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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 2 Aibreán 2020*

*Thursday, 2 April 2020*

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

***Paidir.***

***Prayer.***

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## **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Peter Burke to announce the business for today.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** In relation to today's business, it is proposed that, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, the only business to be taken shall be the business as set out in the Report of the Business Committee dated 31 March 2020, with no Questions on Promised Legislation; No. 4, statements on Covid-19 – health, shall conclude within one hour and 45 minutes and shall be confined to a single round, with the statement of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties and groups or a Member nominated in their stead not exceeding ten minutes each, a five-minute response by a Minister or Minister of State, and not more than two Members sharing a speaking slot; No. 5, statements on Covid-19 – social protection, shall conclude within one hour and 45 minutes and shall be confined to a single round, with the statement of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties and groups or a Member nominated in their stead not exceeding ten minutes each, a five-minute response by a Minister or Minister of State, and not more than two Members sharing a speaking slot; and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of statements on Covid-19 – social protection until 2 p.m. on Thursday, 16 April 2020.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the proposal agreed?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is not agreed. As we discussed at length at the Business Committee, some of us are very strongly of the view that the Government should be subject to questions, particularly on matters pertaining to the current public health crisis, notably the Taoiseach, the Ministers for Health, and Housing, Planning and Local Government, and other key Ministers who are making important decisions on the public health emergency. There is no reason that could not take place next week. We believe this view is more than compliant with and very much in the spirit of the World Health Organization's view that in a public health emergency, transparency of decision-making and confidence in the authorities are key to gaining public support, trust and compliance with public health measures.

At the moment, most Deputies are inundated with questions, concerns, fears and anxieties being expressed by the public. Those matters need to be put before Government in order that the public's questions can be answered. I see no difficulty in that happening.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** The Dáil should meet next week. I do not accept the proposal of the Business Committee. It is not non-essential work for Deputies to come here and raise the concerns of their constituents, and to question and hold to account the Government - or should I say the caretaker Government. I will be voting against the proposal.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I agree with the two Deputies who have outlined why we should sit. Some commentary in recent days in the media and elsewhere has been regrettable. In some way, Parliament is being seen as an optional extra, rather than the constitutional imperative it is. I sympathise with your efforts, a Cheann Comhairle, and those of staff of the House in seeking to find a remedy which honours the requirement for the safety of staff, Members and all others associated. We also need to give good example. However, there is a need as the Deputies have said.

Notwithstanding that, I believe that 16 April is not too far away. On the basis that all groups, including those of the Deputies who have just spoken, are engaged - or hopefully are engaged - in forming a Government, which I hope can be done within a fortnight, perhaps on 16 April we will have a vote for Taoiseach at this location, in the Convention Centre or another location as suggested. On that basis, we will support the Dáil adjourning until 16 April, with the caveat that all of us have a responsibility. I appeal to your good offices, a Cheann Comhairle, to ensure we embrace the constitutional imperative that Parliament is. It is most certainly not an optional extra, despite the views of some people, be they officials, media or otherwise, who feel it in some way is.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I agree with the objections made and will give an example of why the Deputies are correct in what they have stated. This is changing so quickly. One of the consequences the country is facing is that home help hours have not been reduced but completely cut. That is a consequence of the decisions that had to be taken. I am supporting the Minister for Health in this 100% and commending him. However, when a result like that comes from decisions that have been taken, I believe we have to be able to stand clear. We have to be able to hold the Government to account in a working together way. It is not that we want to come in here and knock stripes of the Minister or anything like that; that is not what I am talking about. We are talking about the welfare and health of the people inside this room and the staff in this building. I am interested and very worried as is each Deputy about the health and well-being of the people who are at home today and who have got phone calls telling them their home help has been stopped. Those people could potentially finish up in our acute hospitals or our community hospitals as a result of home help being stopped. No one inside here and no one in government wants that to happen. I know the Minister for Health does not want that to happen. We have to work together and be able to discuss these issues and problems and that is why I support the Deputies in saying it is our job to come here and give the Minister what we are hearing. In fairness, he needs us all to work together with him, not against him.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I agree that we should meet next Thursday. It is vitally important. There are workplaces that are not essential but the Dáil is very necessary. It needs to be in place to hold the Government to account and to make Government accountable for its actions. Whether that is the part-time or caretaker Government that we have now or a new Government, the Dáil has to meet. That should override any other consideration. I know we can do it in a

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way that protects staff here as well and have a minimal number of staff here. That is vitally important too but I do not think it outweighs the importance of the actual Members of the Dáil itself.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I also support the business of the Dáil to continue. It is very important that we should remember we are asking front-line health people to go in to work in the most arduous of circumstances to continue their duty. I do not think it is fair that any Member of this House should be cocooning at home. People need to remember that Teachta Dála means “messenger of the people”. We need to carry the people’s message here very forcibly and the business of the House must not be interrupted.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I concur with all of my colleagues on the aforementioned in that we do have to have accountability. There are many issues on which we would like answers through a question and answer session. Yesterday I partook in a HSE briefing that lasted for two hours. In the first 45 minutes, only two Deputies had asked questions. It is not acceptable and I would prefer to see the Dáil sitting, showing the people that we are able to practise what many of our front-line staff have to practise on a daily basis. The recommendations are in place, we are perfectly capable and it is badly needed at this time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I should point out, perhaps mostly for the benefit of new Deputies, that when it comes to a possible vote on the Order of Business, what we are talking about here is a situation in which if the proposal before the House is not agreed then there would be no business at all transacted today. The only matter really that falls to be decided is the date of the next sitting, which is proposed for 16 April. I ask Deputies to bear that in mind. Does the Minister wish to respond?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Is there an amendment proposed?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There is no amended proposal.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** First, I acknowledge the huge cross-party and cross-grouping support, interest and work in respect of this issue. I think there are ten groupings in this House between parties and groupings of Independents. The co-operation, collaboration and support from each and every one of those groupings is at the level that I think the Irish people would expect. The Irish people are not expecting us to approach this in a partisan manner, nor do I believe their people’s representatives are and I take Deputy Michael Healy-Rae’s point in that regard. We are providing a significant level of briefing and interactions.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** In private.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Let the Minister answer.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Officials who are working extraordinarily hard seven days a week and who have not seen their families in weeks are working and making themselves available, as they want to and should, to brief Deputies and keep them up to date. They are doing a superb job and they deserve our support. In addition to that, myself and the Taoiseach will again brief leaders of all groupings in this House today as we are doing on at least a weekly basis. As a Member of this House, a Cheann Comhairle, I very much take the point about the paramount importance of the work of Dáil Éireann and the fact that it needs to be carried out in a transparent way. However, I am deeply uneasy from a public health point of view that the House is meeting for this session today. That is not to say that the Dáil cannot meet. The European

Parliament has met digitally or virtually in recent weeks. With a little ingenuity and innovation, it would not be beyond us to do what is being done in workplaces across the country.

Members should be clear that we are risking public health by being here today. No one in this Chamber is a close contact of mine. Members may be close contacts of their staff or family. Deputies are travelling from their households, beyond their close contacts, and coming into contact with other Members as well as officials, ushers and clerks for whom attendance is not optional. Their safety and health are of paramount importance. I appreciate the significant work done by the Ceann Comhairle in discharging his duties, but by sitting today in this fashion the House is sending a message that runs counter to the public health message to stay at home.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask Members to bear in mind that, as I stated, the House will either agree to this proposal or we will all go home.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** May we amend the proposal to allow the House to sit next week?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** An amendment has not been tabled. Is the Order of Business agreed? Agreed.

### **Teachtairacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seanad Éireann has passed the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Bill 2020, without amendment.

### **Covid-19 (Health): Statements**

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** Ordinarily, I welcome any opportunity to update the House but today I cannot do so. We are living in extraordinary times and what we ordinarily do is no longer a choice we can freely make.

On this day, World Autism Day, I think in particular of those who most depend on routine in their lives now finding a way to cope with their families in what are very strange and difficult days as they seek to play their part in this national public health emergency. I think of the people who are at home and adjusting to a very different way of living. Like them, I believe democratic accountability can operate at a distance and that there is no reason it cannot do so effectively. Other parliaments around the world are doing so. Yesterday, many members of the Opposition again questioned the HSE remotely at a briefing. Many of them will rightly question the Taoiseach and me in the same way later this afternoon. I will not dwell any longer on this issue. Days in which we do not lead by example are days we should regret.

I express my condolences to the family and friends of all those whose lives have been tragically taken by this terrible virus. It does not just steal lives, it steals from us the very cherished ways in which we grieve. Twenty-two days ago, there was the first death from Covid-19 in Ireland. As of last night, 85 men and women in Ireland had lost their lives to the virus. This should give us a singular focus. We must protect the most vulnerable members of our society.

Earlier this week, the Government moved to strengthen support to people in nursing homes

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and other long-term residential care settings and people working in or depending on home care. I have reached out to organisations which represent other vulnerable groups, including those living with cancer, addiction or poverty. We are all affected by this crisis but some are more affected and vulnerable than others. Our watchword must be that no one will be left behind. This national effort must be driven by our instinct to look after each other. That is what we wish to do as Irish people and it is how we will prevail. We can all help to protect our loved ones, families, colleagues, friends and neighbours. Many of the ways in which we usually show our love and support are currently closed to us, but we must open an opportunity to make a real difference. The Irish people are already making that difference. When the HSE first started to trace the contacts of confirmed cases of Covid-19, those infected had been in contact with approximately 20 other people. Two weeks ago, that number had reduced to ten. One week ago, it had reduced to five and, today, it stands at just three. The truth is that the number of cases will continue to rise. It is also true to say the rate of growth in new cases has gone from 33% to 10%. Let us be clear that this is still too high but we are showing, as a people, that we can do this and we can do more. We can see already some of the impacts of the measures the Taoiseach announced on 13 March and on 24 March but we have not seen the full impact of same and it is too soon to see any of the impacts of the extremely difficult and restrictive measures we announced last Friday. The message people need to hear is that they are already making a difference and if we all redouble our efforts, we can lower the growth rate more and save more lives.

I want to send a clear message to the Irish people and the Chief Medical Officer believes this and states same clearly. There is no doubt that through the countless efforts of so many people, lives have been already saved in our country. The work people are doing by sitting at home today, not going into work, having the children off school, restricting their movements, washing their hands well and practising good cough etiquette is saving lives. Lives have been saved already and we can do more. Our Chief Medical Officer is clearly telling us the number of cases is far fewer than it would have been in an unmitigated epidemic but this should not in any way confuse any of us about what we need to do because there can be no occasion for complacency. Rather, it is a call to arms to keep at it, to do even more if possible, to stay the course and to stay at home.

We all have to help our health service in planning for what lies ahead. Our health service staff are making huge personal sacrifices in the face of this virus, along with many other workers on the front line. I know the House will want to join me in again paying tribute to our health service personnel, including our doctors, nurses, ambulance personnel and paramedics, care workers, cleaners, porters, caterers, medical scientists and all of those working on the front line response to Covid-19. I also pay tribute to those who are working on the front line in keeping our supply chains going, keeping us fed, keeping production going in our country and keeping vital public transport going to get workers to and from work.

I will update the House on some of the key actions being taken as we step up our efforts to contain the spread of the virus and mitigate the consequences across society and particularly in our health service. We are making sure we do everything humanly possible to prepare our acute hospital system to deal with the increased demand that undoubtedly will be placed on its capacity. Deputies will be aware that the City West facility is open. It is a self-isolation facility with 750 beds. There will be also 450 step-down beds at this facility and we are opening similar facilities in other locations across the country. The work the HSE did in securing this hotel and in putting in place this system so quickly is incredible. It had its first 16 patients check in last night.

This week, we also concluded an important agreement with our private hospitals, which will increase the capacity of the health service in Ireland by 17%. It provides us with an additional 2,000 hospital beds across 19 hospitals, including a further 47 ICU beds, more high-dependency beds and 194 more ventilators, which are crucial.

The HSE is engaging, on a daily basis, with domestic and international suppliers to secure additional ventilators to meet the anticipated surge in demand for same. Procurement of these and other essential supplies is an ongoing challenge for all health systems, given an unprecedented global demand. This is a global pandemic and every country is looking for the same products and supplies. Therefore, Ireland has decided to join with other member states in the European Union, as part of a centralised joint procurement of medical supplies. The European Commission is preparing contracts for each member state to distribute the supplies in the coming weeks.

I am conscious of the focus on testing, which is understandable but I have to reiterate the advice of our public health experts. If one has symptoms, one should self-isolate for 14 days and members of one's household should do likewise. One does not need a test to follow this advice. Having a test does not affect one's need to self-isolate. The purpose of testing is for public health surveillance and tracking purposes. The test does not change one's treatment, which should and will be based on the advice of one's GP. As Members know, the national public health emergency team, chaired by the Chief Medical Officer, recently recommended a change to the case definition being used to identify people suspected of having Covid-19. This decision was based on a need to more carefully target our testing regime to ensure we are testing those who are most vulnerable and to help prioritise the testing of our healthcare workers. This has been somewhat effective as we are seeing the rate of those testing positive increase from 6% to 15%. In other words, we are having a more targeted approach and we are finding the virus more often. While we have more than 40 testing centres in the community, in recent days it is clear that testing capacity has been constrained due to a number of challenges. These are challenges we have in common with every other country and which the HSE is working hard to address. It is really important to stress that we are still testing more than most other countries. At 6,000 tests per 1 million people in Ireland, we are near the very top of the league of countries in the amount of testing being done. However, we will ramp this up further. That is the right strategy. The HSE has indicated that it now has sufficient test swabs and more orders will be delivered in coming days. The HSE is also making every effort to procure other stock including sourcing domestic production of reagents. It also plans to expand testing capacity. In addition to the national virus reference laboratory, 12 hospital laboratories are also now testing for Covid-19 with additional facilities due to come online. The expansion plan will also focus on increasing lab capacity in other settings. Plans for this expanded capacity are well developed and arrangements are being put in place with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for the use of its laboratory space. Current laboratory capacity stands at 1,500 samples per day but it remains our national aim and intention to expand to up to 15,000 tests. We will continue to provide regular updates to Members of this House and to the Irish people as these operational matters move further as well as to our wider work. I want to recognise in the House that a testing system that has to be sustainable, not just for today or tomorrow but also the weeks and months ahead, has been set up by the HSE in rapid time. It is true that there have been pinch points from time to time, but the HSE is working flat out to address them. These are challenges that are shared with other countries but I am happy that additional capacity is due to come on stream.

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We have also moved to strengthen our support to nursing homes, other long-term residential care facilities and home support with focused actions to enhance the protection of staff and residents. These actions include infection prevention and control teams which can go into residential care settings and help to support the work of staff, prioritisation of staff in these settings for testing, active screening of all staff, including temperature checks twice a day, insuring personal protective equipment is supplied to long-term residential care settings and home support providers and the development of a preparedness plan across the sector. The national public health emergency team has a specific subgroup on vulnerable people to provide oversight and assurance on the actions being taken to protect vulnerable groups and representatives from other agencies and voluntary providers of services to vulnerable people ensure that an integrated approach is now being taken. The national public health emergency team will meet again tomorrow when I expect it to receive a further update on the implementation of these new measures for long-term residential care settings. This is a very big public health issue which we must get right. Some of our oldest and most vulnerable residents are living in nursing homes and other residential settings. We must make sure that the safeguards are in place to protect them and also to ensure that we do not see the risk of infection spreading from there into the community.

Covid-19 continues to pose a very serious health threat in Ireland and across the world. This is a public health emergency. Our response to that emergency is being guided by the best international evidence and advice available. I thank my colleagues in the Government for the efforts being made in their Departments to support our efforts. I sincerely thank the Chief Medical Officer, who is back in work today and doing an incredible job on behalf of all of us and the country, and all his team working with him. I thank all Members of this House for a genuinely constructive approach and the support which has been shown by Members for the public health measures. We all know that this has not been easy but people are answering the call to help our country through this crisis. We have been overwhelmed by the offers of assistance, the voluntarism, the community spirit, that famous Irish meitheal. We thank the people who are coming to work on the front line despite the risks to themselves and, most importantly, we thank those who are staying at home to lessen the risks to those people and to everyone else.

We cannot stop this virus but we can slow its spread and we can flatten the curve. Phrases that were unfamiliar to us just weeks ago are now a national catch cry that unites us: flatten the curve. They are phrases that are now so over-familiar that we wish we could all stop saying them but we cannot: wash your hands, cover coughs and sneezes, keep your distance, stay apart, stay at home. Some day, they tell me, we will get back to normal life and I know we will. We also know that we will not get there unscathed. On that day, when we look back, we will look back at what we did and I hope that we can say that we did our damndest for our country but, most importantly, for each other.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I am sharing time with Deputy MacSharry. I begin by expressing my deepest sympathies with the families and friends of those who have passed away already because of Covid-19. Losing the people we love is always difficult but losing them in these circumstances, where there are restrictions on hospital visits, on funerals and on the ability of people to come together to help each other through that loss makes it an awful lot harder. I join the Minister in expressing my deep gratitude to those who are on the front lines and are putting themselves at risk to keep the rest of us safe. They include healthcare professionals in our hospitals and communities. They also include a group of women and men who are spoken about less, but who are also very much on the front lines. In our healthcare facilities they include cooks, porters, administrators, cleaners and everybody else who is working to help healthcare

professionals. They include home care and nursing home workers who go out every day out to directly support those who are the most vulnerable to Covid-19. Many do so despite being on very low wages, without medical training and, right now, without personal protective equipment.

The HSE, the Department of Health and the Government are working flat out on Covid-19 and some things are working well, including the opening up of private hospitals, testing centres, step-down facilities and more. I acknowledge that good work. We are struggling in other areas and I want to use my time to highlight two such areas.

The first is the need for much more urgent support for home care workers. The lack of personal protective equipment, training and support for them is very concerning. Yesterday, a home care worker in Dublin tested positive. She sees approximately ten elderly people every day, and every day those people change. She could see 50 elderly people each week. She lives with eight other home care workers who also see about ten people per day. It is entirely possible, given that 50% of transmissions occur when people are asymptomatic, that this healthcare worker, unbeknownst to her, may have infected some of the vulnerable people she looks after. It is also entirely possible that the other home care workers with whom she lives have now been infected and have done the same thing. The HSE told us yesterday that as of yet no personal protective equipment is being provided to home care workers. We know they are not getting medical training and I strongly urge the Government to move on this more quickly. We know resources are tight, but this seems like an area where very bad things could happen very quickly.

The second area I want to talk about is more support for nursing homes. I listened carefully to what the Minister said. I am not trying to criticise him, but yesterday we had a detailed briefing with the HSE and the level of supports and actions which the Minister outlined in his speech do not marry with what the HSE told us is actually happening. Yesterday, I was told that in one nursing home 70 of its 200 staff have tested positive. At the time I received this information, I was also told that 19 of the 100 residents had tested positive and four had passed away. In addition, three of the home's kitchen staff and several cleaning staff have gone. It does not know where it can get help, given that no agency staff are available. I imagine every Member in the House has been contacted with similar stories. The Minister will be aware of these cases. The situation is very serious. Nursing homes cannot get the staff they need, particularly in areas where additional skills, such as palliative care, are required. They cannot get their hands on personal protective equipment. They are receiving small amounts but that is not enough.

I know the HSE is trying to deploy its staff to try to plug some of these gaps, but much more is needed. We support the decision to deploy vast sums of money to build capacity in our healthcare system. However, it does not seem right that we would spend all of that money getting our healthcare system right so that when people get sick they can be helped without making the same efforts and investments for vulnerable people, home care and nursing homes in order to stop people getting sick in the first place. There needs to be urgent movement on that.

I would like to raise many more issues, but we are short of time. Perhaps the Minister and I could pick up the questions I have raised, which have come from nurses, doctors, scientists and families. Why are only 1,500 tests a day being done? Why are healthcare workers waiting so long for test results to allow them to get back to work? Why is Ireland running out of reagent when we have such a large chemical industry here? Why are clinicians still being told not to wear masks at work when many working in hospitals feel they should? Why is the modelling work on projected cases being withheld from the public? Why is it not being made public?

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Why are private consultants being brought into the HSE temporarily being paid more than some of the HSE consultants? Why is the HSE not able to say yet how many cases it feels it will be able to handle on a given day.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I offer my condolences to all the families who have lost a loved one in recent times and I pay tribute to all our frontline workers, predominantly in the healthcare area but also those manning our supermarkets and all essential services throughout the country. They are heroes all. I congratulate the Minister for Health and the Government on their work so far, and the efforts they and all the officials are putting in, and every Member of this House because there is a non-partisan approach and full support for the measures being taken, notwithstanding that anomalies have arisen. I can appreciate fully the phrase coined in recent weeks that speed trumps perfection in many of these issues but as anomalies are coming up they need to be highlighted. One such anomaly is that GPs, their staff and surgeries are not being prioritised in the 24 hour turnaround for testing. They need to be included in that 24 hour turnaround, whether they are secretarial assistants manning the reception, nurses in the practice or the GPs themselves because they pose a risk. While the clinical hubs where GPs can refer people are a good initiative to keep Covid-19 away from GP practices, this measure will be required while normal GP services resume. The PPE issue for care workers travelling to homes and nursing homes and those being cared for at home is a requirement. While I appreciate that good advances have been made recently with flights from China, I learnt that on Monday fewer of those flights took place than should have done due to some visa issue. I hope we are liaising with the Chinese authorities to ensure that does not happen again.

I know these statements are on health but I want to mention some anomalies on the payment of social welfare. I am sure the Minister for Health will not mind passing them on to the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection. I represent a Border county. Those people who live in the North of Ireland and work in the South and pay all their tax here do not qualify for the Covid-19 payment. I am aware that under EU regulations a person claims in the state in which he or she resides but that payment is substantially higher here than in the North. The converse is that those who live in the South but work in the North are entitled to the full payment here even though they pay their tax to the Queen. We need to examine that because it is not fair. People aged over 66 years who are self-employed are not entitled to the €350 payment because they are in receipt of something that is deemed to be a primary social welfare payment, the contributory pension of €248 a week. The Minister needs to consider paying the difference between those sums. Another problem is that people who choose to work part time for lifestyle reasons are entitled to the full €350 per week but people who are on half-carer's allowance to care for a loved one at home and is a part-time teacher working substitute hours is not entitled to the Covid-19 payment. They are some of the anomalies I am coming across and which I would appreciate the Minister's taking on board.

In a broader economic sense, I am sure we in this House are agreed that some sort of a Marshall Plan will be required to kick off the economy. While I appreciate that the Marshall Plan was not being drawn during the D-Day landings, we must have a team of people who begin to focus on that. On a Europe-wide basis we will have to find a mechanism to set aside or warehouse the vast cost associated with fighting this nationally and Europe wide because all countries are in the same boat. This country cannot have another period of austerity to pay the bill for this. We are all agreed that whatever it costs must be paid but we must find a way to set it aside, warehouse the cost to ensure we invest in the economy to get everybody back to work and get the economy moving again.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I will try to be as brief as I can. I offer my sincere heartfelt condolences to any person who has been bereaved as a result of this virus. I wish a fast and full recovery to those who are ill with the virus at home or in hospital. I would like to ask a number of questions about the situation as it stands, particularly on behalf of medical professionals and the medical and scientific community. Some of my questions have arisen in my constituency office and in the offices of my colleagues.

We have an opportunity today to put to bed some of the myths that have been circulating. Some elderly people in my constituency are at home and do not want to let anyone into their houses. They are normally visited by home help personnel. They are very anxious. I am not talking about people who do not need home help. They need these services, but they do not want to have people coming into their houses. That is why it is absolutely vital that we can make a statement here today with regard to the personal protective equipment, PPE, that can and should be provided to home help workers. Such a statement would put at ease the minds of constituents who need home help but are very anxious about allowing people into their houses. Of course they are very worried. They are doing what they should be doing. They are cocooning and trying to stay away from contact, but they need their home help. They need to hear from the Minister that PPE will be provided and that their home help providers will be able to visit, where appropriate, in a safe way.

I know that home help is going to be curtailed. We spoke about this yesterday. In light of the many debates we have had in this Chamber about the home help waiting list, the Minister will be aware of how much people value the home help service. We need to hear directly from the Minister about what will replace the services that are curtailed. We need to talk directly to people watching at home who need home help and have home help assigned to them. Many home help workers want to be able to do their work but they need the PPE to be able to do so. At this point in the proceedings, every worker in the health service is on the front line. There is no such thing as a non-front-line worker now. There is no differentiation between grades. Every single person in our health service is on the front line and every single person who is on the front line needs to have the PPE to do his or her job.

It has become evident in recent days that a lack of the reagent used in the Covid-19 testing process has led to significant delays for patients who are waiting to receive test results. As a result, the number of people being tested each day has been significantly lower than the number that was previously planned or announced. An international shortage of the extraction material used in the testing process is causing significant disruption to Covid-19 testing here and elsewhere. This is a global issue. As this crisis grows day on day, the international demand for this material will grow with it. This will put further pressure on the testing regime here. Dr. Cillian de Gascun has said that the extraction material used to extract the viral RNA in the testing process is proprietary, which means that strict patent laws govern who can and cannot manufacture it. The lack of this material is now causing delays here.

At what stage are the Government's engagements with the pharmaceutical companies that are located in this country regarding the development of test kits for domestic use here? It is clear that the international market cannot meet the demand that is going to be required. All options, including the compulsory licensing of intellectual property, should be considered in an effort to maximise production. We have a world-renowned and long-established pharmaceutical sector. The operation in this country of the top ten pharmaceutical companies needs to be utilised fully. Given that we have thousands of highly skilled workers in this sector, there is no reason we should not be able to manufacture test kits and materials here. We cannot sit back

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and hope the international market will deliver, because it will not do so in these circumstances. My colleague, an Teachta O'Rourke, and I have drafted some suggestions in this regard. As Deputy O'Rourke is a medical scientist, he has much more expertise in this area than I do. We have drafted a proposal and sent it to the Minister. Our aim is to be constructive. We must all make this effort together.

I know the Minister and the HSE have been working very hard to source additional PPE supplies from China and other countries. We have heard from Mr. Paul Reid that other large states with deep pockets are active in the market and thereby pushing up the prices. New supplies have been arriving, as we have seen, and more supplies will come. That is welcome, but we must ensure we have a continuous supply of domestically produced PPE, which is absolutely vital. I reiterate that there is no grade, group or category of worker in the health service that we cannot call a front-line grade, group or category. Every front-line worker needs the PPE to do his or her job. This is going to be absolutely vital. What is the situation with regard to the refocusing of domestic capacity and manufacturing? What stage is the Government at in engaging with the domestic manufacturing sector? How much PPE can be produced here? When can it be produced? How soon can we get it out to people? People are asking these questions and they need to know that this is being worked on, that there is a realistic timeframe and when that equipment is going to arrive. On the matter of accommodation for front-line healthcare workers who have found themselves without somewhere to live due to the Covid-19 crisis, I note that there have been discussions with hoteliers and bed and breakfast owners. I heard yesterday that a list of available accommodation would be circulated. That is welcome but that list needs to be updated. I have had cases come to me of people who have lost a place to live simply because they are working on the front line. They have housemates who may be vulnerable. Nobody, and certainly not anyone on the front line in this crisis, should find themselves homeless or without any form of accommodation. That list needs to be published and made known to all healthcare workers.

Will the Minister elaborate on the public-private hospital agreement? How did he arrive at the decision to pay consultants from the private hospital network more than existing HSE consultants, namely, those who are new entrants? This is an issue that will cause unnecessary distress. Not much of the agreement has been made public but one of the stand-out details that we have seen is causing concern. It is unfair to perpetuate pay inequality in this new agreement. It is not fair to the people whom we are asking to go out and do a tremendous job in the coming weeks. Moreover, I ask for details of how much this will cost. I know that when the Taoiseach spoke about it, he was very clear in saying that we do not know how much it will cost because we do not know how long it will go on for. That is grand but there is a daily rate. We may not know how many days it will take but we certainly should know how much it will cost per bed or per hospital. There is no commercial sensitivity at play here because it is all public now, as the Minister told me. We really should know what this will cost.

The nursing home sector has come to the fore in recent weeks. There are a number of clusters of the virus in nursing homes. I know the HSE and medical professionals are doing sterling work to try to stop the spread and treat people as well as they can. I ask the Minister to do two things. The first is to make sure that staff working in nursing homes have the necessary PPE. Will he also ensure that they have the necessary staff? We all saw the call to be on call for Ireland and people have responded. On call for Ireland means being where one is needed, whether in a nursing home, in the community, in an administrative role or in a field hospital, step-down facility or clinical hub. On call for Ireland means being where one is needed. Our

nursing homes absolutely need a steady supply of staff to keep the residents safe. We all know that staff in nursing homes are contracting this virus and have to take time off, but the residents still need to be cared for.

Will the Minister look into the situation relating to student nurses? I was contacted by a nurse the other night who has lost her SUSI grant because she volunteered to work on the front line and is no longer eligible for the grant. I fully appreciate that this is an anomaly and an unintended consequence, but it needs to be addressed. We cannot have people who sign up to work finding themselves in a situation where they are losing money. Likewise, student radiographers and other students who are signing up to go to the front line are finding themselves in a situation where they are either not being paid or they are losing money.

The situation regarding those who are in receipt of medicinal cannabis needs to be clarified. I think the Minister has some information about that and I know that work was done on it, but that needs to be shared with us.

I have tried to be constructive in my questions to the Minister. We have tried to be constructive at every step of the way. I have offered solutions and suggestions. The Minister has our support in the efforts that are being made, but we need to get some answers on the public record. Every healthcare worker is on the front line now. There are no grades, groups or categories. We also have to thank those who work in supply chains and keep them going and the men and women working in administration in the background. All those people are going beyond. We have been inundated with requests for information. People want to know what is going on, what the plan is, where they stand and what will happen to them. This is our opportunity to put the facts into the public domain. There are many myths and the Oireachtas must ensure it can counter them. I have tried not just to pose questions today but also to offer some solutions and ensure we remain open in our dialogue and frank with people. We must put out all the available information. I ask the Minister to examine the issues around testing and consider Sinn Féin's proposal. We will work with him to ensure we can get those tests. Testing is key, as the World Health Organization has stated. All the medical and science communities have indicated we must test, test and test again and trace and isolate but we must test first. As I indicated, we made a proposal in that regard and I hope the Minister will have time to consider it.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I join other Deputies in offering condolences to all the bereaved families and giving our full support to front-line workers. I will speak to a couple of other matters that may not have been addressed.

As the emergency rolls on and people live the pattern of the new normal, we are aware that despite the creativity and humour engendered by social distancing, this pandemic has the potential to take a toll on our collective psyche, mental health, well-being and resilience. The pressure keg of self-isolation and partial lockdown on the average household can be immense. We can add to the mix women and families experiencing domestic violence, Travellers on halting sites and people who are homeless or simply alone, with nobody to talk to, or in a vulnerable age category. I reiterate the calls from my colleague, Deputy Roderic O'Gorman, for increased resourcing of domestic violence services like Women's Aid, the rape crisis centres and other women's refuges. I welcome the announcement from An Garda Síochána yesterday that its members will place a specific focus on families and individuals living with domestic violence in this period.

With regard to those in the trenches on the front line of this battle, we cannot imagine the

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incredible strain that people feel with the daily intake of those who have fallen to the coronavirus. They know that they are also at high risk of infection and they may face the prospect of going home and not being able to hug their loved ones. It is important that a full complement of supports is in place across our health system so that staff can be debriefed as they come off shifts and they can have access to online counselling, peer support and other support services if required. I ask that all staff working in our hospital settings, as well as those in section 39 providers, nursing homes and other settings, be included in this. It is my understanding that access to such services is very limited when we consider that healthcare workers are trying to manage childminding, home schooling and the maintenance of their own family's health through this crisis.

Occupational health departments are completely immersed in logging, reporting and directing towards isolation staff who are displaying symptoms of Covid-19. Previously offered counselling and support services are not accessible. A dedicated service that is accessible 24-7 is vital to the mental health of workers. There are workers on other front lines. These are in retail, pharmacies, delivery and postal services, and I appeal for employers to ensure they check in on staff regularly, with procedures put in place to keep staff safe, as they are dealing with very worried or distressed people.

My colleague, Councillor Maria Dollard, wrote to the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, earlier this week about the plight of section 39 care providers and nursing homes. We note with concern the emergence of clusters of Covid-19 in such settings and I appeal to the Minister to ensure all services for people with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, older people and other care settings, both day and residential, are afforded the same access to personal protective equipment and hand sanitation facilities as those in the public system.

There are anomalies in pay parity between section 38 and section 39 providers and this must be addressed as a matter of urgency, as must the differential in cost of care between public and private nursing homes. Section 39 providers have been left high and dry by successive Governments through pay inequality and funding cuts. This position has been made more acute by the imposition of efficiency measures in recent years that have left them at a point where they are begging for basic supplies of PPE. These organisations nonetheless provide an exceptional level of care beyond a basic social care model for service users.

I have some final points, with the first concerning bereavement support. Families grieving loss of a loved one caused by Covid-19 or an unrelated cause of death are being dealt the double blow of not being in a position to properly come to terms with their loss. It is often said that the Irish way of saying goodbye is, culturally, among the most empathetic and comforting in the world. Families are being denied that comfort due to the necessary restrictions imposed on funeral services for the duration of the health phase of this crisis. For many, that denial delays or holds back the grieving process, including the ability to come to terms with or celebrate the life of a loved one. I am sure there are similar services as the example in my constituency, Kilkenny Bereavement Support, which is giving voice to those who are silently grieving. Ours is an exceptionally professional but entirely voluntary service and it is important that bereavement support, counselling, suicide prevention and mental health charitable services are supported by the State at a time when the opportunity for voluntary fundraising has largely dried up. Finally, I ask for some clarity from the HSE and the Government on the use of masks by the general population as a means of reducing infection. Several weeks ago a group of people in Kilkenny began making homemade masks from simple materials according to a template found online. The HSE issued a statement saying that masks are not effective in reducing infection,

yet evidence from Thailand and Vietnam, where they are probably more culturally acceptable, has shown that masks did have an impact. Masks are now mandatory in Austria and the Czech Republic and the Cuban Government has recommended that people make them at home. People have lots of time on their hands. I note that the Irish Countrywomen's Association, ICA, is starting to make them. With a widely circulated template we could go into mass production of homemade masks. I would welcome clarity on this issue.

I thank our Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, and the Government for their ongoing work in leading us through this crisis and the co-operation and collaboration of all parties and Independents in the House. In particular, I wish Dr. Tony Holohan a speedy recovery. There was a collective sigh of relief across the country when he was back at his desk again this morning. We welcome that.

**Deputy Patrick Costello:** While I agree that all our health employees are on the front line, there are some who are more visible and of whom we think more quickly. My thoughts turn to those who are often less visible but deserve support in protecting their health so we can keep their services running. One thing that comes to mind is the child protection services, which are under unique pressures at this point as many of the supports for children at risk, such as teachers, coaches and youth workers, are not present in children's lives any more due to social distancing. Tusla has introduced some changes to work practices, but many home visits still have to happen. Social workers are reporting a huge difficulty to me - the Irish Association of Social Workers has commented that its members are also having difficulty - in accessing personal protective equipment, PPE. This does not necessarily mean the high-tech stuff one would see in hospital settings. They struggle to get such simple things as gloves or hand sanitiser. While I understand that Tusla has engaged with the suppliers, clear timelines and supply routes must be identified to ensure that these services can continue by keeping the staff healthy.

There is also a wide variety of community groups, NGOs, volunteer organisations, homecare providers, carers and family carers that provide help and support to a wide variety of vulnerable people who rely heavily on that support. These organisations often fill a gap in health provision left by the State. Now more than ever, we cannot abandon them again. We must ensure they can continue to support these vulnerable people. I welcome the efforts the Minister mentioned at the beginning.

My colleagues, Deputy Neasa Hourigan and Mr. Sean McCabe, have been dealing with this. While we welcome the efforts thus far, there must be clarity on where the supplies of PPE are coming from and when they will be available. There must be clear supply routes and schedules for these people. Many of these groups receive little or no funding from the State and as such might be invisible to the HSE. It is imperative that a needs assessment is carried out for those in the community who are supporting vulnerable people, no matter where they are based, so we can get a clear picture of what is needed and how we can get it out to them. If these people are not linked to the HSE or other sources of State funding, they may be invisible. It is very important that we capture family carers and home carers and ensure they have the PPE needed to protect their health so they can continue to support the health of the people they are caring for. It is also imperative that the HSE issues improved guidance specifically for the people doing this kind of work. Much of the available guidance is generic public advice for non-clinical settings, but this kind of work involves very close contact. Support and information will really help the people doing this kind of work.

Has any Covid-19 related funding been set aside for these kinds of groups? As my col-

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league, Deputy Noonan, stated, many section 39 organisations are struggling with funding cuts at present. Many other groups operate on a shoestring budget. The current difficult times are really placing them under a lot of stress. Specific Covid-19 related funding should be identified for these groups.

This has become quite pressing with today's reports that some home carers will be redeployed to nursing homes.

This makes the situation for carers even more acute. What plans have been put in place to backfill this need that is being created? Getting a homecare package can be a struggle. The lack of replacement for those who are to lose them will be devastating for them. Many  
*3 o'clock* of these are people who in the best of circumstances, without a homecare package, may end up in an acute hospital. The last thing anybody needs now is extra pressure needlessly being placed on our acute hospital system. What is being done to backfill homecare supports and packages where people are being forced into self-isolation, people are becoming sick and carers have been redeployed into a nursing home to support the crisis in that sector?

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I, too, would like to express my sympathies and the sympathies of the Social Democrats to those who have died during this Covid-19 pandemic in our health system. There is one particular time when people want to be around somebody close to them and that is when the person is dying. I know from my own experience of having been with my both parents when they died that there is something very comforting about that in the future. It is regrettable that owing to the restrictions around funerals people will have terrible regrets for a long time. It is only when one attends a funeral in another country that one realises the importance of the funeral process here.

There was a discussion regarding today's sitting and essential workers. I have been contacted by several family members of workers and workers themselves questioning why they are deemed to be essential when they are not health care workers. In some cases, these are people working in warehouses to provide for shops that are not open. I am trying to rationalise this. I even had a conversation about it last weekend with an official to try to understand it. There are people who are very upset that the restrictions in this regard are not being fully adhered to. There is no rationale behind some of the sectors that remain open. It is important to put this on the record. I am sure I am not the only Member who is receiving calls on this particular issue.

As part of our work as public representatives we are not only meeting here, we are also working remotely problem-solving, linking people to services and acting as one-stop-shops gathering information, inputting that information and linking services. All of that work is happening. We are also raising here concerns that the public are raising with us. We need to be able to do this. It is reassuring for the public to hear their concerns being raised. This is one of the reasons it is important for us to meet. There is no doubt that there is frustration regarding our ability to do our job. There is an expectation on the part of the public, on the basis of the telephone calls and emails we are receiving, that we need to be able to do that job. I welcome the commitment that there is to be a scaling-up in the Departments' ability to respond to queries because we have lost some of the helplines that would have been available to us. People are raising general issues such as the number of tests being carried out, the time it takes to get result and personal protective equipment, with the quality of what has been provided of particular concern. There is also concern about nursing homes, social welfare issues, domestic rents and, increasingly, commercial rents. The crises that existed heretofore still exist such that we are still dealing with issues related to homelessness and other issues.

I acknowledge that people are working differently and remotely, including civil and public servants. Many people have been redeployed to, for example, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection where there has been a sudden surge in workload. None of us are expecting business as usual. There is great appreciation of the efforts being made across the public and private sectors.

There is a high degree of co-operation between all parties and groups in this House. Government is not under the kind of normal scrutiny one would see because we realise this is an exceptional situation. However, we need to be able to have a two-way engagement. Often it seems that one inputs information but it takes a long time to come back. It is often not a two-way engagement, which is quite frustrating.

I have heard concerns expressed yesterday and today over batches of personal protective equipment, such as gowns and masks, that are not usable. It may be that there are bad batches and I realise that this was a consignment that was delivered very quickly. If that is not sufficient to protect people, we must address that issue. We must ask if there is capacity to scale something up here domestically. What can be done about it? That has been raised with us in a very serious way and we cannot ignore that issue. We need to see if it can be manufactured differently. It may only be that there are some bad batches within the consignment delivered. Will the commitment be fulfilled? If not, how do we deal with that issue? Can anything be sourced domestically? There have been very good examples of companies coming forward with material that has been used.

By and large people have been fantastic in getting behind the advice to stay at home and take the relevant precautions. The best way to ensure that continues is by being very honest with people about the challenges. I heard the Taoiseach talk about bumps in the road regarding testing. That is not enough. He should come out and say exactly what the problem is in some considerable detail. This is not just about the current crisis. Every week will be different. As we get past the point where, for example, we might be filtering people back to work, there is a concern that we would have a regime in place and that we would not have a new outbreak or an increase in cases by virtue of not having that regime in place. We need to know what the problems are. As has been said already it is really important to follow the World Health Organization advice to test, test, test and then identify the contacts.

Dr. Gabriel Scally made a very interesting contribution yesterday about an all-Ireland approach. This is not a political issue; this is a practical issue for managing the next stage. We cannot emphasise enough that we need an all-Ireland approach if we are to get control of this virus until a satisfactory vaccine is identified.

Even if it is not today, I ask the Minister to give us some detail about the equipment.

It is important to hear something very constructive about the tests. I completely understand this is not about a diagnosis, but about a management. It is very difficult to figure out how we were planning to have many more tests and then all of a sudden, we discover it is not possible to do them because of a shortage of reagent and possibly for other reasons. We need to see the actual position plotted out over a period of time.

It is absolutely legitimate that front-line healthcare workers are tested first. We are hearing of people being frustrated that they cannot get back to work; they want to be back at work. Intensive care beds are not just about a place in a hospital. They are about equipment but they

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are most of all about the staff who are the ones who will deal with them. We cannot even factor what the number of ICU beds will be if we cannot ensure that people can get back to work. It is really important that this issue is addressed in a thematic way where we prioritise those who need to be prioritised.

On nursing homes, this is something people are really upset about. There have been really restrictive access to nursing homes for many weeks now yet there are outbreaks in the nursing homes. It is right that HIQA is in and doing an evaluation. I have been asked on several occasions if there are arrangements that people could live closer or within nursing homes. That kind of thing is being talked about. On registration charges, someone told me they were asked to pay €350 to re-register even though they did not intend to be a nurse again. Can we make sure there is nothing like that included in respect of other allied expertise? We should not be hearing that kind of thing.

I add to other voices to wish Tony Holohan well. His illness was very public and I hope he will be fine.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** On behalf of People Before Profit, I pass on my deepest sympathies and condolences to anybody who has lost a loved one, whether in this country or elsewhere. We have to do absolutely everything we can to minimise further tragedies of that sort as quickly as possible. I also want to pay tribute to health workers and other essential workers who are providing the services and protection we need in fighting this virus, and to all of those who are staying at home. That will become an increasingly difficult thing for people to do but in doing so, they are protecting public health and helping to fight the transmission of the virus.

I want to comment on the debate about the appropriateness of the Dáil meeting. The Government has said it is acting on public health advice in most of its decisions. The list of essential workers, I assume, was drawn up by the national public health emergency team. It included public representatives and journalists as well as many of the other front-line workers. There is a very good reason for that. Public health medicine is unequivocal about the need for decisions in situations like this to be taken in an open and transparent manner and for the public to have the maximum amount of faith in the decision-makers as we move through the crisis. Democracy is not an optional extra in that; it is critical to maintaining public compliance and public confidence in the decisions. It is worth saying that intellectual studies on this matter have made it clear that the countries that did best in previous pandemics are those that are the most open and the most democratic, not those that are most repressive. That is what the intellectual and scientific evidence shows. That is why it is critical that the Dáil sits, whether remotely or in a different venue or whatever. It is essential because Deputies are being contacted by people in direct provision centres who are terrified because they cannot adhere to social distancing. Urgent action is needed. People in homeless hubs and hostels or in overcrowded family conditions impacted by the housing crisis cannot do social distancing. If they become symptomatic, they cannot self-isolate. Therefore it is an urgent matter to air those messages and concerns as they come in and for us collectively to do something quickly. For example, we need to get hold of empty apartment blocks in every area in order to provide suitable accommodation such that people are not living in overcrowded conditions. Last weekend, I was contacted by a teacher who works for an English as a foreign language school. Some of its 700 students contacted him because they cannot get the Covid-19 payment as they are not working although they have work-study visas. They came here this year and many of them are living in desperately overcrowded conditions with people who are symptomatic but cannot self-isolate. They are scared

and have no money. Deputies must be able to raise such concerns.

I have before me a list of 40 questions drawn up by doctors and scientists, some of whom are working on Covid-19 research. The questions address issues of concern to them, such as reagents, shower facilities for health workers, the testing regime and so on. I have been unable to put those questions to the Government because we do not have a system for so doing. It is critical for Members to be able to ask such questions in the interest of public health. It is critical that the House be able to scrutinise the arrangement with private hospitals whereby, rightly, their capacities have been taken under public control. However, we do not know precisely how that will be managed or how much it will cost. The Government has made pronouncements on it being a temporary arrangement.

There are many other issues that I do not have time to raise, such as what is happening in nursing homes and so on. It is critical that Members have the opportunity to ask the Taoiseach and Ministers these questions in the interests of public health and working together to defeat Covid-19.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I wish to start by expressing sympathy for all those who are sick and offering deep condolences to all those who have lost loved ones in recent weeks.

On the Order of Business, during a national emergency the accountability of Government is more important than in normal times. Allowing the voice and concerns of constituents to be heard is more important during a national emergency than in normal times. I am open to the idea of remote meetings but the Dáil should meet next week.

I wish to raise the issue of the tens of thousands of workers who continue to be called into work even though they believe their work is not essential and that company profits are being put before workers' lives. Workers at Ferrero in Cork continue to be called into work to make Tic Tacs, while workers at DePuy Synthes in Cork continue to be called into work to make artificial hips and knees in spite of the fact that elective procedures have been cancelled, the company's competitors have shut down and product is being stockpiled for future use and profit maximisation. Workers who find themselves in such situations have options. Relentless social media campaigning by the construction branch of the Unite trade union this week forced the closure of the construction site at the national children's hospital. A trade union campaign to get workers to contact the Health and Safety Authority *en masse* forced the closure of Stryker at Carrigtwohill in Cork. In other countries, workers have shut down their workplaces by walking off the job. It may be only a matter of time before that starts happening here. I urge workers in such situations who want good help and advice to contact the "Workers SpeakOut Covid19" Facebook page.

I welcome the fact that the State will have the use of the facilities of 19 private hospitals for the next three months. The private hospitals, such as the Beacon Hospital owned by Denis O'Brien, the Hermitage Medical Clinic, Blackrock Clinic or the Bon Secours chain, should not be compensated for this. The two-tier health system should not be dismantled this week and re-established in three months' time. Rather than develop these points in the limited time available to me, I wish to ask why the deal between the State and the Private Hospitals Association is, for the most part, a secret deal. When the State does a deal with workers and their representative organisations, the details are usually published online, they are published in the newspapers and they are subject to scrutiny and public comment. However, when the State does a deal with billionaires and wealthy corporations in this instance, the details are being kept secret. Why

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is that? Is it because the deal has not been signed yet? Is it because the hospital association is insisting on commercial secrecy? Is it because the Government thinks there may be public criticism of the sums involved? The details of the deal should be published immediately and the secrecy around it should stop.

Extraordinary powers have been granted to the State by the Dáil and they are in evidence over this two-week period of lockdown. The overwhelming majority of the population is complying and will comply with restrictions in the interest of public health. However, we should not blind ourselves to the abuse of Covid-19 special powers in other jurisdictions, nor should we blind ourselves to the abuse of special powers in this jurisdiction in the past. This situation needs to be carefully monitored by organisations that defend the interests of workers, young people and oppressed groups and by those who defend civil liberties. As a workers' representative, I will do my best to help monitor this situation in the weeks ahead.

I want to raise issues I have been asked to raise by two groups of workers. First, the student radiographers went into the hospitals on Monday for their clinical placements. They will be doing chest X-rays for Covid-19 patients as part of their work. Many have had to give up accommodation for health and safety reasons and many have had to give up part-time jobs. They receive no pay or travel allowance for their placements. They should be paid. Second, the bus drivers at Broadstone garage have been involved in a dispute with Bus Éireann for the past few days because most of the busses do not have protective screens. The drivers have been stopping at the bus stops, asking passengers to stand back, getting off the bus themselves, allowing passengers on and then boarding the bus again without collecting cash. Rather than entering into a dispute with drivers such as these, who are frontline workers, the public transport companies should follow the example of the drivers and waive fares for the duration of the crisis.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I am sharing time with Deputy Verona Murphy. I would also like to express our sincere condolences with the families that have been bereaved as a result of Covid-19 and I express our solidarity with people who are attending hospital.

Public representatives have both a duty and a responsibility to represent the needs of constituents when national policy is being discussed. On the criticism from some quarters of the Dáil sitting today, I believe my presence is required to speak to the needs of Waterford and the south east. Therefore, I make no apology for it.

Among the many recent concerns highlighted by the Minister for Health, increased emphasis has been placed on the management of our nursing home sector, where a large proportion of residents are deemed as vulnerable or as being at risk of contracting Covid-19. In the south east, for example, we have 66 private and voluntary nursing homes, managing more than 3,000 beds and employing more than 3,600 people. These health concerns face significant challenges in resourcing and in-patient management with respect to planning for Covid-19. Primary issues in this health emergency are the supply of PPE, the retention of staff - and most acutely in the south east nursing home sector - the extended delay in returning Covid-19 tests. This is placing inordinate pressure on managing patient isolation and staff well-being. Testing delays are contributing to the loss of healthcare personnel, who must self-isolate while they await confirmation of possible Covid-19 infection.

Happily for the south east, for the Minister and perhaps for the country, I can propose an immediate solution to this problem. The regional pathology laboratory for the south east at University Hospital Waterford provides all microbial testing for the south east region's hospi-

tals. In addition, it provides 24-hour turnaround Covid-19 tests for hospital inpatients and staff on site. I ask the Minister to resource and direct University Hospital Waterford laboratory to undertake testing of all nursing home swabs in the region. This would immediately and dramatically improve turnaround times and offer significant relief to nursing home managers and caregivers. I also ask that for the duration of this emergency, the Department of Health allows oxygenators to be placed with nursing home managers without the requirement of sign-off from a hospital consultant so that, where necessary, nursing homes can provide appropriate and immediate palliative care to those requiring it. I also ask the Minister to direct human resource departments in the HSE not to seek or target recruitment of health care workers working in nursing homes and community nursing units.

In addition to nursing homes, and the challenges they face, we must also remember those working in the community and voluntary services. These healthcare professionals provide indispensable services to many families and individuals living with disabilities and special needs as well as practical and emotional support to family care givers. Section 39 care workers provide exactly the same services and shoulder the same, and often additional, care burdens as their section 38 counterparts yet they receive less support and remuneration from the State. This discrepancy in pay has led to a 25% turnover in employees in the community and voluntary services sector and there is also a challenge with recruitment. There must be pay parity across the services. The time is long past for the Minister to ensure there is equal pay and funding for this sector.

The Minister outlined his concerns about the potential for cross infection between health-care workers sharing accommodation. Given the availability of university residences in our largest cities, perhaps the Minister could prevail on the educational institutions to shoulder some burden and make accommodation available to healthcare personnel thereby reducing risk of contamination and cross infection.

Beyond this, the Oireachtas must look forward and consider the rehabilitation of our national economy and the HME sector which faces a slowdown that cannot be allowed to cause stagnation. Our economic future cannot continue to be charted by a caretaker Administration. I urge the leadership of the main parties to renew efforts to form a Government so that new economic planning can begin. In light of the current challenges, the voters have the right to see the leadership shown by our front-line healthcare services reflected here. They have the right to question politicians on the delay in serious engagement on Government formation and they have the right to expect a renewed national programme and commitment to our most precious resource, namely our people. Duty calls, and some are ready and willing to answer that call.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I give my best wishes to Dr. Tony Holohan for his own health and all those who suffer from the coronavirus. I pay my condolences to those who have passed away as a result of the virus. I pay tribute to the front-line staff in hospitals and throughout our medical services as well as to those front-line staff who are not so recognisable in our pharmacies, supermarkets, at checkouts and those in the supply chain - in factories, drivers making deliveries, farmers and fishermen - for continuing to supply the food we eat. There is much talk of the Government and the great job it is doing but I commend the people of Ireland who are so focused on flattening the curve and abiding by the measures which Dr. Holohan has recommended be put in place. They are the people responsible for keeping the numbers of infections at bay and I thank them.

Covid-19 has the potential to take over our entire intensive care capacity and possibly our

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whole hospital system. While I commend the policies and recommendations which are being implemented, it cannot be at the expense of our essential services. Many suffer with other serious illnesses, such as cancer and mental health problems. We cannot allow a situation to develop where the second-line affects are more detrimental because of front-line actions. In Wexford, an election promise to open Arden House, the proposed new mental health facility, has not happened. The rooms in the current facility in Summerhill are so small it has had to close because it is unable to meet the recommended social distancing measures. It is only dealing with current patients by phone, on a 9 to 5 basis. I was called last Friday by a very distressed mother. She told me her 16 year old son had told her he wanted to kill himself. As it was out of hours, she called Caredoc and was advised to attend a hospital emergency department, but to ring ahead because of the virus. She was told by the emergency department that no one was there to deal with her son and advised her to go straight to the psychiatric unit in Waterford, but to ring ahead because of the virus. When she rang there, she was told under no circumstances was she to present with a child, they were virtually in lock down and that Wexford General Hospital had a duty of care. She spent all night watching her son to ensure he stayed alive, which was her only option as there were no mental health services available to him. This situation is not because of Covid-19. Mental health services in Wexford have been neglected for years. Last Sunday, a beautiful 17 year old girl who died by suicide was laid to rest. Her friend who was laid to rest only a week before, and was also 17 years of age, died by suicide. Their very vulnerable friends were unable to attend the funerals to say goodbye because of Covid-19.

We are in unprecedented times, but situations where a child takes his or her own life are unprecedented for parents and families. Mental health was a major issue before the election, and is now an even bigger issue. More people's mental health is being compromised because of poor domestic situations, which have been exacerbated due to people staying home as required. This is leading to an increase in the incidence of domestic violence. Those who are worried about other life pressures, such as having no job and bills to pay, and those already in the mental health services system are also suffering.

I understand the politicians who say it is important that we take care of our mental health. It is important to go for a walk, but walks do not deal with mental health issues, self-harm or suicidal tendencies; psychiatrists do. That is why we are all listening to the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, about how to handle Covid-19 and the measures that need to be implemented to stop its spread.

Today, I ask the Government to listen to Dr. Kieran Moore, a consultant paediatric psychiatrist. He said it is now a matter of urgency that the HSE set up an emergency service for children who normally attend CAMHS or other child psychiatry services and cannot now go to accident and emergency departments. He said all outpatient child psychiatry and CAMHS staff must work differently and be available on rota 24-7 by telephone to deal with patients directly as required. Mental health is like all other medical services; it cannot be shut down. We do not need an increase in deaths due to other illnesses because of Covid-19.

I am here today because I cannot get answers to these questions. The lack of accountability leads to a denial of citizens' rights. I should point out that we are following all of the recommendations and are not putting our health or that of anyone else at risk.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I, too, would like to say how important it is for us to acknowledge the sadness and heartache endured by families throughout the country who have lost friends and relatives over the past number of days and weeks. We are so sorry for that.

Our thoughts, prayers and consideration are with people who are ill, either at home or in our hospitals.

It is right and proper for us to be here today in this organised and proper fashion. I could not agree more with those who spoke at the beginning of the session that this is only right and proper. If we carry out our business using a rota system, people from different groupings can come into the Chamber and voice their concerns in a proper, orderly and safe fashion, as people throughout the country are behaving in terms of obeying the rules, and we can do our best to combat the awful difficulty we face at this time.

I will raise one of the consequences of the pressures on our health service. It is an issue I raised earlier, which came to light yesterday morning. I refer to the complete withdrawal of, rather than a reduction in, home help services for many older people in our communities. I can only speak for people from County Kerry because they are the people who have contacted me. I am sure other Deputies are aware of the same issues in their constituencies, and it is for them to speak about it. This matter has to be highlighted here today.

I acknowledge 100% the pressures and constraints on the system and was grateful to have had a conference call for nearly two hours yesterday with senior people in the HSE, with whom I raised this issue. I understand the difficulties the Department of Health and the HSE are having in trying to manage the resources they have. We are aware of the excellent people who have put their shoulders to the wheel and come back, whether they were retired or abroad, and have said they are here to work and to serve at this difficult time. In spite of that, HSE management has decided to completely withdraw services. I was told during the conference call yesterday that it affected people of a low dependency. On Radio Kerry this morning, I asked what is a low level of dependency. I know elderly people who are wheelchair users and are completely bedbound. It is not acceptable for a son living nearby to come to a lady aged between 70 and 90 years to deal with her private matters, getting up in the morning, showering and getting ready for the day. That will not work. There are things that boys or men cannot do for their mothers, aunts or grandmothers. Another person needs to help to give that type of personal care. These are people who are highly dependent. I plead with the Minister for Health, the Department of Health and the HSE not to attack elderly people by leaving them without their home help. I know nobody wants to do this. Whatever way the help is going to be managed there are excellent people to provide it. There are excellent carers who work in our communities. They are the backbone of our communities. There are individuals who may have two, three or four people in their care. They have been doing everything to assist them over the years and all of a sudden they are getting a telephone call to tell them not to visit Mr. or Mrs. So and So. It is a complete withdrawal of services. We cannot allow that to happen. If we do that, those people all of a sudden will not be able to stay at home. Something will go wrong perhaps in their houses or with their health. They will finish up in an acute hospital or in a community hospital. That is exactly what we do not want at this time. The safest, happiest and best place for a person to be, if it is humanly possible for them to be there at all, is in their home and nowhere else. I am sure the Government and the Minister for Health realise that. It would be a very mean person who would stand here and be critical of the Minister for Health or any other Minister at this time because as far as I can see every one of them is doing their genuine best in this matter. That has to be acknowledged. Let us work together and do the right thing by everybody.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I, too, sympathise with all those who have lost family members over the past three or four weeks, for whatever reason. It has been a very difficult time for them because nobody can assist them, grieve with them or go to funerals. I knew a 91 year old man

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who, when he knew he was dying, said to his son, “Goddamit, there will be no neighbour or anyone coming to the funeral.” The son is bothered to this day about it because his father was a grand man. It is hurting many people and families that nobody can help them to grieve or start the grieving process as was the tradition in Kerry and all around the country, where neighbours went to help families grieve and survive. I sympathise with all of those.

I thank all the front-line staff, the nurses, doctors, kitchen staff and cleaners who are vital in all our healthcare facilities, whether in hospitals such as Tralee General Hospital or Killarney or Kenmare district hospitals, or nursing homes around our county. All those involved deserve any accolade we can give them. We will ensure we will fight for whatever PPE they need to keep our health services going.

I join Deputy Michael Healy-Rae in raising the home help service. Those Deputies who were in the last Dáil will recall that day after day, I raised the need for home help services to enable people to stay in their homes for as long as possible. I assure the Minister that anyone in County Kerry who receives home help had to fight to get it. It is not the case that some of those who get this help should not be getting it. They are entitled to it and they have it. I ask the Minister to let them continue to get it. It is a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. If these people do not have home help workers coming to see them, they could die of other causes in their own homes. I beg the Government to do something to ensure there is a change in the current approach. It is valuable for us to be able to come in here today to raise this issue, which is so important for elderly people around County Kerry. I would like to mention as another example of the importance of this issue the case of 72 year old man who went into a shop the other day and was accosted by some nosy parker who said he should not be out getting his messages. We cannot trap or isolate elderly people entirely.

I have to raise the issue of the air ambulance for the south west that was promised in the last programme for Government. It will close tomorrow evening due to funding difficulties. I contacted the office of the Minister, Deputy Harris, early in March, but I heard nothing back. I have since been in contact with the Tánaiste’s office. I beg and implore the Government to keep this vital service going. The air ambulance is vital for people who manifest with cardiac failure, stroke and various other illnesses and who are far away from where they need to go.

I thank the Government and, in particular, Dr. Tony Holohan, for the massive work they have been doing. I see that the Taoiseach thanked the Chinese for giving us the PPE stuff we need. I have to say I would thank the Chinese as well if they had kept their virus. If that had happened, we would not need the gowns and the equipment we are looking for now.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I would like to share time with Deputy Harkin.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I begin by extending my condolences to the families of the people who have passed away from the coronavirus over the last while. It is important that we should extend our sympathy to them. We should not forget those who have passed away under normal circumstances because it is not normal for their families to have to make funeral arrangements like those we have seen in recent weeks. It is difficult for families as they begin the grieving process. We should extend our sympathies to them as well.

It is vitally important that we are meeting here in the Dáil. I think we should continue to meet here. I believe we are critical workers. We have a duty to be here, to bring the concerns of

our constituents to the notice of the Minister and the Government and to bring messages back to our constituents. The vital importance of this sitting was really brought home to me when I was leaving the house at 6.30 this morning and I met a delivery man who asked me for directions to a house. Are we saying that we are more important than a delivery person, such that we can stay at home and look after ourselves but they cannot do so? Should we expect them to go out and put themselves at risk? There is no doubt that there is a potential risk involved in us being here. That is what we are here for. It is vitally important that we are here to convey our message and have our say. That role should not be underestimated and should not decrease through this crisis. It should be increased and enhanced because we have an important message to deliver.

The Minister said there were numerous ways to pass on messages and information. We have Skype messages, WhatsApp and so on. I cannot remember the names of them all but I have used a few of them. They are useful and important and one gets information from them. However, information does not come back. It is like talking into a vacuum. We had a meeting last Wednesday. We got feedback about issues that we raised the following Tuesday afternoon. That does not make sense. I accept that people are under pressure. There is no doubt about that. These are exceptional circumstances. However, we are working under pressure too and trying to keep people up to date on what is happening, but we cannot get the necessary information. That makes it even more important for us to be here and the process to continue.

Maybe the Minister and the Government will give proper information. I am sorry that the Minister has left the Chamber. The information he gave in his speech is different from what we got in a briefing on Skype yesterday. What is the story? The Government seems to be intent on conveying a good message all the time. Irish people are mature enough to deal with messages they need to deal with and to hear how things actually are, rather than how we would like them to be. It is important for people to have the full message and the right story.

Mental health services in Donegal are being put on the back burner according to members of staff to whom I have spoken. I raised this issue with the health team. Mental health is critical, now more than ever. It should be maintained and staff should be working harder to maintain mental health because that will be important throughout this period of isolation. I call on the Minister to make sure that the HSE in the north west maintains that service.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I am truly sorry for all those families who have lost loved ones due to Covid-19. I know all Deputies share that sentiment. I send our best wishes to those who are ill right now. As many Deputies have said, it is great to see Dr. Tony Holohan back at his desk. It gives us confidence.

I am annoyed by an earlier comment. This is not a Chinese virus. It is a virus. A virus knows no borders. Those comments are inappropriate in this House and anywhere else.

We had a discussion earlier about whether we should meet here today. There are arguments on both sides. Apart from the significant issues of accountability and transparency, during a time of crisis, people need to see that systems work. So much is uncertain and they like to see some certainty. The democratic system is important. I thank the staff in Leinster House for facilitating us today because they are facilitating the democratic system. Their role today is just as important as ours.

The issues I specifically want to raise revolve around health care in congregated settings and health care and care in the home.

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Like others I will speak of home care staff, who are a vital element in dealing with this crisis. Many of these staff have seen their hours decreased from 15 or 20 hours per week to three or four hours per week but they are ineligible for any Covid-related payments because they were not working full-time. I understand that at lunchtime today the HSE issued a circular committing to pay home care providers at March levels up to 19 April, which is good, although it is a temporary measure. Other workers have three months of certainty and home care workers need this as well. Will the Minister for Health put in contingency measures to support this often invisible army of home care workers? They are critical now and they will be critical in future. They need more certainty with regard to incomes and matters such as personal protective equipment, as well as other emergency supports. Ultimately, these are the people who will help keep many older and vulnerable people out of hospital.

There is another issue with family carers. For example, if a person cares for a family member and works ten or 15 hours in a week, that person cannot cease working because of fear of bringing the virus home and how this relates to receiving a Covid-19 illness payment. Workers who have young children may be able to make that choice and receive a Covid-19 payment. I fully support the decision relating to child care but the same support must be in place for family carers, as they are protecting the elderly and helping keep people out of hospital.

My second concern relates to congregated settings, including care homes, respite centres and refugee centres. We have already seen how crucial it is that these settings are safe both for those who live and work there. We also know it is critical for the wider community because every person who becomes ill and needs a hospital bed means there are fewer available resources. This is both a private and public health matter and we must learn from our mistakes.

I have serious concerns that best practice is not being followed in refugee centres. National and social media have reported significant inadequacies in certain centres, and particularly in one in my constituency. The Department has recommended that these centres provide hand sanitisers and latex gloves but my information is that this is not happening. Residents must also be able to eat in their rooms or else meal times should be staggered. I am not sure this is happening either.

Like many others, I express my personal gratitude to those on the front line. They are our safety net and we are truly grateful to them.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** The Minister for Health departed the Chamber to attend a briefing of all party and group leaders on Covid-19. The Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht will conclude the debate for the Government.

**Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I appreciate the Acting Chairman's explanation. I thank the Deputies for their contributions. However, the Members here today who have insisted on this Dáil sitting have shown a complete disregard for our national fight to contain Covid-19. Shame on you. They have forced us to stray from home rather than stay at home, which is completely contrary to public health guidelines and nothing to do with any public representative shirking his or her responsibilities. As the Minister, Deputy Harris, said, there is no reason we could not have done this remotely. We have already seen the European Parliament achieve that. As he said, with a little ingenuity, it could be achieved. I just wanted to say that at the outset.

We are learning more about Covid-19 but there is much we do not know. In particular, we

do not know how long this public health emergency is going to last. As the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, said earlier, many lives have already been cruelly taken by this virus. I would like to express my condolences to all of those who have been bereaved. We are focused on minimising the impact of Covid-19 on our society and our economy. We have had to take a number of very serious and difficult decisions concerning our everyday activities so we can take appropriate public health measures to limit the spread and impact of the virus insofar as is possible.

The modelling work which is being done by the subgroup of the national public health emergency team has shown that the public health measures taken to date have had a very significant effect. The number of cases we have had is lower than it would be in an unmitigated epidemic. However, that is no reason to be complacent. In fact it urges us to ensure we carry on listening to the advice of our public health experts. Our efforts to mitigate the impact on everybody living in Ireland and on our economy and society must continue.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** I will allow a brief comment.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I am in the middle of speaking.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** My understanding was that the wrap-up would include answers to questions raised by the House. In the time left, will the Minister actually address any of the questions we have come here to ask?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I think the Chairman made very clear that the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, is with the Taoiseach at present-----

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Deputy Madigan has been here.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** -----and with all the leaders of Opposition parties and groups. He has been giving them a briefing on Covid-19 since about 3.30 p.m.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Is Deputy Madigan going to answer anything that has been raised?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** One speaker, please.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** As Deputy Donnelly knows, the Minister, Deputy Harris, was here. He was here when Deputy Donnelly spoke and he was here for every other speaker except for a few. I have taken notes of those concerns for him. He has taken detailed notes of all the Members' concerns and I am satisfied that he will get back to them with comprehensive responses on everything.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Is Deputy Madigan going to address them?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** It is a bit opportunistic, when the Minister is in a very important meeting-----

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I am not having a go at the Minister for Health. I am asking if a Government Minister is going to answer any of the questions raised by the Parliament.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** He will come back with answers to all the Members' concerns.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Is Deputy Madigan going to answer any of them?

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**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I can only go that far. With respect, I am not the Minister for Health and he cannot bilocate. Deputy Donnelly can appreciate that.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Deputy Madigan is not answering anything that has been raised.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I will continue with the remainder of my submission, if it is all right with the Acting Chairman.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I just wanted a clarification on that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** Deputy Madigan has a minute and a half left.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I want to acknowledge the incredible response of the staff of our public service across Departments and agencies, particularly in the health sector, but also in social welfare and other sectors. These front-line staff have stayed in their posts and have gone above and beyond what we could reasonably expect of them in making sure our public services can function to the greatest extent possible. For example, my Department has put in place a range of measures to support the arts sector during this very difficult time. I will elaborate on these tomorrow.

The changes described in the national action plan on Covid-19 are not optional changes of lifestyle. They are an absolute necessity to halt the spread of Covid-19. It is a matter for all of us to act responsibly in our day-to-day lives and listen to what our public health officials, international health organisations and trusted media tell us to do. Together we can all make a difference in the impact this virus will have on Ireland. The national public health emergency team continues to meet on a regular basis and is keeping the situation under review at all times. We can all follow the main advice from our public health experts; stay at home, avoid unnecessary travel, carry on washing hands properly and regularly with soap and water, cover the mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, and avoid touching the eyes, nose and mouth. I was interrupted, as the Acting Chairman knows, so I will finish my remarks.

I take the opportunity to thank all Members of the Oireachtas for the constructive way we have worked together in the recent past. The Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, has also acknowledged that. I urge Deputies to continue to help us to get the message out that all of us working together can do more than any of us acting individually. I would like to finish by paying tribute to our health service personnel. All of those working in the health service, on the front line of our response to Covid-19, are doing everything they can to minimise the impact of Covid-19 on our country. We should recognise and thank them for the work they are doing to protect everybody living in Ireland. I am sure Deputies will join me in expressing our deepest appreciation to them for everything they are doing.

### **Covid-19 (Social Protection): Statements**

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Over the past number of weeks, the Government has introduced unprecedented measures. It introduced public health measures which are designed to flatten the curve and slow the spread of the disease to the greatest extent possible. Those measures, although necessary, have undoubtedly had a very significant and negative effect on our economy. Therefore, we have sought to lessen the economic impact through a number of actions. These

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include new and enhanced social protection payments for workers who, through no fault of their own, find themselves without an income; wage subsidy supports for employers to help them retain workers on their payroll, even as their trading income falls away; and financial supports, including loan guarantees, for businesses to help them cope with the impact of Covid-19 on their businesses and customers. We have also taken steps to protect people who may not be able to pay their rent or have difficulties keeping up with mortgage payments.

These steps are extraordinary and come with a high financial cost but these are extraordinary times. The budgetary costs and how we might have to pay for them in the future would be a cause of significant concern but they are little compared with the nightmare that some would be living through now if the necessary actions had not been taken to protect them. Our highest protection must be that of public life and human health, preventing the spread of the virus and working to mitigate its impact on the country. This is what we must do, what we have endeavoured to do and what we will continue to do. We passed two emergency laws in the past couple of weeks. I thank all Members of the Dáil for their co-operation in passing that legislation as we faced into such a crisis.

In terms of social protection, we started by introducing an enhanced illness benefit scheme through the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020. The measures were designed to ensure that a person who is diagnosed with Covid-19 or has had to self-isolate on medical grounds has immediate access to a higher level of support. This was introduced at a rate of €305 per week. It was subsequently increased to €350 per week. In addition, we increased the qualified adult rate from €134.70 to €147 to ensure that people with two adults in a family on a standard illness benefit would also receive the rate of €350. This rate of payment also applies to citizens who are unemployed due to the Covid-19 crisis. We achieved this by the introduction of the pandemic unemployment payment which is available to all Irish-resident workers, including the self-employed, who lose their employment income due to Covid-19. All jobseekers with an adult dependant, including those already in receipt of a jobseeker payment, also benefit from the increase in the rate of the qualified adult payment. We also eliminated waiting days for illness and jobseeker payments.

As businesses closed their doors in many areas of the economy and as workers were laid off, we all agreed it was important to find a mechanism that would enable employees to maintain their links with employers. We promptly introduced an employer refund scheme and emergency legislation to put in place an enhanced support known as the temporary wage subsidy scheme. This scheme, operated by the Revenue Commissioners, will see the Government contribute to eligible firms payroll costs by paying them a wage subsidy to be passed on to the employee on a temporary basis. This is about protecting, insofar as we can, thousands of jobs that were created and maintained in recent years. When we emerge from the other side of this crisis, we hope that many employers will be able to start up from where they left off without the need to recruit new staff. From an employee perspective, they are provided with job security.

We have also taken other measures. This week we extended the fuel allowance season by four weeks to 9 May. This provides many welfare recipients, including those who may need to cocoon, with valuable support of €24.50 per week. It means that many thousands of pensioners and people with disabilities will have one less thing to worry about and they can remain safe and warm in their homes. We have also moved to a fortnightly rather than a weekly payment cycle. We have extended the period for which payments can be held at post offices to 90 days and agreed a temporary arrangement with An Post to enable nominated agents collect payments for welfare recipients where necessary.

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All these measures are designed to support the people most vulnerable to the effects of this virus to stay at home and to stay safe. They will come at a significant cost to the Exchequer. They have been implemented at pace. They are not perfect and not without risk. Removing risk is impossible given the extraordinary scale of the challenge and the speed at which it materialised. Since the introduction of the pandemic payment, in just two weeks the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has up to last Friday received and processed 389,000 claims for this payment alone. This is on top of the normal run of processing claims and payments that are made to pensioners, people with disabilities, other job seekers and one-parent families among others.

The Department has been required to develop and implement new systems to create new functions. Normally this would have taken months of coding and testing. It has also introduced new claim application and processing functions. It continues to provide ongoing communications to the public through print, broadcast and social media as well as through very busy helplines. It has reassigned thousands of staff to ensure that people's claims are processed as quickly and as accurately as possible.

The staff at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection are not immune to the virus, in terms of self-isolation, sickness and bereavement. We have asked much of all of our civil servants and throughout our public service. They have responded to that task with an incredible sense of public duty. I take this opportunity to thank them for that.

As we can all understand, responding to a challenge of this scale is not easy. There have been difficulties, but not as significant as some may have expected. The Department's focus has been on paying people promptly and paying as many eligible people as possible to ensure the State can play its role in cushioning our citizens from the devastating impact of loss of employment. The various measures outlined were introduced to protect our people.

Together we face an extraordinary challenge. In these uncertain times, given the anxiety and stress people felt over the risk to their health and to their future economic outlook, I believe it was crucial that we did all we could to reassure citizens. We acted fast so as not to create a heightened sense of fear and unease in communities. We may not have got and we did not get everything perfect, but I believe much of what we did was good. We have shown again that this country can rise to significant challenges and that its people can and do support each other at a time of great need. In doing so we have laid a strong foundation from which to recover from this crisis.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Rabbitte, who is sharing time with Deputy Cowen.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** The scale of the challenge ahead of us cannot be underestimated. We as legislators must be honest and acknowledge that it will not be easy. We will get through this if we take a whole-of-society approach. If we do not play our part, the virus will win and lives will be lost. Each person, each family in the country is making huge sacrifices. The normality we once knew may not be seen for several months. Today's live register figures are startling. Over 500,000 people are now unemployed or on some form of Covid-19 payment. This has numerous knock-on effects on people's lives and it is undoubtedly leaving many very worried about their finances. I welcome the extension to the fuel allowance, which is of great benefit to people right across the country who have found themselves cocooned. I know this was a great concern for many older constituents and it is a relief for them and one less thing to worry about. I welcome the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment and the speed at

which it is being administered. The credit is due to the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, her Department and her wider staff. They have worked phenomenally. If I was to make a suggestion, it would be that perhaps they could take some prime time slots to explain to the various sectors as to how the payment will be done and whether it can be backdated. It is only a one-page document. Ingrid Miley's presentation on the "Six One" news the other night was very well put but not everybody will have heard it. If we could run different slots for different sectors, it might help the Department and cut down the number of telephone calls.

I have been in regular contact with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to ensure childcare professionals, providers and parents have their services to return to once this over. I acknowledge the role of the Minister in supporting us in getting what was a very onerous task sorted this day last week. We got it sorted in such a way that if the providers sign up now, no parent will have to pay a fee. The staff will maintain their full salary and even part-time staff will be in receipt in the minimum of €350, as will managers. I echo the call of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, for childcare options for front-line workers to be secured. Common sense can be used here. We have thousands of childcare workers around the country who would be happy to help. Providers will know the parents who will need assistance so they assign their workers who want to help. It is important, too, that the HSE considers childcare arrangements and offers flexibility with shifts when drawing up rotas.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I offer my condolences and those of my constituents to the families of those who have died as a result of Covid-19. As other speakers mentioned, families are also encountering very difficult circumstances as they bury their loved ones during this time. I record my appreciation, thanks and support for healthcare workers, emergency workers, essential workers and indeed the patriots who are the citizens at home today, playing an equally important role. We should also acknowledge and respect the leadership and decision-making of the Government. Its empathy and understanding and the way in which it has delivered its views, thoughts and advices have ensured that those same advices are adhered to. That has resulted in the progress that we have seen to date by virtue of an increase of only 10% to 15% in the number of positive cases, rather than the 30% we had feared some weeks ago.

It is imperative in the eye of this crisis that the Government throws all the necessary resources possible at the public health service and the Departments of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and Business, Enterprise and Innovation. Today's live register is a sobering vista for us, telling us that this crisis far outweighs the impact of the banking crisis. The spend to date of €6.7 billion does not account for all that has been or is in the process of being spent. The Exchequer returns today show revenues are down 20%. These are only early indications of the task that is and will be at hand.

In response to the murmurings of the Minister, Deputy Madigan, I was quite surprised at a Minister serving at the behest of the President's right to appoint a Government, in the absence of the Dáil doing so, suggesting we should somehow be ashamed of our actions today. Like the other Members present, I am here to represent the interests of those who give us the privilege of representing them. We are here at the bequest of the Business Committee, on which all Members are represented. It has laid out the schedule for the day. The duty of the Minister of State in question, as a representative of the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, was to respond to the queries, thoughts and worries of Deputies who are passing on the representations of their constituents. I hope there is no further commentary of that nature in the course of this debate or, indeed, this crisis. This Dáil does not have the level of transparency or accountability that Fianna Fáil would like it to have. As if the debacle of the constitutional crisis created by the

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Seanad election is not enough, the message relayed today to the Business Committee is a message to those with the capacity to prepare to chart a recovery and ensure continued and effective management of this public health crisis that they must work tooth and nail, utilising whatever communication process they can devise, in order to be in a position to elect a Taoiseach and put in place a stable Government that can make the necessary, right and proper decisions for the people who elected us.

On the fuel allowance, I welcome the fact that the Minister and the Government have acquiesced to many of the recommendations made by Fianna Fáil and others. I have recently received representations from my constituents on the fuel allowance. Many who receive it may not be able to buy briquettes. The new licensing laws associated with the harvesting of peat, initiated as a result of the decision of the High Court last September further to the statutory instruments produced by the Government last January, proved ineffective and it was necessary for the Government to prepare legislation to counteract that. As the Government failed to do so, it was necessary to apply to An Bord Pleanála for a licence for such work. In its wisdom, An Bord Pleanála decided to postpone a decision on that application until May. However, harvesting will be ineffectual at that time. The postponement threatens 800 jobs, which comes on top of the terrible live register figures published today. In addition, it may compromise the security of energy provision in the State at a time of crisis. It has the potential to close the power stations in Shannonbridge, Lanesborough and Edenderry far sooner than the end of the year. Can the emergency powers to which reference was made be used effectively in this situation, given its impact on the security of energy provision in a crisis? Is such power vested in the legislation that was recently passed? If it is not, that is another reason why there must be a functioning Government in place to bring forward legislation to respond to issues such as this which are arising in the course of the crisis. Rather than take a cheap pop at those of us who are here trying to get answers in a time when we do not have the level of transparency or accountability associated with a functioning Dáil, I hope that the Minister who responds on this issue will address this issue. Does the Minister with responsibility for this matter have the power to take action to address it? It was possible to sidestep certain legislation in respect of restaurants and takeaways, either through its being disregarded or the provision of emergency powers. I hope the Minister will respond to my simple question. It is one of many that Fianna Fáil will relay to the Government in writing in the hope that a response will be forthcoming. I hope that, as there is no opportunity for Deputies to table parliamentary questions as would be done in the normal course, the Government will respond to our questions in good faith.

**Deputy John Brady:** I am sharing time with Deputy Carthy. I offer my condolences to the friends and families of all those who have unfortunately passed away due to the Covid-19 pandemic. My thoughts are with them all. It is a difficult time for many families that have had their lives turned upside down as a result of the health crisis we are experiencing. Many families are experiencing serious financial difficulties as a result of family members becoming unemployed or being put on the wage subsidy scheme. It is at times such as this the safety net of our social protection system is most needed.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the essential frontline workers who are working throughout this crisis to keep us safe and to ensure other essential services can continue. That includes all of the staff in the Intreo offices across the State who have received and processed more than 389,000 applications for the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. Well done to them and I thank each and every one of the members of staff in those offices.

People need clear answers to the many questions they have. Along with other Deputies, I

am inundated with questions and it is critical that answers are given to these questions so they get the information they need quickly. Hopefully, today's sitting will give us an opportunity to get some of the answers we so desperately need.

On Tuesday, some 283,000 people received the PUP flat rate payment of €350. Many of these people had applied for this payment several weeks ago and had been living hand to mouth in the interim, while they waited on this critical payment to come. It was not backdated as people had expected. Will this payment be backdated and when can people expect to receive that payment? I also want to welcome the temporary wage subsidy scheme. However, in its current design, the scheme is flawed and requires immediate reform. Employers that sign up are required to pay their employees no more than 70% of their net weekly wages, which for many is less than the €350 they would receive from the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment. Anyone with a salary of less than €30,000 will receive less under the wage subsidy scheme than they would from the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment. For a full-time worker on the minimum wage, this subsidy will provide nearly €100 less than the PUP. The wage subsidy scheme needs to be reformed by ensuring that €350 is the minimum payment employees receive through the temporary wage subsidy scheme. Will the Minister immediately look at that scheme and reform it to ensure workers will receive a minimum payment of €350?

The PUP is a working age payment and it is therefore causing major difficulties for those outside the age eligibility criteria of 18 to 66. Many people under the age of 18 and over the age of 66, who are in employment, unfortunately have seen that employment cease and they are not eligible for the PUP. This includes young apprentices, who can start their apprenticeships from the age of 16, for example. It also includes many of those over the age of 66, who are experiencing serious financial difficulties because they cannot access this payment. Will the Minister commit to extending the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment support to certain people under the age of 18 who have lost full-time employment? Will the Minister look at the issue of those over the age of 66, many of whom, as I have pointed out, are experiencing serious financial hardship during this pandemic?

This crisis has caused major concern for many renters who have lost their jobs or are working reduced hours. I welcome the important changes that have been made to accessing the rent supplement to ensure people can pay their rents and keep roofs over their heads. Can the Minister outline the revised criteria for people to apply for rent supplement? I am aware that there was a 23-page application form, which has been reduced to an eight-page form. However, there also has been a change in the criteria. Can the Minister outline the changed criteria and can he forward to me the circular that was issued to Intreo offices which outlines those changes?

Once a child maintenance order is in place, rent supplement and other social welfare payments such as the one parent family payment are reduced, regardless of whether maintenance is paid. Maintenance is treated as income and calculated as means. Many parents are not receiving any maintenance due to non-custodial parents being made unemployed or their hours being reduced. One-parent families are among the most at risk of poverty. There must be a simple process for those whose maintenance is not being paid to ensure that social welfare payments can be increased. Providing evidence or proof of non-payments is time consuming and these people cannot afford to wait. What process is in place for people in these circumstances? Will the Minister commit to changing the process around the provision of evidence?

In recent days, Dublin Bus staff are among workers who have been forced to take annual leave. This is illegal as it contravenes the Organisation of Working Time Act which states that

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employers must give workers at least one month's notice if they are directing them to take leave and that any such move requires consultation with the workers or their union. It should take into account a worker's ability to gain necessary rest and recreation. Does the Minister believe that forcing workers to take annual leave is illegal? Will the Minister ensure that additional resources are put into the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, to quickly deal with such situations and where complaints are made?

In 2014, the bereavement grant, a one-off payment of €850, for families was abolished. We need to put in place such a payment for those who lose loved ones as a result of Covid-19, at a rate of around €1,500. I ask that the Minister would put in place such a payment to help people who are going through an horrific time, in order to ease the financial burden and other pressures.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank the staff in the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and in Revenue who are dealing with the unprecedented influx of applications for new schemes in difficult circumstances, and all our public servants working at this time. Those who have had reasons to claim for these new schemes, whether it is workers applying for the pandemic unemployment payment or businesses accessing the wage subsidy scheme, are going through a traumatic time. As well as concern for the well being of their families, which we all share, they are also concerned about whether their jobs will return, about how long the crisis will last and whether they can withstand the financial cost of the restrictions. These people are livid that the banks thought this week was appropriate to deduct exorbitant fees from their customers' accounts. This House should be clear that these charges should be stopped and that the money deducted this week be returned.

Everyone understands that the Government cannot address all their concerns, but they expect that the Government will recognise the contribution they have made to our society and the role they will play in any economic recovery that follows. In that context, I raise a cohort of workers who have been abandoned by the Government measures, namely those who work in this State, paying taxes and PRSI here, but who happen to live on the other side of the Border. That affects thousands of workers in my constituency. Almost every business in County Monaghan has two sets of workers, one able to draw down the pandemic unemployment supports and those living a few miles away who cannot. EU rules state that cross-border workers who are made partially or intermittently unemployed should be entitled to this support in their State of employment. Anyone who has lost his or her job as a result of the pandemic falls under that category. This is an emergency. Exceptional measures are required and, therefore, I ask the Minister whether he will commit to reviewing that proviso to ensure that all workers who have contributed to this State's finances and who will be pivotal to the economic recovery we hope will follow, particularly in the Border region, are supported during this time.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** When I spent time some years ago on Oileán Chléire, off the coast of west Cork, I saw a great summer thunderstorm sweeping in off the ocean. As it gobbled up Fastnet Rock the windows and doors across the island were pulled to and made secure and livestock huddled into what shelter they could find. Everybody prepared as best they could for the storm to make landfall. I get the same sense here today, as we await the surge. Our health-care workers are the lighthouse keepers who are already feeling the brunt of that storm, with worse to come. Today we must offer them our gratitude and every last support the State can give them to help them weather this crisis.

Meanwhile, here on the island we must make the best preparations we can. I commend again the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection and her Department officials

who have put together a sweeping range of measures. As the Minister acknowledged, they are not perfect but they are very good considering the timeframe in which they were constructed. The pandemic unemployment payment is providing some measure of comfort to people who have lost their jobs owing to the outbreak. Likewise, the temporary wage subsidy scheme is allowing businesses to retain employees in anticipation of better days ahead.

However, as is understandably the case with measures so quickly designed in reaction to an unprecedented crisis, there are gaps in provision and areas where people have fallen between the cracks. To give the Minister and her officials their due, they have in most cases reacted quickly to the shortcomings in the scheme and have given the concerns raised by Opposition spokespersons a fair hearing when we have been given the chance to have input. There remain areas of shortcoming within the scheme and cohorts whose needs still have to be met. I hope the Department will remain flexible in addressing those in need.

Like my colleague in Sinn Féin, I have had many representations from people who fall outside the range of the pandemic unemployment payment, such as apprentices under 18 years of age or older citizens who might be supplementing their pension provisions with part-time work. While I accept the principle of a working age payment and why age limits might apply, that is cold comfort to those who have been excluded, be they aged 17 or 70. I hope the Department can find a way to help these people in the weeks ahead.

Likewise, many in our communities may find it difficult to demonstrate a loss of income. They include mothers returning from periods of unpaid maternity leave or members of our arts communities who may work from project to project, commission to commission or gig to gig. There are workers on low-hour contracts who make the bulk of their income in overtime and now find themselves reduced to 70% of their minimum contracted hours under the temporary wage subsidy scheme. This represents a serious loss of income.

Others may continue to be employed but may wish to self-isolate or cocoon themselves. I have been contacted by people with underlying conditions which make them especially vulnerable to Covid-19, be that asthma, diabetes or heart conditions, or who are living with elderly or infirm relatives and are terrified of the consequences of contracting the virus. They must be supported in their decision to temporarily step out of the workforce. I welcome the extension of the Covid-19 payment to these citizens, but I note it is only payable for a two-week period. This should be extended in cases where the person in question can certify their vulnerability to the infection. I also strongly recommend that the Government provide certainty to people hoping to avail of this payment that their employers will allow them to take this leave and that their jobs will be there for them when they decide to come back.

In fact, there is a job of work to be done to protect all employees who are still at work at this time and to protect the State from spurious claims on the public purse. While the overwhelming response of people in Ireland to the outbreak of Covid-19 has been one of social solidarity, there will always be unscrupulous people who will spot an opportunity in a crisis. Like many others here, I have heard whispers about employers who have sought to introduce rationalisation measures during this period and have laid off higher-paid employees while retaining younger staff on the temporary wage subsidy scheme. I have also heard of companies which hope to leverage the 70% wage subsidy scheme to secure cheap labour while keeping their doors open for business. This is, I am sure, a tiny minority, but I urge the Minister to put in place structures that would allow employees to report any abuse of the provisions put in place during this period of uncertainty.

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I must again emphasise, as I did two weeks ago in this Chamber, the needs of some of our more marginalised communities. We are hearing reports of illness establishing a foothold in the Traveller community and in direct provision centres. We must begin to provide people in these settings the opportunity to self isolate effectively in order to stem the spread of the virus in what are often crowded settings. I would include our prison population and those in emergency accommodation in this cohort. It will be a measure of our society how well we look after our most vulnerable in this period. While we wait for the storm to come it may seem too early to begin to think about a time when the sky is clear again. Right now our citizens and front-line workers in particular are living day to day, hour to hour and coping to the best of their ability. I commend them. I am very proud of how we as a nation have risen to this challenge but there must also be a role for us as elected representatives to look beyond the surge to how we rebuild an economy and society after a sudden shock not seen in our lifetimes. Our Uachtarán has argued that the reaction to the Covid-19 crisis has made an unanswerable case for universal basic services and I agree with him. It has also shown the merits and possibilities of a universal basic income, something that the pandemic unemployment payment comes very close to modelling. In responding to this tsunami, listening to and following the best scientific evidence and the advice of experts, we have shown how we might act to combat that more slow but ultimately more devastating inundation of climate change and biodiversity collapse that poses a more deadly threat to this planet than even this pandemic.

If social protection is about the care of individuals in our society it must also be about the protection of our society as a whole. In a parliamentary democracy the work of parliament is paramount. The Dáil must sit. When my next door neighbour is asked to go to her job as a carer each day, when my former student turns up to work at a shop counter each day, can I, as a Teachta Dála really sit at home and identify myself as a non-essential worker? The Dáil must sit. I acknowledge that today's sitting carries a risk of spreading the virus, not just for the Deputies in the Chamber but the kitchen staff, the ushers and all the ancillary staff who stand behind the work of this Chamber. We are open to new ways of working but against the backdrop of extraordinary legislation passed in the last month, with parliamentary questions suspended, briefings for party spokespersons intermittent and dwindling, the need for parliamentary oversight and scrutiny has never been more acute. However it sits, however we use the new technologies available to us, the Dáil must sit. We have learnt that in times of crisis it is not the markets we turn to for help but each other. Mar a dúradh anseo cheana, ar deireadh thiar thall, is ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** On behalf of the Social Democrats I extend deepest sympathies to those who have lost their lives through Covid-19 and our endless thanks to those who continue to put themselves in the front line and in harm's way. It is often said that a crisis makes us focus on what is really important. This crisis has shown us that it is not full employment alone that we must crave. The focus must be on the nature of our work. It must be secure and pay appropriately. The crisis has shown us what work we cannot live without, waste collectors, cleaners, nurses and retail staff. It has not gone unnoticed that those we pay the least are those who have mattered most to society during this crisis. It has shown us that a health care system based on need rather than ability to pay is non-negotiable. It allowed politicians in this Chamber *en masse* to recognise that public good in our Constitution does in fact allow a rent freeze. It has proved that childcare is beyond unaffordable. Our childcare system is widely in need of reform. Our childcare workers, so highly trained but poorly paid, should be paid directly by the State. There is the old conservative trope that the problem with socialism is that eventually you run out of other people's money. This crisis has proved to us that unchecked capitalism cannot sur-

vive without State intervention and this is absolutely the time for us to begin the conversation of how we keep our newly acquired public healthcare, public childcare and a security of tenure that has been a lifeblood for so many families during this period of crisis. Health, housing and childcare, for so long the big three insoluble issues, have improved drastically in a very short space of time, proving that the political leadership which had been needed for so long was in fact lacking. The job of those of us in this Chamber who view ourselves as progressive is to ensure these disaster measures, which have been introduced to preserve basic decency in many families throughout Ireland, are there when this disaster abates. We are still failing in some areas. This sitting gives us an opportunity to highlight some of the groups that are being left behind and some of the gaps that still exist in our social protection structures, notwithstanding the areas in which we have stepped up enormously in recent weeks. I would like to respond to the unfortunate comments made by a Minister a short period of time ago by saying I will accept no shame for representing my constituents when I am called to do so in this House.

I would like to ask a number of direct questions. The Minister might not have the answers to them today, but I would appreciate it if he could get the answers to them shortly. My first question relates to people whose fuel allowances are paid in two lump sums. How and when will they get their extra weeks? We should praise those who are staffing the helplines at present. Those helplines are inadequately staffed, however. Those who are looking to avail of them are finding themselves waiting all day for responses to their queries. I think we need to step up the helplines by improving staffing levels, while continuing to extend immense goodwill to those who are currently staffing them.

We have already heard about the plight of part-time employees under the age of 18 who have been let go. We need to afford some degree of this pandemic payment to such people, many of whom live in low-income households. They have been stepping up to provide an extra source of security, but that has now been removed. They were using this money to pay for extra data or for Netflix, which many people are relying on at present. Now that this income is gone, the burden will be felt in many households. People in precarious employment who had two part-time jobs, but have lost one of those jobs, have asked me to highlight the fact that they are ineligible for the pandemic payment. We need to step up and offer some degree of payment to people who have lost one of their incomes.

Another important issue that has been raised in recent days needs to be resolved. Pregnant women who have been let go because of Covid-19 and are within 16 weeks of their due date must apply for maternity benefit. Women are absolutely entitled to 26 weeks of maternity leave. There needs to be clarity about whether some women who are forced to start their maternity leave six weeks early will get just ten weeks of maternity leave after they give birth. They might get even less maternity leave if they give birth after their due date. Clarity is urgently needed in this regard.

This debate affords us an opportunity to give a voice to those who are voiceless at this time. Earlier this week, dozens of specialists across the fields of health systems, public health, social policy, law, human rights, migration and equality activism wrote to the Government to express concern that the State is continuing to require large numbers of people who are seeking international protection to live in shared bedrooms and to share sanitary and eating facilities within the direct provision system, thereby preventing many people in that system from socially distancing in accordance with Government advice. They want to avoid contracting Covid-19 and passing the virus to others. It is absolutely crucial that individuals living within direct provision are included within the Government's approach to safeguarding public health at this worrying time.

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I am reminded of the Minister for Health's comment a couple of weeks ago that a pandemic affords no opportunity for a double-tier health service. I would argue strongly that during a time of pandemic, we simply cannot continue with a system of incarceration.

We are already seeing conversations in some quarters about how we will pay in the long term for the impacts of Covid-19. Although our political climate has changed utterly, I fear that our future political leadership will not change. Austerity will potentially be on the cards once more, perhaps with another name. We will fight this every step of the way. As someone who was politicised by austerity, and who comes from an area of Dublin that was utterly decimated by it, I believe now is the time to start ensuring we never go back there. On several occasions over the last couple of weeks, I have heard people in senior positions argue in public commentary that hard decisions will have to be made in the future. It seems to me that "hard decisions" is a euphemism for what happened between 2011 and 2016, when "hard decisions" were cited as a reason for further punishing or devaluing the role played by lone parents in our society, for destroying the community development sector and for eroding public services. If such "hard decisions" are being referred to again, we will fight them every step of the way, as we should.

The ESRI's current quarterly economic commentary, which was published this week, contains some fairly stark predictions. The predictions show that a 7% fall in GDP, a doubling of unemployment to 12.6% and a rise in the debt to GDP ratio of 4.3% are possible. There will be limits to the choices that we take next. We have already accepted, quite spectacularly, that our current social welfare rates were not good enough to live on. It will be hard to roll this back. It has been proven to us just how much Airbnb was affecting our housing stock. This proof cannot be unseen. After our experience of a single tier health service that works for us when we need it, we will not tolerate going back to the old regime of waiting lists for those who cannot pay. While it is true that our old policies had a cost - a low tax base, for example, has a cost and a two tier health service is expensive to run - it is clear that returning to our old spending levels may not be instantaneously possible.

Where does this leave us? A recession caused by a lockdown aside, we all agree that Sláinte-care on speed or our new income supports that actually support people when they most need support, are not possible given our current tax base. One hard decision that might need to be made is that the tax cuts proposed just a short time ago by the three medium-sized parties, shamefully in my view, must be taken off the table. It is no longer acceptable to gamble with our public services and the State's ability to provide a safety net when we need it most. Alongside this, it is time for everyone to pay their fair share of tax. When it comes to corporation tax, this is a republic and the message simply has to get through that if a company arrives here to do business and it is working out well, we expect that business to contribute. Donning the green jersey in this case means a commitment to investing in our vital social infrastructure, which is needed by all political parties. Now that we have learned what is truly important and how quickly those elected to this House can respond, there is no going back.

I want to address entrenched educational inequalities that will be exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a fear among many working in DEIS schools that the current system, where DEIS students are working from home, will entrench the inequality that already exists. The current public narrative is focused mainly on the digital divide. Broader divisions already existed. For many students, not only is there a digital divide when trying to study for the leaving certificate, but they do not even have a table at home on which to work. There is also an inequality with regard to peace and quiet in that many students cannot simply close the door and study for their leaving certificate. This needs to be factored into considerations of how we

approach these difficult decisions about the leaving certificate. We need to develop a digital fund to provide supports for students. We need to help DEIS schools. There are other factors. Students undertaking the leaving certificate applied are being completely lost in this narrative. Their leaving certificate and education are as important as those of anybody else. I ask that these decisions and factors are taken into consideration urgently.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies Barry and Gino Kenny are sharing time.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** It is nice to see you again, a Cheann Comhairle. I am sure there has been a sense of the surreal among people for the past four weeks. That also applies to the proceedings today and with regard to what is happening to people's well-being and health. In a matter of weeks, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs, incomes and livelihoods. The sense of insecurity we are experiencing has not been seen for generations. Today's figures make for sombre reading. Some 500,000 people are now on the live register, an increase of 13% since 1 January. That figure is incredible and I do not think anybody could have predicted the number of job losses in that period. Even more sombre are figures from the United States today where some 6.6 million people have filed for unemployment benefits in the past week. We are entering the vortex of an economic depression that the world has never seen. That is not being alarmist. It is probably what we are facing. A vast number of people will be affected by this pandemic. Job losses will be temporary for most. We must be upfront with people. Some people will lose their jobs permanently. Many people are accessing social welfare for the first time in their working lives. As I indicated, hundreds of thousands of people accessed social welfare over the past couple of weeks, specifically those taking the Covid-19 payment, and we must commend the workers who processed all those claims in the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. They have done a fantastic job in an unprecedented and unbelievable environment.

I have a series of questions, although they may not come under the remit of the Minister in the Chamber. Will the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection consider a universal payment of €350 for all workers who have lost income in the past number of weeks? There are many anomalies with the Covid-19 payment, including those affecting people who are over 66, people working in the gig economy and students on work study visas who had not started before the relevant date. They do not get the €350 payment because they are out of the bracket. Is there a provision in the Department for a solidarity payment, perhaps, for people on disability or illness benefit in this period? Is there a special provision of rent allowance for people who are unable to meet their rent? Is there any provision for reward payments for front-line workers in the public health system?

My final points relate to the wage subsidy scheme and an anomaly therein. Anybody earning over €586 per week should get €410 in the wage subsidy scheme. They are currently only getting €350 and are therefore losing out with this anomaly. The information I have indicates this could be changed through a ministerial order. Would the Department consider it appropriate to change this anomaly in the wage subsidy scheme by ministerial order? It relates to people earning just over €580. Does it make sense?

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I did not intend to return to this subject but I have no real alternative, given the comments of the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Josepha Madigan. I made the point earlier that democracy is more important in the middle of a national emergency than it is in normal times. Deputy Boyd Barrett gave examples from the World Health Organization to back up that point. Is it the case that a couple of hours before the Min-

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ister told those of us who insisted on today's sitting that we should be ashamed of ourselves there was a briefing for the press in the Department of Finance, attended by that Minister, where journalists had to submit their questions for reply in advance, where the journalists who were present were not allowed to submit questions at that time and where material was handed out by Department of Finance officials-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is not strictly relevant to our reasons for being here. We are speaking about the social protection elements of the Covid-19 arrangements. What goes on in press conferences has nothing to do with the business we are here to transact.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** The business we are here to transact requires openness and transparency. I am concerned that if a press conference was held this morning with material handed out by officials and where no questions were allowed from journalists-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** With the greatest respect to the Deputy, we must transact our business in this Chamber around the areas of our responsibility. What transpires at press conferences is not our responsibility.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I conclude on the matter by saying the two issues go hand in hand. Whether it met remotely or there was a sitting in this Chamber, there had to be a session of the Dáil this week. We must see an end to this type of approach. This must be open and transparent. I will go on with my points about social protection.

The drivers at Dublin Bus have been instructed to take a portion of their annual leave in the coming weeks. These drivers are front-line workers. Every day they drive people to essential workplaces, including taking health service staff to and from our hospitals. Their service has been rewarded with a kick in the teeth. Dublin Bus has asked them to use up ten days of their annual leave in the next ten weeks, a move which may very well be illegal. This is an important test case where the social protection of our people is concerned. In the great recession of 2008, employers and the Government attempted to place the burden of the crisis on the shoulders of working people from the get-go. That must not be allowed to happen this time. What is being attempted by Dublin Bus must be resisted and stopped, not only in the interests of the Dublin Bus workers but also in the interests of every working person in this country.

I raise the issue of unscrupulous employers who are cheating their workers on the matter of the wage subsidy scheme. I am aware of a construction company which employs workers on the site of one of the State's major multinational companies and is forcing its workers to take annual leave while the scheme is in operation. I am also aware of a major chain of coffee shops which is forcing its staff to do the same. I could give other examples. This is appearing on the radar of several Deputies here. It needs to be tackled.

I will conclude by raising the issue of the ban on making Covid-19 payments to workers under the age of 18. During the week, I spoke to the mother of a 16 year old. Her son worked as an apprentice at a joinery just outside Cork city. Before all this happened, he was earning €250 a week as an apprentice. He paid universal social charge out of his pay packet every week. At home, he gave money to his mother and assisted in paying the mortgage. In fact, the mortgage payments could only be made on that basis. He has now been laid off. Being under the age of 18, he cannot claim the Covid-19 payment. His mother, of course, cannot claim the children's allowance for him. Her son is being discriminated against on the grounds of his age. That is wrong. A worker is a worker, irrespective of age. The ban on making Covid-19 payments to

workers aged under 18 should be ended.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** The measure of support put in place by the Government to help Irish people get through the Covid-19 crisis is unparalleled in the history of the State. The speed with which these measures were introduced is to be applauded. The response has been one of gratitude and relief. There is a real awareness among Irish people that citizens of many other countries do not have governments that are quite as willing or quick to help them at this time.

However, when new measures are introduced there can never be a one-size-fits-all package. Anomalies are to be expected. There will always be those who, due to their unique circumstances, may not initially appear to meet the specific criteria. There are borderline cases. My office has received numerous queries on cases where the applicants have been refused assistance. The people involved are genuinely in need of financial support and desperately need to have their specific cases examined. I am aware of the huge volume of work taking place in departmental offices at this time. Staff are snowed under with work. I place on the record my appreciation and thanks to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, which assists my office and other Members of this House on a daily basis with courtesy and co-operation.

I request that Department officials establish a group to examine all appeals for payments and deal with them expeditiously. We need a rapid appeals process to help identify genuine cases where applications may have fallen through the cracks.

The volume of applications for financial assistance over the past two weeks is unprecedented. It is inevitable that given this enormous volume of applications some people in genuine need of help may slip through the net. This cohort of people is deserving of our immediate attention and I am calling on the Department to respond to this need. I compliment the former Minister, Regina Doherty, and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection on the outstanding work they have done to help those in unexpected need at this time.

As health is also on today's agenda, I wish to raise my serious concern in respect of the delayed support by the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, and the Health Service Executive, HSE, to private nursing homes across Tipperary. One of the chinks in our response to Covid-19 is the delay in intervention to assist nursing homes. Nursing homes have the explosive potential to spread the virus. In other countries, nursing homes and similar residential settings have become the weakest link in the chain in efforts to stop the spread of Covid-19. We cannot allow this to happen in Ireland.

I have been contacted by the management of nursing homes in Tipperary who are extremely worried about their ability to contain and cope with this virus. Some nursing homes across the country have been badly hit by the virus. I am aware of the very serious threat that exists already within a number of nursing homes. I am personally aware of residential units where residents are ill and a large number of staff, including nurses, health care assistants, catering and housekeeping staff and the maintenance teams, are unable to report for work as they are self-isolating. To avoid closure of these facilities, it is imperative that the HSE steps in to provide nursing and support staff. Also, there is an alarming lack of personal protective equipment available to nursing homes. They must receive a guaranteed supply of personal protective equipment. Staff must be protected. This needs to be addressed urgently.

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Nursing homes are the places many of the most vulnerable people in our communities call home. They cannot be allowed to become dangerous places to live or work. Every possible effort must be made to source additional staff for nursing homes to cover for those lost through illness. If this does not happen, staff will refuse to go to work. They will refuse to risk their health or the health of their families. If this were to happen, nursing homes would have no alternative but to close and the consequences of this for our elderly and vulnerable people is unimaginable.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I welcome the timely and significant measures that have been introduced by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to soften the financial blow of this crisis across the country. However, my role here this afternoon is to highlight a particular anomaly that has been mentioned previously. There is a cohort of people who appear to have been forgotten, namely, people over the age of 66 who had been working part-time or full-time and are now unemployed as a result of this crisis but are not entitled to the pandemic unemployment payment. For me, this is unacceptable for three reasons. First, we have been told that the pandemic unemployment payment is payable to all workers regardless of whether they are part-time or full-time, employed or self-employed but it appears that this particular cohort has been completely forgotten. Second, this group of workers is doing precisely as they have been told to do in that they have been advised and encouraged by the State to work into their late 60s to flatten the pension curve. However, at the first opportunity the State has turned its back on these people, leaving them at a disadvantage when they are most in need. Third, there are many reasons people would work into their late 60s but by far and away the dominant factor is that people need extra income. The denial of the pandemic unemployment payment to this cohort of workers is causing significant and unnecessary hardship across the country. I could speak about this issue for longer than the three minutes I have remaining but I do not need to do so because the case is so compelling it speaks for itself. I would like the Minister to indicate that she will review and hopefully overturn this anomaly at her earliest convenience. The virus does not discriminate on grounds of age, nor should we.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. Quality, not quantity, is something that is very important in life.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about a few anomalies. I thank the Government for many of the measures it has brought in, but we need to trim up a few things to make it equal for people who are not being catered for.

Kerry, Killarney in particular, is basically a tourist county. Many seasonal workers who traditionally work from the start of March until the end of October are missing out on the Covid-19 payment. In recent days the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, suggested that they were included, but I do not think they are included because the phone is redlined at home with people saying they are not being considered. If it were not for the coronavirus, they would be all working now. This is when they would be making their few bob to keep them going for the year. They are dependent on the work from March to October to keep them going. I am asking the Minister to see if she can do something for the people who have been left behind because it is just not fair.

As Deputy Berry said, there are people over the age of 66 who may be on a pension but for various reasons, including money they may have borrowed, still continue to work. At present they are getting a small payment of about €200. I am asking the Minister in these times to bring their payment up to €350. I am not asking for the €350 on top of their pension, but at least to bring it up €350 to give them some parity. The Government should do the best it can and oper-

ate as fair as it can.

We all, including the Minister, know that in the past 12 months farmers have been hitting very hard times with very low financial returns. It is worse than ever. I do not honestly know how they will continue. I know that some of them have applied for the Covid-19 payment. I do not know whether they will get it. I am depending on the Government to ensure they do. Pressure on health, including mental health, is a serious matter to which we must attend, but people can only take so much. The farmers have taken a lot over the past year and a half from the factories and with other things that have happened in their sector. Bad weather does not seem to manifest itself up here on the eastern side of the country at all. It has been pouring in the west of Ireland since last August until very recently. Farmers are depressed and very downtrodden at present. There are many poor farmers out there and I ask the Minister to look sympathetically on those who apply for the Covid-19 payment.

We are hearing that the banks are offering people a three-month holiday on loan payments. I am also hearing a worrying thing about the banks. They want the interest before the crisis finishes or, at the latest, when people start paying back again. They are saying the principal can be paid back at the end but they are suggesting that the interest on the principal that is being forgone for three months will have to be paid up when people start paying back again. That will drive many people under and I am asking the Government to talk to these banks. It has a very sizeable share in Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish Banks. We lost so many companies and people between 2008 and 2012 and we cannot afford to lose any more.

There is another issue. The phone is reddened at home about it. It is students who have paid their rent up-front in universities and colleges around the country. I have no problem in the world in naming the campus in the University of Limerick. They are refusing to pay back the money that has been paid up-front to the end of May. It would be €1,000 or up to €1,500 in some cases. These universities are saving now on fuel, heating, lighting and refuse collection because there will be practically no students there. There may be a few from abroad, a very small number, who are staying there but aside from all that, these campuses should be giving back the rent to the parents and students involved. These people at home who are looking for the money back have no work. All they have now if they can get it is the €350 for each person who was working, and in many cases there was only one person working. It is very unfair and it is setting a very bad example when the national universities will not pay back this money. How can we expect private landlords, who are also in the frame and are not paying back, to behave? I am very sorry they are not because they are hurting honest, good-living, hard-working people who do not have a leprechaun behind them or a gold mine. They need their money back to give them a chance to start again next September or October, hoping that we start again. It is very unfair to hold on to money that is not being used. The Minister and Government have us told that anyone with a mortgage or loan will get a chance to pay it back. Those people, if they do have loans or mortgages, are going to get a chance and they will not have to pay until a certain time, until the economy starts rolling again. These parents and students need to get their money back as soon as possible.

We are in a time of crisis. We must all pull together. Something that I did not get to mention in respect of the testing is that we need a test place in Killarney. The old St. Finan's Hospital has a grand way in and a grand way out. A test centre could be set up there to cater for an area within a 25 mile radius, including Killarney, east Kerry and even into north-west Cork, as well as down to Kenmare and Sneem. Those people are very far away from Tralee and I am asking the Government to try to set up a centre there.

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People are asking why it is taking so long to get tested. That is a worry. I had a couple waiting practically ten days before they were called. The other problem is that we are waiting too long for the test results to come back. I am not giving out or scolding. Rather, I am asking the Government to do what it can do to ensure something positive happens in this regard.

The issue of nursing homes was raised. I have been contacted by nursing homes that are having difficulty maintaining staff numbers. They cannot recruit staff in the same manner as the HSE. I ask the Government to keep a watch on nursing homes and ensure that when the number of staff working in them at the coalface drops, assistance is provided. People are worried. It will fall back on patients in nursing homes if they are not properly looked after.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I welcome the efforts made to date and pay tribute to the staff of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection who are working on the ground. Year after year, we recognise at budget time that without the payments made by the Department and the significant work done by its staff on the ground, this country would be even more unequal. I welcome the Covid-19 payment, the wages subsidy and the extension of time in respect of the fuel allowance. However, we must take into account the context. Deputy Cowen referred to the stark live register figures that were published today. We have gone from having 4.85% unemployment - almost full employment - to an unemployment rate of 17%. Indeed, figures provided by the Government indicate that 800,000 people will avail of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment or the wage subsidy scheme. That exposes the situation on the ground. As I have repeatedly stated in the House in recent weeks, I hope we now see what is possible and that we never go back. Perhaps now, more than ever, is the time to look at a basic income for everybody based on needs on the ground. We have shown what can be done in a few weeks. Let us see what we can do for the future because there is no going back to the unequal society we had.

I refer to anomalies that have arisen, some of which have been mentioned by my colleagues. The issue relating to persons aged more than 66 was raised and I will not belabour the point. Deputies are receiving constant representations on this issue. It seems somewhat hypocritical that we are appealing to our older people to do the right thing but they are being excluded from the scheme which is supposed to support everybody.

In regard to persons on reduced hours, I understand that if a person is on a three-day week, they may apply for the welfare payment. However, that works out at €40 per day, whereas the Covid-19 payment is €70 per day. Those workers are getting less than they ought to be.

Deputy Pringle was anxious for me to mention the North-South issue, but I will not belabour the point as it was already raised.

On the 30,000 people who have been refused the Covid-19 payment, approximately 15,000 were refused because they gave the wrong information but the other 15,000 were simply refused for one reason or another. There is no appeal mechanism. I understand from reading the notes that no appeal is allowed because it is an emergency. I ask the Minister to look at that because, obviously, mistakes are made when things are rushed.

On nurses, other Members have pointed out that there is no assistance for student nurses.

On redundancy, I was here when the legislation passed last week and it applies to a specific time. Representations have been made to me on behalf of a person who was made redundant on 13 March, before those provisions came into effect. The person is unemployed and cannot get

work. He or she is caught in no-man's land and cannot avail of mortgage relief from the banks. I wish to draw the attention of the Minister to that point.

Rent supplement is now administered by local authorities rather than by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. It is subject to ongoing reviews in respect of what constitutes a reasonable rent, whereas the housing assistance payment, HAP, which is also administered by local authorities, is not subject to review. I understand no review has been done on that since 2016. While the social welfare system was doing a good job in keeping the rent supplement under the review, that is not happening.

I refer to the comments of the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan, that we should be ashamed of ourselves for taking her and other people out of their homes. I will make no apology. I find her comments embarrassing. They fail to grasp the necessity of democratic institutions functioning. We heard the unprecedented comments from the Chief Justice today on the importance of democratic institutions functioning as best they can, however restricted, in a time of emergency. We have passed two draconian Bills, mixed up with some good stuff. There is a need for the Dáil to sit. I hope the Ceann Comhairle will use his leadership skills to facilitate that in whatever way necessary in an open and public forum.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I endorse the words of Deputy Connolly. I agree with her that it is important the Dáil sits. Some important points were made here today and some important questions were asked. Deputy O'Reilly asked an important question about the front-line workers in our health service and about the welcome news that private consultants and private hospitals will be working in the public sector. There is an issue, which was reported in the media over the weekend, that they are being given a different contract. In fairness to the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, he seemed to be about to answer that question before he had to leave and I completely accept that he had to leave for good reasons. This question needs to be answered, however. Are the private consultants, who are now working in private hospitals on public contracts, getting the old contract? If they are, that would be worrying because it is those doctors and nurses who are working in our public hospitals who will primarily be dealing with people with Covid-19 because it is in our public hospitals that we have ventilators and ICU beds. Therefore, doctors and nurses in public hospitals are more likely to come in contact with the virus and to bring it home to their loved ones. If they are on a different contract, and I am not saying they are, that would be shameful, to paraphrase the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan. It is legitimate to ask these questions because that is what we are here to do.

We have done well as country, and the Government, of which the Minister is a member, has done very well in dealing with this. We have done well as a nation in following the medical advice of the Chief Medical Officer. Like the rest of the House, I wish him the best with his recovery. However, we are uniquely vulnerable in this country. We hear about the vulnerabilities and the death rates being much higher in Spain and Italy than in other countries. There are a variety of reasons why we have a particular vulnerability. The number of ICU beds per 100,000 people in Germany is 34 and in France it is 16. That may go some way towards explaining why their death rates are so much lower because in Spain the number of ICU beds per 100,000 people is 9.7 and in Italy it is 8.6. In Ireland, we have five ICU beds per 100,000 people so we are uniquely vulnerable, we need to take care and I urge everybody to follow the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, as has been well conveyed by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health.

I want to return to two particular groups within the social welfare system. One of the rea-

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sons we have fewer ICU beds in Ireland is because of political choices. I supported a Government that did not invest much in health. The Government said at the time that we did not have the money to invest in health but in any event we need a functioning economy when we come out of this. One of the sectors that will hopefully contribute to that revival is the tourism sector. A lot of people will not be going on holidays abroad but hopefully we will be in a position where people can holiday at home and spend money here. We have a tourist sector in this country but many of the people who work in it are seasonal workers. Tourist enterprises across the country would now be taking on staff and opening at a low key level or getting ready to open. However, they cannot do that now because they do not know when they will open and they cannot take on the staff under the Covid-19 measures because they will not get the money from the Government for staff who were not employed on 29 February. The staff will not get the money because they were not in employment on 29 February. That is a lacuna or loophole which I pointed out to the Minister for Finance before in this Chamber and I hope it will be addressed because we need a functioning tourist sector in this country when we go back to a normal. I worry that all business, such as it is, is being funnelled into multinationals such as Lidl, Aldi and Tesco. Garden centres are closed yet people are gardening more than ever. Where does one get the equipment or buy seeds? There is no alternative but to get it in Tesco or Lidl because the local garden centre is closed. Farmers markets, where people can buy produce which has passed through far fewer hands than food on a shelf in a large supermarket chain, are closed. Small shops are closing because people are going for one big shop. This will inevitably have a huge economic consequence but we should not increase the economic consequence by virtue of our measures. We must be very careful in what we do. We need to show that we are all in this together.

I am quite worried that a senior civil servant has ventured into constitutional matters and conveyed the Attorney General's advice when there are other advices on whether the Seanad can form. I am more worried when a senior civil servant suggests that he and the permanent government should not be answerable to the people. He works on behalf of the people. We are ridiculed and maybe we are ridiculous at times, but I take seriously my position as a representative of the people and I come here to convey their concerns to the Minister so that she may bring them back to the permanent government. That is important.

**Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation(Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I thank all the Deputies who contributed. I acknowledge again the co-operation and support of all sides of the House during this time of national crisis. Deputies have asked specific questions on various schemes. Due to time constraints, I cannot address them individually. Ms Orlaith Mannion has agreed that the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection will provide Members with written answers to clarify some of the issues raised.

It is important to acknowledge where we stand. The live register figures released earlier highlight starkly the changed economic landscape. A month ago, we had full employment with more people at work than ever before. Sadly, today's figures show that more than 500,000 people are now in receipt of some form of income support. This is unprecedented and for the many businesses and workers impacted, and their families, this is an extremely difficult and worrying time.

The Government's focus has been on responding quickly and decisively to the challenges of Covid-19. First, we put in place the public health measures necessary to slow the spread of the disease and, second, we put in place the social welfare and economic policies necessary to mitigate the impact of the virus on the well-being of citizens. Have we got everything right or

designed the perfect solutions to the welfare and economic challenges? No, we have not, nor, given the pace at which we had to respond, could anybody be expected to. Officials from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection have provided briefing sessions for Members on the new measures. The Department will continue to work with Members to provide answers to the issues raised and seek to provide solutions, where possible. However, we must be realistic. In a time of unprecedented crisis, not every problem can be sorted out and not every anomaly can be resolved. The perfect cannot be allowed to get in the way of the good. Nevertheless we are open to making whatever improvements we can. As a Government, we will seek to take on board the comments and suggestions made by Deputies.

Some Deputies have constituents who applied for but did not get the Covid emergency payment on Tuesday. I assure them that the Department is working with people who have legitimately applied but where an error may have been made, for example, in a bank IBAN.

I reiterate that the quickest and easiest way to apply for the Covid unemployment payment is online at *mywelfare.ie*. It is also important to point out that 88% of claims received were put into payment. That is 283,000 people. I want to acknowledge the staff of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection in local offices across the country, as well as those who have been redeployed from elsewhere in the public service, who have worked night and day to clear the equivalent of a 19-month claim load in two weeks. This is unprecedented and an enormous challenge, but the work is being done. We must remember that those staff have families and loved ones, but they are working tirelessly to make sure that people are receiving the payments they are due. In my mind, that is what public service is about.

The 283,000 people in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment were working up to a week or so ago. They were looking forward to St. Patrick's day, mother's day, Easter, holidays and all sorts of normal activities. Now, like almost every facet of Irish life, their world has been turned upside down. The income supports we introduced and enhanced are, first and foremost, intended to alleviate the financial hardship they now face. As many economic commentators have observed, these payments will also play an important role in sustaining incomes and positioning the economy for what we hope will be a fast recovery.

I encourage employers to avail of the temporary wage subsidy scheme. As of this morning, more than 36,000 businesses had registered for the wage subsidy scheme, with more than €54 million in payments already issued to employers. The scheme is vital to maintain the link between employer and employee so that we can be ready, when we come out the other side of this, which we will, to reboot businesses as soon as possible so that people can get back to work as quickly as possible.

I encourage any business to engage with Revenue before it lets go staff and to consider the option of the wage subsidy scheme. It is important to point out that even if an employee has been laid off because of Covid-19 it is not too late. Employers can rehire an employee, provided he or she was on the payroll in February, and avail of the temporary wage subsidy scheme.

Finally, I would like to thank all sides of the House for allowing the passage of two very important pieces of emergency legislation in the past fortnight. I have no doubt we will continue to work together in the national interest in what are going to be difficult days and weeks ahead.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.35 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Thursday, 16 April 2020.