

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM ACHAINÍOCHA ÓN BPOBAL

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS

Déardaoin, 7 Iúil 2022

Thursday, 7 July 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Pat Buckley,	Jerry Buttimer,
Cormac Devlin,	Eugene Murphy,
Brendan Griffin,	Fintan Warfield.
Emer Higgins.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Teachta / Deputy Martin Browne sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Committee

Chairman: I welcome everyone. We have members present in the room. Apologies have been received from Deputies O'Donoghue and Devlin.

The Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl, and the Cathaoirleach, Senator Mark Daly, have published a Covid-19 code of conduct for the parliamentary community from March 2022. Face masks should continue to be worn when people are moving around the campus and during the meeting except when speaking. This will help to reduce the risk of Covid-19 spreading among the parliamentary community.

I propose that we approve the minutes of the private and public meetings held on 22 and 23 June 2022. The minutes have already been approved at a virtual private meeting. We must do this for procedural reasons. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that they must be physically present within the confines of the place in which Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House, in order to participate in public meetings. I will not permit members to participate where they are not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting.

Consideration of Public Petition on Adding Chefs to the Critical Skills List Now to Save Irish Hospitality: Discussion

Chairman: We will have two sets of witnesses with us to speak on two separate issues.

Petition No. 00025/22 from Mr. Paddy Lynn concerns adding chefs to the critical skills list now to save Irish hospitality. Mr. Lynn and Mr. Khairul Nizam Bin Nayan will speak on this petition. Later in the meeting, we will address petition No. 00042/21 from Ms Joanna Curtis, which is concerned with saving the services of the Owenacurra Centre, Midleton, east Cork. Dr. Orla Kelleher will speak on that topic.

Before we start, I will explain some limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practice of the Houses regarding references witnesses may make to other persons in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts is protected pursuant to both the Constitution and statute by absolute privilege. The witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if any of their statements are potentially defamatory in regard to an identifiable person or entity, the witnesses will be directed to discontinue the remarks. It is imperative that the witnesses comply with such direction. Before we hear from Mr. Lynn regarding his petition, I propose that we publish the opening statement on the committee's website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I extend a warm welcome to Mr. Lynn and to Mr. Nizam Bin Nayan. I suggest that Mr. Lynn make his opening statement for about ten minutes. We will then have questions and comments from members. Each member will have approximately ten minutes. Members may speak more than once. I invite Mr. Lynn to make his opening statement.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: I thank the Chair and the committee for having us in. I begin my presentation by quoting the description on the website of the Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment of the critical skills employment permit:

The Critical Skills Employment Permit is designed to attract highly skilled people into the labour market with the aim of encouraging them to take up permanent residence in the State. Eligible occupations under this type of permit are deemed to be critically important to growing Ireland's economy, are highly demanded and highly skilled, and in significant shortage of supply in our labour market.

I wish to separate that statement into two parts, each of which, in my view, is separate and independent of the other and should be treated thus when considering my petition. The second part is most pertinent and relevant to the current major issues facing our sector, namely:

Eligible occupations under this type of permit are deemed to be critically important to growing Ireland's economy, are highly demanded and highly skilled, and in significant shortage of supply in our labour market.

This statement alone is tailor-made to confirm the premise of my petition that chefs should be added to the critical skills list.

During the meeting of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media on 25 May 2022, which was loosely entitled the "Working Conditions and Skills Shortages in Ireland's Tourism and Hospitality Sector", representatives of the Licensed Vintners Association, LVA, and the Vintners Federation of Ireland, VFI, clearly showed the desperate dearth of hospitality staff across all disciplines and counties. Markedly, the representatives of both groups alluded specifically to the shortage of chefs as being fundamental to the re-emergence of their members' businesses.

The Chair, Deputy Niamh Smyth, from Fianna Fáil, presided engagingly on the topic and asked the hugely important question of where it was possible for the sector to get skilled staff. From the Government's perspective, the answer comes from the expert group on future skills needed, EGFSN, established in 1997. It is tasked with advising the Government on future skills requirements and associated labour market issues that impact on the national potential for enterprise and employment growth. Its membership includes representatives from Government Departments, enterprise development agencies, businesses, unions, the further education and training sector and the Higher Education Authority, HEA. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, in conjunction with the skills and labour market research unit, SOLAS, provides the EGFSN with research and analysis support.

Mr. Paul Clancy of the VFI suggested, quite reasonably, that an investigation of the precise scale of the problem needs to be conducted at Government level. The EGFSN is the entity to do that. On its "About Us" web page, the organisation describes what it does. I will cite those aspects relevant to my petition:

We advise Government on projected skills requirements at national and sectoral levels and make recommendations on how best to address identified needs.

We advise on any skills requirements that cannot be met internally at a given time and so must be met through inward migration.

I then read the current working list of objectives from the EFGSN's website. These are an artificial intelligence, AI, skills report; a design skills report; a zero-carbon skills report; a design skills implementation group; and work in the context of the report on Building Future Skills: Demand for Skills in Ireland's Built Environment Sector to 2030. Hospitality sector needs are not mentioned or addressed. In the context of an industry that has such highly publicised labour difficulties, surely the EFGSN should be scrambling to acknowledge and respond to the current supply-demand catastrophe. As this is clearly not high on the Government's agenda, it falls to industry representatives like me to argue the case for at least accepting the issue exists on a national level.

To date, my engagement with the Ministers and Departments involved has been mixed. The overall mood is that the legislation is dated, tired and unfit for purpose. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has been responsive to our approaches at lobbying level and information on advisers and contacts has been given freely. All those to whom I have spoken have been very helpful, but they suffer under the heavy burden of unabating processing queues and complex bureaucratic inadequacies. These issues make their work and objectives unclear. They also make solving issues or errors extremely slow and hierarchical. The impression given is of a disparate system where checks and balances take undue time. This is a matter for future resolution.

The crisis we face right now asks for immediate action. The statutory instruments that can allow this change exist and are easily amended. This is the main legislative barrier I see:

In the case of a Critical Skills Employment Permit for an employment for which the minimum annual remuneration is €30,000, the qualification required in respect of that employment is a third level degree relevant to the employment concerned.

This third level degree stipulation must be removed. Some of the most influential, powerful, successful and productive members of our society, and some of those in industries, do not have third level degrees. It is an archaic measure of suitability that is standing obnoxiously in the way of the progress of my petition.

I will return to the description of the critical skills employment permit and its first line:

The Critical Skills Employment Permit is designed to attract highly skilled people into the labour market with the aim of encouraging them to take up permanent residence in the State.

I wish to reflect on the outdated precedence it indicates. The Maastricht treaty of 1992 opened the EU to freedom of movement and thereby created superb opportunities for workers to find employment in their fellow EU countries. Since 1992, the EU has transformed into a powerhouse of enterprise, industry and belief. Countries that were severely impacted by exceptionally poor labour market options are now thriving economies with enthused and proud young people, who often return from their time abroad and choose to remain in their native lands to set up businesses and raise their families. The will "to take up permanent residency in the [foster] State" is not as prevalent as it once was.

As a result it is not necessary for the critical skills employment permit to be framed in this way. Of course, housing is needed while workers are here and this will be a real issue. *WeHaveChefs.com* has noted from our coalface experience that accommodation is available throughout the country. It is just a matter of the hotels, restaurants, bars, chefs and ourselves

as recruiters uniting in the search to find our incoming employees suitable lodging while they are here.

Our chefs for the most part are not economic migrants in the disheartened sense of the phrase. Instead they are highly skilled, highly versatile, well-travelled, globally wise go-getters who seize at a good opportunity when it arises. They know their skill set is in demand world-wide and they choose Ireland because our reputation for welcome and diversity is well known. They do not necessarily intend to stay forever. They are exploring the world and applying their passionate career choice to the nation in which they find themselves.

Under the general skills employment permit checklist, businesses seeking staff from outside the EU must complete a labour market needs test for each and every position they want to fill. For chefs this requires a EURES advertisement that must run for 28 days before the application can be submitted, an advertisement for the job in a national newspaper for three consecutive days and an advertisement for the job in a local newspaper or a copy of the advertisement on a jobs website, other than the EURES website, for three days.

The problem here is threefold. The expense of posting these advertisements is substantial, there is a delay of 28 days before an outside-of-EU permit may be submitted, and, most damn-ingly; no-one responds to these advertisements. For example, *WeHaveChefs.com* placed 27 EURES advertisements over 28 days with 45 positions available in top-class hotels and restaurants throughout the country and we received two CVs, neither of which was anywhere near suitable for the position advertised.

The labour market needs test is obsolete as there do not seem to be chefs in the EU who want to come to work in Ireland. I do not think this is a poor reflection on Ireland's living and working conditions but instead describes the growth and development across the bloc that keeps native chefs in their domestic markets. The other element is that the hospitality sector is primarily and ideally manned by locals or at least nationals. These are people who take pride in their country's hospitality offering and often, like myself, they have only one language. Therefore, the transferability of their skill sets as chefs is hampered by their inability to communicate in a foreign tongue. The culinary sectors throughout Europe cater largely for their own domestic markets.

On the contrary, the chefs we bring from east Asia more often than not have worked in international hotels where English is commonly used as the mean language. They are well-equipped, ready and prepared to travel to use their skills overseas. Their intention is not to take up permanent residency but to explore the world of culinary variety. We do not need to worry where they will live so much; we simply need to welcome them into our country and our communities and help them find accommodation suited to their location. Where there is a will, there is a way. I thank the committee for hearing my argument and I hope this petition is not raised in vain.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Lynn. Is the shortage of chefs an issue throughout the EU? If not, is it the language issue to which Mr. Lynn referred that prevents them from coming to Ireland?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: I imagine there is a shortage. I do not have the statistics for the rest of the EU. I have heard there is a shortage of chefs throughout the world but I cannot necessarily speak to it. The Irish market certainly does have a shortage.

Chairman: The Irish market definitely has a shortage.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Yes. It has a shortfall of 10,000.

Chairman: Mr. Lynn said he has engaged with various Departments and their responses have been mixed. Is he saying his request is not being taken seriously by Departments or that the focus of the Departments is on other areas, which means the hospitality sector is lower in their pecking order?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: I would say so. They have been very engaging. With regard to the changes and allowances we are asking to be made to applications, the legislation is quite tight on what is and is not allowed. It is more that their hands are tied. On the second part, I believe that hospitality is a Cinderella industry. It is an afterthought much of the time. The fact that the expert group on future skills needs, EGFSN, does not have a focus on hospitality shows this quite clearly. It is not necessarily an issue at ministerial level, it has more to do with the Government's overall view of the sector.

Chairman: Mr. Lynn mentioned that the Employment Permits Act 2006 applies to nine different permits. Does Mr. Lynn believe a specific permit for the hospitality industry would speed things up and could be more effective?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Yes. The overall resolution for our industry is not to bring in chefs from overseas. It is to encourage our youth to immerse themselves back into the hospitality industry and take pride in it. We are at a critical moment and we need chefs on the ground. We need more than chefs. The petition is specifically aimed at chefs but the hospitality industry in general is under severe pressure in terms of bodies. Chefs are already on the general permit list, which is great, but it takes four or five months to get them here. If they were on the critical skills list this would reduce to four to six weeks. This would have a significant impact. As an aside, the rest of the hospitality jobs are not even on the general skills list. We cannot bring in housekeeping operatives, receptionists, waiters or bartenders from outside the EU. They are ineligible and it is a crying shame.

Chairman: Mr. Lynn has advised us it is costly to follow the process to advertise for a chef on the general skills list. Will he give us an idea of the expense involved as it stands?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Apart from the administrative costs of the advertisement, the only one that costs money is the newspaper advertisement. Partly because there are not huge sales of newspapers any more, the price has drifted downwards. It costs roughly between €150 and €200 to place an advertisement with a national newspaper. It used to be much higher but thankfully it has decreased. This is the main cost. EURES is free.

Deputy Pat Buckley: In October 2021, 350 general employment permits were provided for hospitality but only managers were on the critical skills list. Why is it only managers? Prior to Covid the hospitality sector in the country was huge, with more than 260,000 people working in the industry. I would like to know where they have gone. We are speaking about chefs of all things. As a country we have an amazing reputation, even for beach trucks and tuck trucks and so on. In any town or village in the country some fellow will say there is a famous chef here or there. Why are chefs not on the critical skills list? Is the job not attractive enough? Is it that the pay is not strong enough? Would putting chefs on the critical skills list set a certain bar whereby they must be on certain wage rate? Would it pump them up? Would it be a regularisation? Would it make it more attractive for chefs to come in?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: I would imagine an exception was probably made for managers because

of a lobbying effort. I do not know the details of it. The hospitality industry needs far more than chefs. We deal with the largest hotels in the country and they want people at every level. There are not people for the jobs. Why is hospitality not attracting people? Covid had a big impact on the number of people involved. I do not think wages are high enough throughout the industry, including for chefs. That is not necessarily something that we are here today to solve but I do feel that. It is quite a maligned industry in general. I do not think that we appreciate the chefs of the country as we should. We all love a celebrity chef and they are some of our most popular television personalities. There might be a chef here or there in a town or village with a good following and reputation whose name proceeds them but that is not always the way. It is a noble and altruistic discipline and a vocation for many people. That is often used against them. If someone is committed to a life as a chef there are not many other things that they want to do so maybe the wages do not chase the dream.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I apologise as I have to go to another meeting. I am sorry I was not in for the beginning of Mr. Lynn's presentation. We are going from A to B to C today. It is just a very busy period. I assume he is involved in the hospitality business. I have not met him before. What Mr. Lynn is saying is very true. Look at what Fáilte Ireland said earlier this year. There were 40,000 vacancies in the tourism industry and 10,000 were for kitchen staff. I think that was in the spring of 2022, and they reported that 88% of employers in hospitality were having these difficulties. I know from my own county of Roscommon there are people, particularly in family hotels, pleading with me every second day of the week. They are having to close what are, in most cases, very good premises because they cannot get chefs in particular. In one case, the hotel was asked to dedicate a few rooms to the unfortunate Ukrainian people, they managed to get a wonderful young chef from Ukraine which was a very big plus. The language barrier was an issue, without doubt, but they managed and they worked their own-----

Mr. Paddy Lynn: The Senator raises a fascinating suggestion. The Ukrainians were given PPS numbers. More power to them. It is great to have them here. It is superb. It is possible to make things happen quickly. We can do it. It is, 100%, an issue all over. On 25 May, the LVA told a joint committee that one third of hospitality staff are gone. That is vast. It quoted a figure of 260,000.

I spoke with a hotelier on Newstalk two days ago. She was unaware that chefs were not on a critical-skills list. The owner of Matt the Thresher, where I worked for ten years, was also unaware. It has only become an issue since Covid and this mass exodus of people. We have not needed critical skills at this level before but we do now. The only way to solve it quickly is by their addition on this list. The only real barrier is the third level thing. We analysed the chefs on our database currently and 60% have third level education. There is great quality in the ranks of our chefs. They are not Irish and I wish they were. They are people from overseas, outside the EU. They have great English as a second language. Everyone can interview strongly. Most have super hotel backgrounds and college experience plus work experience. They are raring to come here. They want to come here but the only barrier is the timeframe. The hotels cannot wait four or six months for staff to come in. They cannot predict that far ahead, as much as they would want to. They are running a day-to-day business. The chefs have to make decisions about what they will do. Khairul who is with me today has six children and a wife. He is from Kuala Lumpur. He has travelled the world as a chef for many years. He is interested in exploring the world. His wife and children do not intend to come here. His wife is an accountant who works at state level and the six children are various ages. The goal is not to move everyone here. I am not saying that is the case for all of our chefs but they want to bring their skills here for a period at least. All we need to do is to make that more easy to achieve.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I was going to make the point that we can do this with Ukrainians, and that is great. I am delighted and that family hotel is thrilled it could place that young lady in a job. Despite the language barrier, things are working out pretty well. It shows we can do things.

We need to get chefs onto that critical list. We are only seeing the nub of the problem now and if we do not deal with it, we will see serious closures in the hotel sector. As I said, some fine family hotels are closing two days a week. That never happened with these hotels but they have to do it now because they cannot keep the staff they have working seven days a week. Many of them are exhausted as it is. Therefore they have decided that they must give a day or two off so they must close the hotel. I know it saddens them greatly when they have to put a sign up saying, "Sorry, due to staff shortages we are closed Monday and Tuesday". It is not good for tourism or for any town or village. Many people from abroad are travelling around this country. They are coming from every country in the world. There is a huge number of tourists here. If they come to a town or village and the hotel is closed, it does not look great. I agree with the sentiments Mr. Lynn is expressing. While I accept there are one or two little issues we need to solve, it can be done. If we can do it for Ukrainian people, we should be able to do it.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Super. I thank the Senator.

Chairman: Senator Buttimer is next. We cannot hear him.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: I might talk on the Ukrainian issue while we are waiting. It is absolutely fantastic that we have such an influx of people. They are suffering from psychological trauma. We have made efforts to place people from Ukraine in communities. We do that at no cost and we want to get as many in but they are dealing with other issues as well so they are not ideally poised for the task but they will be in future.

Chairman: I think Senator Buttimer has gone for a vote in the Seanad. I have some questions. Although the hospitality sector was supported during the pandemic, does Mr. Lynn think that it is properly valued in this country?

I see Senator Buttimer but he is still on mute and we cannot hear him. Maybe he can run down to the committee room. I see there was a vote in the Seanad. Is the hospitality sector properly valued in this country?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: No. It is incredible that our national motto is céad míle fáilte, a hundred thousand welcomes. Hospitality is the core of that welcome. We are masters of it as Khairul will stand testament to. He has only been here a short period but has already realised that the way Irish people welcome others into the country is remarkable. I do not think we really appreciate that fully on a financial, salary level or at legislative or government levels. One thing that was raised with the Licensed Vintners Association and the Vintners' Federation of Ireland was that we fall between many stools. That was Deputy Niamh Smyth's comment. She said that hospitality falls between many stools in Departments and there is no overseeing Department, which covers the whole thing. I spent the period building up to this meeting trying to find out who I approach for movement. It is hard to find the main root of the issue or to have that conversation. It is fabulous to be here and able to do that. Maybe from here it can be spread further.

Chairman: In Mr. Lynn's statement he said that the expert group on future skills needs made no mention of the hospitality sector. Has he any thoughts as to why it did not? It seems like it should be at the top of the agenda.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: A neighbour of mine is highly positioned in a regulations committee and has regularly spoken here. It was he who advised me to find out where the advice for the Government is coming from. That led to my discovery of the expert group on future skills needs. I assumed I would then find reams of reports and work done on hospitality needs but it is just not there. I absolutely agree that AI and zero carbon are important issues but so is hospitality. I wrote a small piece on it being a Cinderella industry. I like the idea of the title and I think it very much fits hospitality. We are expected to do all the warming and welcoming things, the cooking and cleaning and plámásing but we are not paid or respected for it thereafter.

Chairman: I think Deputy Buckley said earlier that there are 20,000 to 30,000 people in the sector and they are talking about a shortfall of 10,000 but the expert group did not put it into its document.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Precisely.

Chairman: When Mr. Lynn is taking on staff, what qualifications does he look for? Many of them would be self-taught. Some of the Michelin star chefs would say they are self-taught. Does it pose complications for vetting the skill levels of an applicant?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: My business partner, Rowan Lynn, is a very well trained chef. He trained under Kevin Thornton in the Fitzwilliam at sous chef level.

Chairman: A good Tipperary man from Cashel.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Yes. Rowan has lived in Bangkok for nearly eight years now and runs a cooking academy there. When I first mooted the idea of the project, *wehavechefs.com*, it did not immediately strike him that it would be doable. I knew the skill levels were out there. We started with Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. They are very highly appreciated courses built for the service industry and there is great respect for-----

Chairman: I am sorry, we are having some trouble with the microphones. We will have to pause for a moment.

Sitting suspended at 2.15 p.m. and resumed at 2.17 p.m.

Chairman: How many chefs has Mr. Lynn recruited and where have they come from in the world?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: We are at roughly 60 chefs at the moment. We have been functioning since September of last year. We placed our first submissions and applications for work permits in December. We have six chefs on the ground and about 20 work permits through currently. It is a two-step process. There is the submission of the work permit application. Once that has been received, it goes to visa application. They have to do two levels as well. Then it is a case of asking, "How long is a piece of string?". We have had direct contact with the embassies in the countries we deal with and asked for expedited methods, which do not exist. We are waiting eight weeks for Filipino visas to come through. We are waiting three weeks for Thai visas, which is pretty good. Malaysians are visa exempt which is perfect. Once their work permits come through they can move straight away but that varies as well. Demand for our product is strong. We are as transparent as we can be on timeframes. It does not work for everybody. It is something people do not quite believe in yet. I think it is the only real solution for the immediate issues. We work from start to finish to get the job done. We have worked out how to do the process and how not to do it. It can be very fraught with refusals and flaggings. The

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has been very engaging but there are issues within the format of the processing. There are also things that are being missed. We are getting refusals on paperwork we have sent in. We are having to resend the same paperwork two and three times before we get the approval. It is extremely frustrating but we push hard. We are committed and it is our entire business operation. We believe in what we are trying to achieve.

Chairman: The witnesses will have to excuse my ignorance on this; I can cook but I would not class myself as any kind of chef. On the general skills list, cooks are classed as ineligible. What is the difference between a cook and a chef? Seeing as we are talking about Michelin star people being self-taught.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: You tell me. I do not know. In certain countries they use the word “cook” as an authoritative title.

Chairman: So I could be classed as a chef in some countries.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: They are not called cooks here. We look down on the word “cook” for whatever reason I do not know. It is not my area of expertise. As the Chair knows, legislation is clear, tight and crisp, so adjustments need to be made. The wording in some of the legislation relating to the issue is wrong. Coaxing in that regard could address some inadequacies in the process.

Chairman: Will Mr. Nizam Bin Nayan walk us through the process he went through when seeking employment in Ireland?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: The steps from when Khairul engaged us and how he got here.

Mr. Khairul Nizam Bin Nayan: When I applied for this job after I came back from Japan, I had an interview with the head chef. The second step involved an interview with hotel management, HR and the general managers. Either we are qualified to become team members for the hotel or we are not. After a few stages, we were selected equitably according to our skills and experience. It took a couple of months last year if I am not mistaken. The approval came one or two weeks ago. I booked a ticket from Kuala Lumpur and came here. I want to share my experience. I am a qualified chef. I worked everywhere in the world. I just came back from Japan, where I had been setting up a nice hotel and restaurant that sells Asian food, which people in Japan really love. I wanted to do the same thing here because I love Ireland so much. It is like a first love. I love the people here and I love the country. That does not mean I want to stay here. I want to share my experience and expertise. I have been in this industry for over 26 years.

There would not be any issues in communicating because English is our second language in Malaysia. We study it from kindergarten through to high school, college and university. It is always our second language. Most chefs can speak English fluently. We communicate easily, especially with people in Ireland. I had studied English for more than seven years when I finished high school. I had been selected for a scholarship from royalty in Malaysia, so I stayed there for almost seven years. It is a nice country but after I googled Ireland, its history and people, I started to fall in love with it. I wanted to come and share my expertise and experience as a chef. I really enjoy-----

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Khairul was willing to wait.

Mr. Khairul Nizam Bin Nayan: Yes. I was willing to wait for almost six and a half months

if I am not mistaken.

Chairman: I was going to ask Mr. Nizam Bin Nayan what motivated him to come. He seems to have fallen in love with the country. Has he been here for long?

Mr. Khairul Nizam Bin Nayan: I arrived about a week ago.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I listened to how passionate Mr. Nizam Bin Nayan is. We need a strong hospitality sector that complements the tourism sector. That is a no-brainer. I was lucky enough to watch maybe an hour and a half of the pro-am in Adare during the week. There was general commentary from all the television stations about how the people reacted, how the crowds in Ireland, the scenery and so on are different. I understand how one can sell tourism, which is a huge industry in this country. If we does not have the hospitality sector to complement that, however, we will fall down.

I have an issue that relates to the Philippines more than Malaysia. We have a critical skills shortage in our fishing industry. It has been decimated, but that is a different story.

The Chair asked about a particular matter I am interested in. The witnesses set out clearly that this is not an excuse to jump ship and slip out under the radar. They are right. I wish I had the opportunity that Mr. Nizam Bin Nayan had. He has a special talent that gave him the opportunity to travel the world and share it with other people. As I said, in Ireland, we are not bad old grubbers. We like our food. Mr. Nizam Bin Nayan has opened my eyes to this. I will keep an eye on it. We will obviously discuss this afterwards. It makes sense if it speeds up and simplifies the process. As the witnesses said, there is a switch between the Departments, including the Department of Justice. Could that be streamlined? The Departments could work with the industry. If there is engagement, they will learn.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: The Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy English, who represent the relevant Departments, have conversed with me about this. They want the changes to be made. They are trying to streamline the situation. I am not saying I know the answer. Donall O’Keeffe of the Licensed Vintners Association brought up tourism and hospitality. They are kindred spirits and go hand in hand. Hospitality is tourism and tourism is hospitality. They should be hand in glove.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank Mr. Lynn for his presentation. I heard him on Newstalk. To be fair, it is not only Ireland that has an issue with skilled workers in the hospitality sector. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, has a new apprenticeship plan. The issue of hospitality, bar management and executive chefs to level 9 have been included in that. Is that progress?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Hospitality is a heartfelt, vocational task and life choice. Chefs are integral to that. One either wants to do it or one will not do it. The best thing we can do is to get our youth on board, however that is achievable. It was remarkable to hear a McDonald’s advertisement the other day. During it, there was advertising about becoming a chef as a child. That is a large international company commenting on the issue of chefs worldwide, not just in Ireland. Keeping people in hospitality is difficult. I cannot speak to the reasons why in other countries but we have to compete for talent here. We cannot all be the best destinations for tourism on Earth. Ireland is ahead of the posse. Now we just need to sustain our hospitality offering.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Mr. Lynn’s final point is completely right. I thank our case manager for the extraordinary work in preparing for this petition. If the Department, which corre-

sponded with us and which is headed by the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, reviewed or amended the critical skills and ineligible occupations list, what would the benefit be?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: I am happy the Senator mentioned the ineligible list because that is also key. I did not want to overstep my remit today. From a chef's point of view, one cannot encourage people to come into an industry that is struggling and suffering.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: When Mr. Lynn says struggling, what does he mean?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: I mean the chefs, kitchens and restaurants. Chefs are under extreme strain because they are working too many hours. They do not have full teams available. For all the passion and joy, if you do not have the skill level in the kitchen, you cannot maintain the kitchen. The head chefs are there; we have strong head chefs in most places, but they need understudies and sous-chefs and chefs de partie who can support them. If they are constantly drained because of the number of hours they are working and the failure of the restaurant they have taken so much pride in, it is going to slowly whittle away our industry. We Have Chefs brings fresh talent in. We are not trying to change Irish cuisine to Malaysian cuisine or Thai cuisine. We are injecting a skill set.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Fusion.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Precisely. Why not? We are injecting a skill set into the economy. One of the hotels at which we recently placed two Thai chefs has already, within a couple of months, said it is going to open a Thai restaurant on its premises.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Okay.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: This is a long-standing hotel that has been in operation for generations. It is not a permanent change. This is temporary. It will have a Thai restaurant for ten years and then after that it might go back to an Irish traditional restaurant. What we need now is for the bodies to come in to reignite the stability of the hospitality industry. After that, we can take them back of the critical skills list, if needs be.

I will address the ineligibility list.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Yes.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: We Have Chefs acquired *wehavestaff.com* because we said we want to move into that area as well because more and more positions need to be filled in many industries, although hospitality is mainly our focus. The ineligibility list rules out the majority of employees within hotels, restaurants, front of house and everywhere else. They are just not allowed in, full stop, even on the basis of general skills. Of course you want your céad míle fáilte to be Irish people, if possible. If it cannot be Irish people, then we have to bring in somebody to do that for us in the meantime and integrate their style of welcome into our country. The likes of Mr. Nizam Bin Nayan are warm people. They have the same aspirations for hospitality as we do. It is only an addition.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: That is a fair point. My final comment is in the context of where we are today. We have had a very good engagement. I apologise for missing the private meeting yesterday. I suggest that on foot of today's meeting we look at the possibility of inviting in Fáilte Ireland, Adrian Cummins on behalf of the hospitality sector, and maybe the Minister of State, Deputy English, or the Tánaiste or officials from their Department to come before us to

discuss matter this further.

Mr. Lynn is right. I thank all the people who work in our hospitality sector. Anyone watching or listening should understand that, as Mr. Lynn rightly said there, chefs, people who work in kitchens, kitchen porters and hospitality waitstaff often work in high-end, high-pressure, not-fully-staffed settings. We should thank them and acknowledge the work they do. To be fair, it is very easy for someone to go on *tripadvisor.com* and write a cranky review on the basis of a misguided engagement because, as I think we will all agree, 99% of the engagement is superb and the hospitality, whether it is the céad míle fáilte or whatever you want to say now, is excellent.

The one thing we must look at, which I know is not a matter for or today, is the cost factor. There is a debate we need to have regarding the cost factor, which is a different story. I thank our guests for being here. I commend those who work in hospitality and tell them that we hear their concerns here. I hope that at our next private meeting we can look at continuing our examination of this matter. Again, I apologise for my lack of technical know-how.

Chairman: That is no bother. I think the Senator will get full support from all the committee in the context of what he said. We will definitely look at inviting the Department and Fáilte Ireland to appear before us. Deputy Higgins is next.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Chairman. I thank Mr. Lynn for giving of his time and sharing his ideas and expertise with us. This is something I am really in favour of. We need to be exploring this much more quickly because, as we all know, there is a shortage of workers in the hospitality industry right across the board, and that includes chefs. Adding chefs to the critical skills list would mean we would be able to attract more of them to our shores and that we would be able to provide better lifelines and opportunities to allow the industry to thrive. I am conscious we have gone through the time for this and we were due to start another petition a few minutes ago, so I will leave it at that. I thank both our guests for coming in and presenting the case.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. I think Senator Murphy referred to the fact that we have a shortage of 10,000 workers in the sector. If that continues, places will close. There is no doubt whatsoever about that, so Mr. Lynn will get support on what he is asking for. I call Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I was having my own technical difficulties. I thank the Cathaoirleach and the committee for dealing with this issue. Fair play to Mr. Lynn. This is an issue about which we have all heard at constituency level. I got it from Mr. Lynn. There are a number of hotels and other businesses that are under pressure and that would have contacted me in the past while. We all know the importance of the hospitality sector to this State. It is a no-brainer that we have a problem. We have all done those clientelist fixes and gone to people within the Department, Ministers and whomever and seen those issues sorted. The fact that people are coming to us in the first place, however, indicates that the system is not fit for purpose. We all know there has been an insufficient amount done in the context of workforce planning and ensuring that people with the necessary skills are available.

I am looking for a very quick synopsis from Mr. Lynn of his asks. He is looking to move chefs onto the critical skills list but he also referred to the third level stipulation and some other difficulties. On the ask with regard to taking the Ministers and other stakeholders in, it is not that I am looking for the issue to be taken away from this committee, but the enterprise committee or somebody has to deal with this issue because there is an element of madness involved.

This is another of those issues we have batted over and back. One would have thought the system would have caught it and fixed it, but it has not.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Fair point.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I asked whether this is cross-party or cross-committee.

Chairman: It is cross-committee, yes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is not to take away. Senator Buttimer has played his part in the sense that this meeting is happening.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Former Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin and I worked together when the health committee joined with the justice committee about the issue of drugs, with Deputy Stanton chairing. We could think about that again. It is an idea.

Chairman: We can discuss that later.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: Deputy Ó Murchú has got the point across exactly right. It needs to be dealt with. It has been batted around. Who is in charge? I only mentioned the issue slightly, and Paul Clancy of the Vintners Federation of Ireland raised it too, but there has not been a study done on what the figures are. To be fully open, I might have made the 10,000 figure up. I do not know. I might have heard it somewhere else. Whose figures are we dealing with? The figure of 260,000 people working in the industry was mentioned by one party and 180,000 mentioned by another. There was a 40,000 shortfall and a 50,000 shortfall. We do not know where it is, but it is definitely an issue. Every hospitality company in the country is struggling with staffing issues. There are not any defining figures on that but we need to find them. In the meantime, we can adjust some of the legislative barriers to fix the issue. There are only so many positions in a kitchen that need to be filled. There were five positions added to the general list, which were executive head chef, head chef, sous-chef, senior chef de partie and chef de partie. That is great. Unfortunately, commis chef is not on that list. The €30,000 threshold is the issue there. One can pay, but people are not paying commis chefs more than €14.79 per hour. That is another conversation perhaps. Senator Buttimer referred to getting young people involved in the sector. They have to start at commis chef level. One cannot start somebody at chef de partie level. For now we can bring in chefs de partie. They are accomplished up-and-coming chefs as it is, so let us bring them in. However, the problem is deeper than that, of course.

The other one is the general skills permit for other hospitality jobs. That is key too. I did not want to explore that off my own bat today because it was not up to me, but it is very important that this is also done. The ineligibility list blocks applications for work permits from outside the EU entirely, so one just cannot apply for a housekeeping team from outside the EU. That obviously needs to be addressed.

The last one was the-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There was the third level difficulty, even if one gets onto the critical skills.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: It is a little archaic to use third level as a measure of people's prowess generally, but I understand the reasoning behind it. As I said, 60% of the chefs we are bringing in have third level education, but that is beside the point because 40% of them cannot come in unless they have it, if they are added to the critical skills. It is the legislative change that needs

to be made to add them to the critical skills list. It is just removing that wording.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, a promise has been made here to follow up on this and to ensure it is put before the correct people who can make it happen. Probably the best thing to do is that Mr. Lynn do a synopsis of what the actual needs are. Given that he is moving beyond needing chefs, it is those requirements. We know about all the businesses and industries that are crying out for people and cannot get them. If there are small fixes that can deal with visa issues or whatever, we need that done. That is along with the workforce planning. Some of it is beginning to happen. We must make sure we have the training roadmaps. They are all going to be very different because when we talk about third level now that includes apprenticeships which can suit particular trades, such as people who want to train up as a chef or whatever.

Again, I congratulate the committee for dealing with an issue that definitely has to be dealt with.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. After today the ball is starting to roll. As Senator Buttimer and Deputy Ó Murchú said, we now know who we can contact to get it across the two committees. Everybody recognises the situation in the hospitality sector and here is a solution to stop places closing down. We need to follow up on it with the other committee. We will ask the secretariat to make contact with it. Does Mr. Lynn wish to make any final comments?

Mr. Paddy Lynn: I thank the committee for engaging on this, from Ms Semple getting our petition through to this point. I understand that people have a lot on their plates, if the pun will be excused, but it is something that has to be dealt with. If it takes a conscientious interested party, so be it. We are here to push it through as far as possible.

Chairman: On behalf of the committee I thank Mr. Lynn and Mr. Nizam Bin Nayan for attending the meeting today. It has been very informative and we have a path we can take now to see what we can do.

Mr. Paddy Lynn: We appreciate that.

Chairman: We will suspend the meeting to allow the witnesses to leave and to bring in the next witnesses.

Sitting suspended at 2.44 p.m. and resumed at 2.47 p.m.

Consideration of Public Petition on Saving the Services of the Owenacurra Centre in Cork: Discussion.

Chairman: This engagement is with Dr. Orla Kelleher and Ms Joanna Curtis representing the Save Owenacurra Centre campaign.

Before we begin I wish to explain some limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practices of the House as regards references witnesses may make to other persons in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence within the parliamentary precincts is protected by absolute privilege pursuant to both the Constitution and statute. Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to

the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory with regard to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with such a direction.

Before we hear from our witness, I propose that we publish her opening statement on the committee's website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

On behalf of the committee, I extend a warm welcome to Dr. Orla Kelleher and Ms Joanna Curtis. Dr. Kelleher has ten minutes to make her opening statement and there will then be questions and comments from members. Each member will have approximately ten minutes and members may speak more than once. I invite Dr. Kelleher to make her opening statement.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: I am a niece of one of the residents of the Owenacurra Centre in Midleton and I am here today to advocate on my aunt's behalf. It is not easy for families like mine to share our story publicly. With Anna's permission, I will share her experience of living in the Owenacurra Centre and what the service means to her and to families such as ours. I will also highlight some problems with the closure and the steps we would like the Committee on Public Petitions to take.

My aunt, Anna, has lived at the Owenacurra Centre for over 25 years. Before moving to the centre, Anna was a patient at Our Lady's Hospital in Cork where she was in a closed ward for several years. My aunt has struggled with significant and enduring mental health problems since her twenties.

Owenacurra Centre was set up in 1988. It is a multipurpose service for people with severe and enduring mental health illness. It has a town centre location. It is next to SuperValu and the Midleton market and within walking distance of lots of amenities. This has been key to rehabilitation, community integration and quality of life for many residents, including my aunt. It really is a life-saving and transformative service. Life has not been easy for Anna but being at the Owenacurra Centre has given her a chance to live the best life she can. When Anna first arrived at the centre, she found communication with people difficult, she was reluctant to leave the building and she could not go out for a short drive in my mother's car. However, over several years of rehabilitation and with the dedicated support of the Owenacurra staff, Anna gradually found her feet and flourished in Midleton. As a family, we are terrified that any move away from the centre, and Midleton, could result in a serious deterioration in her mental health and well-being.

The Owenacurra Centre is the only HSE long-stay adult mental health facility in east Cork and our only mental health respite facility. The centre has a capacity of 28 placements and can accommodate up to 20 residents in single rooms. In June 2021, the HSE announced its plans close the centre by 31 October 2021. At that stage, there were 19 residents. After a campaign mounted by Friends of Owenacurra, which is a coalition of residents, family members, local representatives and members of the community, the closure has been temporarily postponed. The reason for pushing out the closure date was that the HSE has not been able to find suitable placements for all the residents. Delaying the closure has been cold comfort to residents and family members. We have been informed that the centre is definitely closing but we have no idea when it will happen.

The closure process is ongoing and some residents have already moved. The number of residents has now been reduced to 11. To date, my family has had three family consultations to discuss Anna's future. These discussions have raised more questions than answers and have

only increased our anxiety and worry about her future. For example, in September 2021, it was suggested that she would be moved out of the area to St. Stephen's Hospital in Glanmire, which is an institutional setting in the countryside, away from her friends and community in Midleton. This suggestion was very distressing for our family. Anna spent years in a closed ward and now, after the progress she has made at Owenacurra, she is facing the prospect of being sent back to an institutional setting. In December 2021, there was a conversation about another out-of-area placement in a house in Carrigaline. However, the building did not have planning permission and the proposal has been subject to a number of objections from local residents. Most recently, there was a vague suggestion that the HSE would look for a house in Midleton but no property has been identified.

The whole process has taken a severe toll on Anna and on our family. For Anna, the past 12 months have been extremely difficult. She has expressed her clear wish to remain in Midleton at the Owenacurra Centre, which is her home. She has had to endure terror and fear that she is going to be made homeless. She has had to watch her fellow residents, many of them friends, being sent off to different places around the county. She has had no news about how they are settling into their new accommodation and she is worried about them.

The stated reason for the closure is that the premises is not fit for purpose and no amount of refurbishment could bring it to an acceptable standard. The proposed closure was not signalled by recent Mental Health Commission reports, despite briefings from HSE management and communications to residents strongly suggesting that the commission's concerns contributed in significant part to the closure decision. The decision stemmed from an internal building report by the HSE's maintenance department. That report did not provide evidence of a new building survey that could support such a claim. Independent asbestos and fire safety reports, carried out in 2019 and 2021, respectively, set out the works that were required on the premises. Neither report supported the claim that the building was beyond repair or could not be brought up to an acceptable standard.

Despite repeated HSE briefings suggesting otherwise, no independent report has supported the HSE's position that the Owenacurra building is beyond repair. A member of the Oireachtas health committee who is a qualified architect with a specialist expertise in healthcare buildings visited Owenacurra, studied the building reports, concluded there was no reason the building could not be renovated and suggested this could potentially be done section by section, with the reduced number of residents remaining on site. After a thorough examination of the closure rationale, including a site visit to the Owenacurra Centre and St. Stephen's Hospital for comparison, the health committee wrote to Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Butler, in April calling for a reversal of the closure as a matter of urgency and stating that the committee considered the evidence produced by the HSE justifying the decision to be "unconvincing". The committee repeated this opinion in a more detailed follow-up letter to the CEO of the HSE, Mr. Paul Reid, and the Minister of State in May and in a referral to the HSE board in recent weeks.

I will sum up what families of residents and the Save Owenacurra Centre campaign are seeking. It is important to emphasise that the campaign is not just about current residents, including my aunt. It is primarily about them but it is also about the many other people in east Cork with severe mental illness who require placements of varying duration to attain a decent quality of life. The campaign is not just about a few vocal families holding out against the HSE's planned closure; it is about a broader regional need into the future for a very vulnerable group of people. Families and others involved in the campaign want the Oireachtas health com-

mittee's detailed refutation of the closure to be upheld by the HSE. We want to see the building issues addressed in a manner that is not so disruptive that it leads to an almost total cessation of services over many years.

We are appealing to the HSE board to intervene and direct the executive to overturn the closure decision. The board was set up with the aim of building public trust and confidence in the HSE. The experience of families and many other supporters is that a vital service is being removed in a manner that just does not stand up to scrutiny. There appears to be no accountability for this. No amount of evidence of the distress of residents and family members or arguments from Oireachtas committees is making any difference to these proposals. It is extremely difficult to have trust in the HSE as a result of this attempted closure and how it has been handled. We ask the Committee on Public Petitions to write to the HSE board to reinforce the health committee's recommendation that the decision to close the Owenacurra Centre be reversed.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Kelleher. I have a number of questions for her, after which I will bring in other members. Going back to the start, when families were told the centre was closing, was there any consultation with any of them before that decision was made?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: No, it was a real shock to us when we found out in June 2021 that it was closing. We did not know until then that it was a possibility.

Chairman: Were any concerns raised with families about the condition of the building? The report states that it was nearly falling down. Was any of that communicated to the families of residents?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: Not that I am aware of.

Chairman: Has the Save Owenacurra Centre campaign been issued with any documents outlining the issues the HSE claims are the reasons for closing the centre and showing they are irreparable? In my constituency, we had more or less the same situation with St. Brigid's District Hospital in Carrick-on-Suir, with the same excuse given for closing it. However, the documentation we got does not stack up against what the HSE has been telling us is the reason for the closure. Have Dr. Kelleher and her colleagues received any of that type of documentation?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: We have made various freedom of information requests to get access to information. We have had fire safety reports and asbestos reports setting out what work needs to be carried out, but they do not say the issues are beyond repair. There has not been any independent report, notwithstanding calls from family members and the Save Owenacurra Centre campaign for such a report. We have not had anything that stacks up, as in the situation in Tipperary to which the Chairman referred.

Chairman: Dr. Kelleher spoke in her opening statement about her aunt's situation. Can you explain to the people who are watching the difference between an open ward and what your aunt had been in before and looks to be going back into now, and the effect that can have on someone like Anna?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: Anna has lived for a long time, more than 25 years, in Midleton, at the Owenacurra Centre. Her progress at the start was slow. I remember when I was younger and we would visit Anna, she could not go for a short car journey because she would just not be able for it. Over the years in Midleton, with the dedicated support of the staff at Owenacurra Centre, who are absolutely phenomenal, Anna has gradually made progress. She goes out in the town every day, she is involved in the local craft group with really nice women, and she is totally

integrated. She volunteers in the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, NCBI, charity shop. She goes to the leisure centre and goes swimming. She goes across the road to SuperValu. She is fully integrated. She goes across the road to the newsagents, Angela's, to get her cigarettes. She knows everybody around the town and it is such a joy to walk around town with her and to pop in for a coffee. Everybody knows her and she is so well-treated there whereas if she were to be somewhere else she would not have that community or those friends. The idea that someone could be in their 60s and be uprooted like that after 25 years of working really hard to get to that point is really heartbreaking for our family.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank Dr. Kelleher for her bravery. It is not easy telling her own family's stories. At the outset, I am well aware of the Owenacurra Centre. It is in my own town. Listening to her last statement, there is a mixture of emotions between anger and sadness. She hit the nail on the head in that the HSE is going against its own policy and the Sláintecare policy of a community-led, fully supported, totally integrated centre. Dr. Kelleher explained it, from regression years ago to where her aunt is now. I have met her aunt and many of the people in town. This is personal. I do not wear the fact that the building is not fit-for-purpose because these issues were raised as far back as 2016. There is a number of reports there. I have said at meetings, even at the one in Sarsfield Court with the HSE, that people cannot be thrown out of their homes, especially when blaming the fact that the building is not fit-for-purpose. The HSE is the proprietor and is responsible for the upkeep of that building. It has failed and is putting the pressure on the residents of the Owenacurra Centre. I have heard of something similar happening in Tipperary and not too far away from Middleton, in the Castlemartyr health centre, the exact same excuse is given, that is, the building is not fit-for-purpose. It is on the main thoroughfare, the M25. It is in the village and yet the HSE wants to locate it six miles out the road where there is no access to it. Again, it is isolating and cramming people in.

The thing that bugs me is the fact that the campaign members have worked very hard on this. A long time ago we said we would not make it political. It is not about scoring points, but it is about supporting a system that works and has worked for years in Middleton. Dr. Kelleher is right. I have seen it and I know the residents who get the bus, who go to the supermarket and who go dancing. I will put it very bluntly here. I am not knocking the other locations the HSE is talking about but they are totally and utterly inappropriate for the residents of the Owenacurra Centre because they have been integrated into the town. It is all about location and access. To add to that, my fear and that of others is that the additional services at the Owenacurra Centre, not the premises, will be lost. There were 22 beds originally. Two of those beds are short-term respite, so that the individual and the family can get short-term respite. When the individual comes in, they get a blood test, they are made comfortable, they have a shower and their feet are checked. If they need a chiropodist, one will be found. The dentist is across the road and the doctor, the hospital and the Garda barracks are nearby and the market is out the back. If that is not a model to be replicated and invested in, I cannot figure out the HSE.

We are 12 months down the road from the original closing date and the building is not fit-for-purpose or fit for the residents. If you go back to 2016, why has it been suitable for the last six years?

I want to thank the Joint Committee on Health because it has been supportive. This is one of my bugbears. We are supposed to be the legislators and the people who look after the citizens of this country. It will call it a recommendation or a conclusion but it is like the old story of the 40,000 troops marching. The mother says, "Look, 39,999 of them are out of step, but my Johnny is the only one who is walking right". This is the game I feel the HSE is playing. I want

to put the health committee's letter on the record:

In light of the above we again recommend that you reverse the closure of the Owenacurra Centre and request that Cork/Kerry HSE pursue essential building works on the premises that have already been identified in independent reports. The reasons advanced by Cork/Kerry HSE for closing this highly valued service would, if applied elsewhere, lead to widespread closures of other mental health facilities, and are not credible grounds for such a drastic service decision in East Cork. The Owenacurra Centre has consistently received higher annual Mental Health Commission inspection compliance ratings than the two nearest continuing care facilities...

The two facilities are Glanmire and St. Catherine's ward in Cork, so you are taking it from the boiling pot and putting in the fire. In addition, these are very isolated locations.

The letter continues, "The loss of the Owenacurra Centre, including its town centre location, would involve far-reaching adverse consequences for one of the most vulnerable groups of people attending the East Cork mental health services and would constitute a regression in their care and rehabilitation."

This is the recommendation from the committee to the HSE.

It is personal because mental health services are in my blood. Between 2000 and 2002, we had 69 suicides in east Cork. It is not a proud boast but it is a fact and I like dealing with facts. We have a very large cemetery in the town and it is called suicide row. We were labelled the suicide capital of the world in 2004. These are not boasting points. We are being told one of the finest working centres in east Cork that should be replicated as a pilot project is to close and the service is not needed. The excuse of the HSE is that the building is not fit-for-purpose. When these people are gone, nobody else is going to need the service and nobody else is going to get sick. That is totally unacceptable to me and I am bitter and angry that the witnesses, as family members, have to appear in front of any Oireachtas committee to fight their cause. It could be me, my parent or anybody's parent who could end up in this service.

This service is needed in Midleton. I spoke to a lady a number of weeks ago who called to that centre looking for help. She was woken by a garda on Sunday morning just after 7 a.m. She slept in her car. She was met by the staff, who are absolutely amazing, but they could not do anything because they were under the orders of the HSE. That lady told me that she put her own vomit into a bag and put it into the boot of the car. Obviously, she had nowhere to go to the toilet, so she put that bag into the boot of the car too. If that is the way we are treating the most vulnerable citizens in this country, the HSE is nothing short of an absolute disgrace. We are treating people as PPS numbers rather than treating the person.

I will finish on the next point because, Chair, I could be here until next Thursday. HSE management has made many dismissive comments. We have tried to engage with them. I have received numerous replies to parliamentary questions on the matter. I have the official reports with me today. I have received 600 petitions asking for this service not to close. The most important thing here is not the actual building; it is the services provided, the service users and the residents who are using the services. Family members are visiting Leinster House today. I met them last week with the First Minister-designate, Michelle O'Neill. I will put it this way and will be polite about it. We were not refused entry to the Owenacurra Centre, but we were not facilitated by HSE management. Despite that, we went to the centre and we met with residents there. The people with me on the visit remarked how integrated the residents were. The HSE

could take them out of the setting and send them to St. Stephen's Hospital in Sarsfield Court in Glanmire. It has been there since the 1950s. My own grandmother was incarcerated in there because she had TB, Lord have mercy on her. If that is how mental health services for elderly people are being progressed in this country, we should be absolutely and utterly ashamed. I will leave it at that.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I welcome our witnesses from east Cork. Like Deputy Buckley, I wish to state that it is a pity that we are here today. I recognise that there is a balance to strike between the needs of the residents, who are citizens; the family members, who provided a powerful testimony today; and the report of the Mental Health Commission and the HSE. I was at the HSE briefing on the closure of Owenacurra a few weeks ago with Deputy Buckley. I have spoken to Deputies O'Connor, Stanton and Sherlock about the matter. I have to be honest. Like Deputy Buckley, my concern here is that we need to ensure, first of all, that the people who use the service in Owenacurra are housed, cared for and looked after in a building and a facility that is not just adequate, but meets their needs. That is my first point.

I might be speaking out of turn when I make my second point, because I was not at the meeting yesterday. I ask that following today's meeting we consider inviting representatives of the Mental Health Commission and the HSE to attend the committee. I accept the point that the proposed transfer of the service to different locations and the whole issue around the provision of the service has been very badly handled by HSE management. My only motivation is to ensure that a state-of-the-art residential unit is put in place for the residents. We must ensure that the continuum of care and service delivery is such that both family members and service users can be absolutely satisfied and quality of life is guaranteed for residents.

I would like to hear the views of Dr. Kelleher on the report of the Mental Health Commission and on the HSE estates management report, both of which have been presented to us. I thank the case manager for the excellent presentation that she gave today. The HSE estates management department is giving us a different view from what we have heard from the family members today. I ask for the views of Dr. Kelleher on the reports I mentioned previously. I thank the family members for being here today. I wish they did not have to attend the committee today to highlight the issue.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: On the Senator's first question about the Mental Health Commission, we, as family representatives, along with our public representatives who have been involved in the campaign, have written to the Mental Health Commission asking that it consults the families on the closure of the centre and the process around it. However, the Mental Health Commission has stated that it is legally precluded from doing so, or from commenting on the closure. We are struggling with the fact that initially, the Mental Health Commissioner appeared on RTÉ Radio 1's "Drivetime" to discuss the issue. The position is that family members cannot be involved. As family members who are really struggling with the decision, we do not really know where to go. We would definitely like the Mental Health Commission to be involved.

The rationale for the closure has been based on a report published by the HSE estates management department. The report does not provide any evidence of a new building survey that supports the claim that the building is not fit for purpose. There are independent asbestos and fire safety reports that were published in 2019 and 2021. The reports set out the works that need to be done to bring Owenacurra up to standard. They do not state that the centre has to be closed down. The families-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Apologies, but I wish to ask a question. Deputy Buckley was

with me on the day that we met HSE management in Ballincollig. I am not, for one second, intending to be confrontational here. I am actually trying to see how we can reach agreement on the issue. The HSE has stated in a report we have received that it is certain that there is no refurbishment that could deliver the quality of accommodation which the residents deserve, and in line with modern requirements and standards. As Dr. Kelleher mentioned in her presentation about her aunt, the HSE report states that it understands that moving to a new home will be difficult for each remaining resident, and regrets that it is not possible or safe to refurbish the existing building. The report goes on to state that the HSE is offering to provide a new type of ten-bed rehabilitative unit in Middleton. Like other members of the committee, I have to take what HSE management has said at face value. I appreciate that Dr. Kelleher might have a different view. On paper, it seems to me that there is a pretty clear choice. The new rehabilitative unit would be new, modern and fit for purpose. I ask Dr. Kelleher for her view on that.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: My understanding is that there is no funding commitment, no planning permission and no building has been identified for the ten-bed unit that is being proposed. I am just speaking as a family member here. I am sure it would take a number of years before the new unit would be up and running. In the meantime, people like my aunt would be moved elsewhere. We are very concerned about the fact that one of the reasons being cited for the closure of the centre is that the rooms are too small. Yet, the alternative accommodation being offered to service users could potentially be on a ward. My aunt has her own room in Owenacurra. Some, but not all, of the rooms are small. There are only 11 residents in the centre at present. Deputy Hourigan, who has expertise in the area, has indicated that the building can be refurbished. She has even offered to provide expert guidance on that. She has suggested that the refurbishment could be done with some of the residents *in situ*. There are issues with asbestos, which is standard for a building of the centre's age. In Deputy Hourigan's opinion as an architect, those issues could be dealt with. Our concern is that there is no funding commitment for the alternative ten-bed unit in Middleton yet. It has been indicated that there is funding for a three- to four-bed unit, but we do not know any of the details. In the main, out-of-area placements have been offered to families. That is not what our family members want.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I appreciate the effect the discommoding of family members would have and the disorientation involved in moving them away from familiar settings. I have one final question. My proposal still stands. This has been a very positive engagement. I thank the family members for being here. The report we received at our most recent meeting with the HSE states that each resident is being assessed to ascertain what kind of placement would best meet his or her needs and that process is led by consultant psychiatrists. Where are we at with that in the case of residents of Owenacurra? Has that happened? What has been the level of engagement?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: It is most appropriate for me to speak about the experience of my family. To date, we have had three consultations. There is nothing concrete being put on the table. It is very much maybe this-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: My apologies for interrupting. When Dr. Kelleher states there has been no positive construction or points, what does she mean by that? What has she been told by the HSE? The committee is being given a different proposition, perhaps.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: The mic might have picked that up wrong. We have not had a concrete proposal.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Okay. Sorry.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: In our first family consultation, my mum was informed that the HSE was suggesting that my aunt would be moving to an out-of-area service. That would be an institutional setting, so that-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Does an out-of-area service mean one completely out of Midleton?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: She would be moved out of Midleton, to the countryside in Glanmire, where she would not be able to meet friends and family she has in Midleton.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank Dr. Kelleher for her engagement. I am trying to broker a way here; she should not think I am trying to be confrontational.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: There was a suggestion in respect of Carrigaline but that never materialised. There have been a lot of planning objections to that. The site there did not have planning permission and there were objections.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Dr. Kelleher should take her time. I am trying to help her because I want to get a solution here. I thank her for what she is saying to us today because it helps us. We are getting a different side of the story and that is why this meeting is so important for those of us who are not in east Cork. I thank Dr. Kelleher for being here today. I hope she understands that we are trying to work together to ensure her aunt and other service users are looked after and treated properly.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: My apologies for being a little bit emotional.

Chairman: No need to apologise.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank Dr. Kelleher. It is important. It shows she cares. We care as well.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: I thank the Senator. There was a suggestion for Carrigaline but it, too, is out of the area. My aunt does not have any connections to Carrigaline. We do not have family there. She would not have friends there or be integrated in the community. It would be very difficult for a person in her 60s to do that. Most recently, we heard that a three- or four-bedroom property in Midleton may be bought but there is no suggestion that she would be placed there. It has been very uncertain for our family.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank Dr. Kelleher. I hope she did not think I was trying to be argumentative; I was not. I am trying to get information so that we can go back again to the HSE to have further engagement with it. That is why I am proposing that, arising from this meeting, if necessary we bring in the Mental Health Commission and the HSE to continue this discussion. This is a very important issue. I again thank the witnesses for being here. It is a matter on which the committee should have a private meeting before the recess.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: I thank the Senator.

Chairman: For the information of Senator Buttimer, we planned to bring in the HSE. There is no problem with bringing in the Mental Health Commission or any other-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Chairman will have my support if he does that before the summer recess or the week after we return. I will be happy to accommodate him in that regard.

Chairman: We will discuss that after this session and try to facilitate a meeting. I have no bother doing that but I cannot speak for all other members. We will see if we can get a meeting set up as soon as possible.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I support what the Chairman has said about bringing in the HSE, and also what Senator Buttimer said about bringing in the Mental Health Commission. That is a good suggestion.

My heart goes out to Dr. Kelleher. It is clear that she is passionate about this and loves her aunt dearly and wants her to be cared for. That is what we all want. We want her aunt and all the other residents to be delivered the service and care they deserve and to get it in a building that is fit for purpose. What the HSE is saying clearly to us is that the care is fit for purpose but, currently, the building is not. It is telling us that the service is badly needed but the building is the problem. I would like to ensure that all the residents get the care they need in a building that is fit for purpose and as accessible to family members as possible.

Is a day-care service being provided in the facility? Does Dr. Kelleher have any information in that regard?

I refer to the building works that the HSE is telling us cannot be done but in respect of which Dr. Kelleher has received guidance stating it is possible to do them. Has she received indications of costings of the work from the people to whom she has spoken who say it can be done?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: I thank the Deputy. As regards day services, those ran pre-Covid. I think there are plans for them to be back up and running again in Midleton, but not at the Owenacurra Centre. That is my understanding but I am speaking as a family member rather than as someone who has clinical expertise on that. It is an important dimension to the service. What makes it so important to the east Cork area is the big impact it has on people's lives.

I do not have costings for the work. The families and those of us who have been campaigning to save the service have been seeking an independent report. We have written to the HSE asking it to allow us to commission an independent report but it has not responded positively to that. It stated that it is not possible to commission such a report. We do not have costings for the refurbishment of the Owenacurra Centre but that is something we would definitely like to see.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Dr. Kelleher. That was very helpful. It will certainly be helpful to get the view of the HSE on costings and whether there is scope for an independent evaluation to be carried out. We may have a better sense of the issue once we hear from it on that particular issue. As Senator Buttimer stated, the Mental Health Commission will add value to this discussion. I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee. I am sure it was not easy.

Deputy Pat Buckley: As I stated, in 2016 there were a few leaks in the building and cracks in the ceiling, and there was some plasterwork to be done. The estimated cost was €1,000 to do the cracks, €3,000 to repair the ceilings, €3,000 to fix the leaks and so on and €300 or so to put in a sink. Those are minuscule amounts of money. Those figures date from 2016, when the HSE had not spent money on the place. I have spoken to many people on this.

I agree with Senator Buttimer with regard to the HSE but I wish to touch on the issue of the Mental Health Commission. The spin from the HSE is that it is the commission's fault that the building is being closed. However, reports prepared by the commission each year from 2016 to

2020, inclusive, and three reports in 2021 outlined the structural deficiencies within the building or premises. The commission has been telling the HSE since 2016 that the building is not right and needs to be fixed. To draw a comparison, if you bring a car for its national car test, NCT, and it fails, you will get a snag list. When you fix those snags and bring it back to the NCT centre, the car will pass the test as it is roadworthy and fit for purpose. The HSE failed in that regard.

There are buildings similar to this one across the country. One could start naming all the towns in east Cork that have similar buildings. They were all built at around the same time, in the 1970s. If the commission were to inspect those buildings, it would say they are not fit for purpose. Are we facing a tsunami of closures of centres?

When this issue broke, a thing the members of the Owenacurra Centre said that resonates with me was not to move them, but to improve them. That is the most important point. It was a simple request from the centre's residents and their families. Why would the Mental Health Commission not go into the centre? It is the organisation that calls out construction snags, in that it goes into a place, investigates and says what was wrong with it so that it can then be fixed and everything will work. The HSE claims that it is because of the Mental Health Commission's report that the HSE has to close the building.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: May I ask a question? Has HIQA been involved and made a report on Owenacurra?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: My understanding is that this does not come within the remit of HIQA and that the Mental Health Commission is the appropriate body.

Deputy Pat Buckley: That is where it breaks down. I am in favour of Senator Buttimer's suggestion. In our game, we listen to both sides of the story and somewhere in the middle is the truth. My bugbear is someone else being blamed for a body's failings over the years. My strong opinion is based on evidence that we have dating back to 2016, as well as the mix and match of reports. When we request fire safety reports, what we get compacted into a single document is something from 2016, the next page or two will relate to 2018 and then there will be half of a fire safety report from 2019. There is a great deal of misinformation and distortion, but the main issue is that we will lose all services for more than 94,000 people in east Cork, devastate the centre's residents and destroy their families. There is mention of three-bed units here and three-bed units there but, as Dr. Kelleher mentioned, there is nothing concrete. It is all just suggestion.

We have an ageing population, so I cannot understand why the HSE does not believe that we will not need these services in east Cork any more. You do not need to be a rocket scientist to know we will. There will be instances of people needing respite, be it short term or long term, but the HSE seems to be dismissing the need over a single point, namely, that the building is not fit for purpose. If it is not fit for purpose, then knock it and replace it with a state-of-the-art one, keep the 22 beds, keep all of its services, including the mental health day care and short-term respite, and improve it. When we lose those staff and services, they will be gone and we will be back here on some other committee - if we are lucky enough - being reactive instead of proactive and asking how we did not see it coming. It will be on our shoulders because we did not stand up for the people whom we are supposed to represent. Sometimes, we have to call people out and challenge them. If the centre is not fit for purpose, the HSE has a duty of care to the people in that area to replace it with something that does work and is fit for purpose and, instead of reducing services, to improve them and move forward.

I will leave it at that. I could get angry about this matter, and I am doing my best to hold my patience.

Chairman: Dr. Kelleher does not need to apologise to anyone here for getting upset. It is the system that should be apologising to her, her family and other families around the country. I apologise for not recognising Ms Curtis as being the person who brought this petition to us. The system is wrong. Dr. Kelleher is not wrong for worrying about her aunt, Anna, nor is any other family. It makes me angry as well because we have seen what is happening at St. Brigid's in Carrick-on-Suir, whose representatives we hope to speak to after the recess. There was no mention of St. Brigid's being unfit for purpose when we were told it was closing and staff were being moved due to Covid. It was not until the hospital was closed that problems with the building suddenly started appearing, something along the lines of what happened at Owenacurra.

As Deputy Buckley mentioned, there is talk of one of the possible solutions being a building from the 1950s. I was involved in building for 40 years and I assure the committee that, if there is asbestos in Owenacurra, then there is asbestos in the building that patients are possibly going to be placed in. I have no doubt about that whatsoever because that is what was being used at the time.

I agree with Senator Buttimer. We will invite the Mental Health Commission, or anyone else, to a meeting. HIQA was involved in St. Brigid's in the end. Despite requesting the engineer's report that says that the building is not fit for purpose, we did not get it or we failed to get adequate answers as to why Owenacurra, or anywhere else, was being closed down. In one of our meetings with the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people, we were told that a further 350 beds were to be cut in the area's services. That will affect more small places like Owenacurra, St. Brigid's and so on. One of the solutions for St. Brigid's was to move them into private nursing homes, but that was no good to families. We have no public transport in south Tipperary, so a patient could be moved 25 miles away and family could not get there. I am sure that Dr. Kelleher's family visits daily. Families are visiting people in all of these hospitals daily. Suddenly, they are being told that their family members are being moved 25 or 30 miles away. That is not good enough.

I do not have further questions, but no member of the committee will disagree with me when I say that it is great to see how much Dr. Kelleher cares for her family member. She must not apologise to anyone for fighting to keep her aunt where she is happy and can be looked after. From listening to Deputy Buckley, Dr. Kelleher and Senator Buttimer, Owenacurra is a place that looks after family members, so they should not apologise to anyone for fighting to keep it open.

Dr. Orla Kelleher: I thank the Chairman.

Chairman: Do Deputy Buckley and Senator Buttimer have further questions?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: No. I thank our guests for attending. The continuum of care and service is important. It is also important that there be engagement and that we ask the HSE to discuss the situation and explain it to us. I thank our guests.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank our guests. I also thank the committee for listening and giving them a fair crack of the whip. Senator Buttimer was on the previous petitions committee with me. When we established this committee, it was known as "lastchance.com". The voices

of the people we represent should be heard. If this is lastchance.com, our guests can see how strong the committee is. Listening to people as they air their opinions should not be taken for granted. This is a very strong committee. If we can move anything forward and improve matters, we will do so.

The staff of the Owenacurra centre and everyone associated with it are 110% committed to keeping it and its services open. All of the people in that building are friends. It will be a shame if its model is not replicated around the country. This might be personal to me, but I am here as a public representative and it is my job to represent people and give them their voice. It would be a shame if we did not build on this. “Do not move us, improve us.” That is what should be done at this centre.

Chairman: Before we ask Dr. Kelleher to make a final comment, I thank Ms Curtis for bringing this petition to us.

Deputy Buckley referred to having petitions from 600 families. It is easy to get caught up in numbers and pins stuck in boards and maps, but behind every number and every pin is a family member like Dr. Kelleher’s aunt. The top level of the HSE needs to start recognising that and that this is not just about moving people around.

I thank our guests for attending. Does Dr. Kelleher have further comments to make?

Dr. Orla Kelleher: I thank the committee for its invitation and its support. I reiterate our call that, if in a position to do so, the committee write to the board of the HSE to ask it to support our call and the call of the Joint Committee on Health to reverse the decision to close the Owenacurra centre.

Chairman: The recommendation we had was to invite the HSE to come before us. However as Senator Buttimer said we also asked the commission to come before us and anybody else in order to try to get answers on such issues as the Owenacurra Centre. I thank the witness.

Sitting suspended at 3.40 p.m. and resumed at 3.43 p.m.

Consideration of Public Petitions Received

Chairman: We have two petitions for consideration today. Petition No. 36 of 2021, “Reform of Insurance for Thatched Heritage Buildings” is under the name of Ms Katie McNelis. This petition relates to the difficulties people have in getting insurance for residential and commercial thatched properties. The secretariat corresponded with the Central Bank of Ireland on behalf of the petitioner in October 2021. The Central Bank responded in March 2022 and its response was forwarded to Ms McNelis. A copy of the petition and the correspondence was also forwarded to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman for comment and that office responded in April. This response was forwarded to the petitioner. The secretariat has been in contact with the petitioner since and in June, Ms McNelis sent in a copy of the letter from the thatched property insurance action group, TPIAG, to the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage with responsibility for heritage and electoral reform, Deputy Noonan, to the secretariat.

The committee recommends that the petition and all associated correspondence including a copy of the letter from the TPIAG be sent for comment to the Minister of State at the Depart-

ment of Finance with responsibility for financial services, credit unions and insurance, Deputy Fleming; to the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage with responsibility for heritage and electoral reform, Deputy Noonan, and to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, and that the petition be brought before the committee again in the autumn if time allows. Do members have any views?

Deputy Pat Buckley: I can see how difficult it is. We talked about tourism in the first half of this meeting and about promoting it. We have thatched houses throughout the country for which owners cannot get insurance plus the fact a house cannot be held without insurance. I would like that to be revisited when the correspondence is returned next year.

Chairman: I agree with the Deputy. It needs to be looked at fairly quickly because we are all about heritage and everyone wants to see it. We all love to see thatched cottages throughout the country. We have ten in a small village setting in Holycross near my home in County Tipperary. It would be an awful pity to lose them. We run a massive risk of people taking the thatch off and losing that if something is not done on the insurance end of it. For this reason people cannot sell on a house, as the Deputy said. People will not buy a house if they cannot get insurance for it.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am happy to go along with the consensus and whatever next steps are being taken will have my support.

Chairman: Petition No. 2 of 2022, "Homelessness is Cancer - blocked-up houses are not the answer" is under the name of Mr. Eamon Broughan. This petition was submitted on 28 January 2022 and relates to a housing estate in Kildare where houses were bought by the county council in 2007 and have been blocked up since. Starting in February 2022 the secretariat contacted Kildare County Council on behalf of the petitioner several times and did not receive a response to the petition. During this time, the petitioner also contacted the committee secretariat seeking updates and expressing his frustrations with the secretariat. On 1 July 2022, Kildare County Council responded. The committee recommends that the correspondence from Kildare County Council be forwarded to Mr. Broughan for comment and the petition and all the related correspondence be sent for comment to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. Do members have any views?

Before I let members speak, in regard to a petitioner contacting the committee secretariat and expressing his frustrations, I want to refute that. The committee here and its secretariat worked tirelessly trying to get answers from Kildare County Council and any delay was on its part, not on the part of the secretariat or the clerk. I wish to express my satisfaction that they have done all they could since the petition came in and they contacted Kildare County Council. I wish to make members aware that the delay was on the other side, not on the part of the secretariat or the clerk.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: What does the Chairman propose that we do?

Deputy Pat Buckley: That is going to Kildare County Council, back to the petitioner and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: That is fair enough.

Chairman: The committee recommends that the correspondence from Kildare County

Council be sent to Mr. Broughan for comment, that the petition itself and all related correspondence be sent for comment to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. Those are the recommendations. Has Senator Buttimer seen the documentation? There are a great many things to be answered. This estate was bought by the council in 2007. Difficulties surrounded the whole thing from the word go when it bought it. How it ever got the go-ahead for planning in the first place I do not know, for example five houses have been demolished so far. There is talk of demolishing another 15 units in the middle of the estate in order to get access to another field that the council owns. It is crazy that the original scheme passed planning and was given the go-ahead only to discover thereafter that there were so many problems subsequently. We have a serious housing problem in the country, and to see a council buying up a scheme and then starting to demolish houses does not look good. Someone needs to answer for the decisions that were made. We will send correspondence to Mr. Broughan and the Department and see what they come back with.

Deputy Pat Buckley: We should revisit it.

Chairman: We should certainly revisit it after the recess.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I am happy with that.

Chairman: That concludes our consideration of public petitions this afternoon. I would like to invite members of the public to submit petitions via our online portal, which is available at petitions.oireachtas.ie. A petition may be addressed to the Houses of the Oireachtas on a matter of general public concern or interest or an issue of public policy. Today's submissions and petitions are perfect examples of local issues being brought to a national platform. It was very beneficial to have both petitioners in today.

Decisions on Public Petitions Received

Chairman: Regarding banning herbicides in public areas and the review of local authority responses on this issue, at the public meeting of the committee on Thursday, 12 May 2022, it was agreed that the secretariat would write to all 31 local authorities with a list of questions about whether they use herbicides in public areas - petition No. 8 of 2022. To date, 26 of the 31 local authorities have replied. Only Carlow County Council, Galway County Council, Kildare County Council, Westmeath County Council and Wexford County Council are yet to reply. The secretariat has reviewed these responses. On the basis of this review, we know that those 26 local authorities all still use chemical herbicides in public areas. However, the vast majority are reducing their use of chemical herbicides with some only using them for limited specific purposes and many also using and trialling non-chemical alternatives, such as Foamstream and the mechanical removal of weeds. For example, Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council and Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council have phased out the use of chemical herbicides in many public places. These local authorities now only use chemical herbicides in public areas to treat invasive alien species which are particularly difficult to remove and in specific public settings, such as golfing greens in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and graveyards in Fingal.

Some local authorities also noted that while they are trying to minimise the use of chemicals, it is difficult to remove invasive alien species, such as Japanese knotweed and giant hog-

weed, on a large scale without glyphosate. Others local authorities including Wicklow County Council and Fingal County Council have developed policies which aim to reduce the use of chemical herbicides further. Overall, there is a positive and proactive movement across most of the country to reduce the use of chemical herbicides in public areas.

The committee recommends that: the secretariat follow up one last time with those local authorities yet to reply; the secretariat continue with its review of the local authority responses and work on its report on banning herbicides in public areas over the summer recess; and note in the committee's report if any of the outstanding local authorities fail to respond to the final reminder. Do members have any views? I wish to let Senator Buttimer know what was decided yesterday. The secretariat has been in touch with the local authorities and they have ignored us as well.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I believe David Joyce from Cork City Council gave us a very comprehensive reply.

Chairman: We would not doubt that the people in Cork would come back to us straight-away. That is agreed.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I again commend the officials in the secretariat on the quality of their work on our behalf. As we come to a recess, we should acknowledge publicly the fantastic work of the staff of the Committee on Public Petitions secretariat. The quality of the work that members of the committee receive in advance of petitioners or presentations by the different ombudsman offices is just brilliant. I will not name people but I thank all the members of the team that work with us.

Chairman: The Senator will get full agreement from all members. The clerk and the secretariat staff do an unbelievable amount of work for us.

Do members wish to go into private session to discuss Owenacurra or are we planning to have a meeting during the recess?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: We should go into private session for five minutes rather than having a discussion in public.

Chairman: We are not sure if Senator Buttimer would even be able to hear if we go into private session because that thing is back on his screen again.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Can the committee hear me now?

Chairman: We can hear you at this stage, but we are in public session. If we go into private session-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Yes.

Chairman: Everyone else is gone. There would only be the two of us if we went into private session.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: We can meet next week when we are here.

Chairman: We can try to organise a private meeting next week.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: If that is agreeable, yes.

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Chairman: We will try to have a private meeting next week to discuss Owenacurra if we can find a date and time that suits everybody.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: The Chairman can send communication on that.

Chairman: I send everybody best wishes for the summer holidays. If they are going abroad, bring us back something.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.56 p.m. *sine die*.