to see that the North-South and east-west relationships are now beginning to blossom and grow, and that's everything we should like to encourage.

Finally, I would just like to call on Annabelle Ewing to move the adjournment please.

Ms Annabelle Ewing MSP:

I formally move, Acting Co-Chair.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Annabelle. We look forward to meeting in Edinburgh in September for our next plenary meeting. I know Annabelle, as Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish

Parliament and her colleagues who are fellow members of this committee, have done a lot of preparatory work already for the next plenary, so we look forward to that. In the meantime, there's a busy schedule of work for all our committees, and we look forward to more reports in September being presented to our meeting.

I want to record our appreciation of the Taoiseach's attendance on Sunday evening and yesterday morning as well. I again reiterate our thanks to all our guest speakers. Gráinne sent us off on a very fine note when we see that scenery from my home area, so it's very important to recognise that as well. Gráinne, a sincere thanks for your help.

I now declare the 66th plenary session of the Assembly closed. We will next meet in plenary session in Edinburgh in September. The plenary session now stands adjourned.

The Co-Chairperson (Dr Steve Aiken MLA):

Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Lunch will be served in Hugo's Restaurant, and I'm told that the bus to the airport will depart at 1 pm sharp. I wish you all very safe journey home.

Adjourned at 12.15 p.m.