



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	501
Covid-19 (Taoiseach): Statements	502
Covid-19 (Irish Economy): Statements	524
Covid-19 (Health): Statements	550
Covid-19 (Education and Skills): Statements.	579

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 23 Aibreán 2020

Thursday, 23 April 2020

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 12 p.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh to announce the Order of Business for today.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: 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 21 April 2020, with no Questions on Promised Legislation; between each item of business, the House shall suspend for a period not exceeding five minutes; No. 4, statements and questions and answers on Covid-19 to the Taoiseach, shall not exceed 100 minutes, with each party or group having ten minutes; No. 5, statements on the Irish economy, shall not exceed 115 minutes, with statements from the Minister and spokespersons from Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin not exceeding 15 minutes each and statements from all other parties or groups not exceeding ten minutes each; No. 6, statements and questions and answers on Covid-19 to the Minister for Health, shall consist of an opening statement by a Minister or Minister of State of five minutes, followed by questions and answers not exceeding 100 minutes, with each party or group having ten minutes, and a five-minute response by a Minister or Minister of State; No. 7, statements and questions and answers on Covid-19 to the Minister for Education and Skills, shall consist of an opening statement by a Minister or Minister of State of five minutes, followed by questions and answers not exceeding 100 minutes, with each party or group having ten minutes, and a five-minute response by a Minister or Minister of State; and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of statements and questions and answers on Covid-19 to the Minister for Education and Skills, until 12 noon on Thursday 30 April 2020.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal agreed?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I understand we are due to conclude before 8 p.m. If so, my proposal is null and void, but if we over-run and are still here at 8 p.m. I propose that we would join the national round of applause to the health and other front-line workers who are keeping us going and protecting us in this current situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: If we are still here at 8 p.m., we can do that. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Covid-19 (Taoiseach): Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to make his statement. He has ten minutes.

The Taoiseach: As of last night, we had 16,671 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in our country. Sadly, 769 people have so far lost their lives: people with lives and stories; people who made a contribution; people who mattered; and people who will be remembered. The Government is eternally grateful to all those working to combat Covid-19, and everyone is playing their part in this emergency, whether through their work or simply by staying home.

The good news is that we now estimate that the reproduction number of the disease is between 0.7 and 1. More information will be provided on the modelling by Professor Philip Nolan later today. More people in Ireland have now recovered from coronavirus than have the virus, and more people have been discharged from hospital than are now in hospital as a consequence of coronavirus. This means that our collective national effort is working and that we are suppressing the disease in our communities. So far, 130 people, having recovered, have been discharged home from ICUs, and there has been no overall increase in the number of people in ICUs in recent days.

We have been battered by a wave of destruction but, as a people, we have endured. I know that all of this is coming at an enormous cost, with people suffering increased anxiety because of the restrictions, people who have lost their jobs and people who fear losing their businesses. The mission of the next Government must be to bring the same focus and energy to rebuilding our society as we have brought to facing this health crisis.

Today our new enemy is complacency. The real risk is that if we become lax in the next few days and weeks, we could lose control over the spread of the virus. So far we have not been able to slow transmission of the virus in every setting, and its impact in long-term care and residential facilities, both nursing homes and other care facilities, is great. Our most vulnerable citizens are at risk and we are now taking action to control outbreaks and minimise transmission to protect as many people as possible. This involves increased testing, now that that is possible; increased access to personal protective equipment, PPE; oxygen training; staff accommodation; and other approaches being undertaken. We are also providing financial assistance for nursing homes in order that they can better manage their response to Covid-19.

International best practice shows that an integrated strategy of rigorous sampling, testing and contact tracing is the best way of managing this crisis. Our approach in all these areas has been robust and will help us plan for when we can safely ease the public health and physical distancing measures. As of last Friday more than 105,000 tests had been processed in laboratories, including a laboratory in Germany. The National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, recommends that we should try to expand our testing capacity to approximately 100,000 tests per week. That is a significant increase but one that will be necessary as we plan to exit from the current restrictions and manage the aftermath. This is a big challenge. It might not be possible, but we will pull out all the stops to make it happen. The easing of public health measures will be gradual and will be done in a stepwise manner. It will require continuous effort by all of us to suppress and control this virus. Our easing of the restrictions will not necessarily mirror the manner in which they were escalated, and we must leave a period between taking each step so

23 April 2020

that we can monitor its impact and act if necessary. Certain stricter social distancing measures may have to be reintroduced if it looks like the spread of the incidence of the virus is increasing again. We have seen this happen, unfortunately, in Japan in recent days.

Public health criteria have been developed by NPHE, based on the work of the World Health Organization, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the European Commission. The criteria set out are: the incidence of transmission, including in respect of outbreaks in residential and other healthcare settings; ICU occupancy as an indicator of transmission; public health capacity, that is, testing and contact tracing; and overall health system capacity, including access to healthcare workers, beds and essential products and equipment.

Extreme vigilance is required to limit the increase in new cases and to prevent more deaths. We must do everything we can to avoid a post-peak wave or a deadly second wave, which, as we know, occurred in the cases of H1N1 and during the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. When this is over we will awaken our society and our economy, and the actions we take to do so must be taken in a safe, appropriate, phased and timely way. I look forward to hearing Members' observations and suggestions.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have ten minutes for each leader, which can be statements, statements and questions or whatever Members like, but there are only ten minutes available.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Our first thoughts today must again be with the families of those who have lost their lives during this pandemic. This virus has been every bit as deadly and destructive as was feared. Those who have been worst hit by it have, in most cases, not been able to receive the personal support and comfort that is so important at a time of loss. We have all witnessed the experiences of friends and others where the normal ritual of grieving and mourning could not apply or indeed where being with their loved ones at the end could not apply either. Our core duty remains doing everything we can to stop the spread of the virus, to care for those affected by it, and to support in every way possible the health workers, whose work has already saved thousands of lives.

Before addressing a range of issues concerning the public response to the virus now and in the months ahead, I welcome back Deputy McDonald. We hope her recovery will continue to be robust. It must have been a terrible time for her and her family. The lengthy delay in providing test results can only have made it even worse.

It appears that widespread community transmission of the virus has been contained for at least a few weeks. The fact that overall national figures have continued to be a concern links directly to a large number of specific care and other settings, which are referred to as hotspots in the reporting. Public support for comprehensive action has been strong from the beginning, which is one of the reasons exceptions to this have stood out when they have occurred. The strong political consensus behind action has been there from the beginning and remains intact. There have been many occasions where parties and Deputies have had serious concerns or questions, but the united response has been to raise these issues directly and to avoid allowing these issues to develop to the level of a public dispute. We have as a Parliament voted to limit our ability to work and to be a more active part of the debate about what is happening and what should be done. This has extended to much of the media, where there has been an active policy of seeking to raise concerns in a highly restrained way and to suspend many of the normally more assertive approaches to public issues.

What has not been commented on enough, though, is that this places a heightened obligation on Government in terms of the speed and transparency of its procedures and communications. Unfortunately, too often there has been a sense of resistance to being upfront about problems until a solution has been found. There have been too many cases of legitimate questions asked by Deputies and journalists being met by a lack of clarity or a deflection. In recognition of the extreme pressures being felt in parts of the system and a wish to protect the clarity and focus of the national response, these cases have not been allowed to accelerate into fuller disputes. However, it is important for everyone to understand that we are at a stage where the only way to proceed is to have a more open and inclusive debate about what is to be done.

There are a series of very significant decisions to be taken and we must move away from an approach that looks increasingly like one where decisions are to be taken first and discussion will only be allowed afterwards. Public and political support for decisions about what measures are to be taken can only be secured if there is a willingness to seek and listen to multiple views and if decisions, once made, are communicated more directly and with proper clarity as to the exact reasoning behind them. As we can see every day, there is a real and sustained debate in countries throughout Europe about future steps. This debate must be allowed here as well.

The key epidemiology statistics have confirmed that Ireland can now discuss what measures to retain, alter or lift. Equally, we must discuss what new measures may be required. Our first concern is that we have full, open and frank information about a series of critical issues. To understand the spread of the virus, to aid treatment and to be able to have confidence in reopening plans and gradually lift restrictions, we must have a comprehensive capacity to test and trace rapidly. What capacity is in place today and what is planned for the coming weeks and months? Is it planned to test the asymptomatic population, for example? What is the projected turnaround time in terms of such testing, because we know it is essential, as highlighted in several global papers? The London School of Economics recently stated that the key to re-opening the economy and society is comprehensive testing with a rapid turnaround time.

Many Deputies have too often been contacted about emerging hotspots which have not been publicly acknowledged. As the Government is aware, the meat packaging sector has continued to operate due to its importance to food supply. Concerns have been raised for quite some time regarding the sector. There is a major hotspot in a plant, a significant cluster in the midwest, and this has caused particular concern. There are other such hotspots and I have raised them with the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Holohan, and the Minister, Deputy Harris. What is the role of the Health and Safety Authority in this regard? There is a separate issue regarding an asylum centre in Cahirsiveen where there seems to be a lack of engagement between the health authorities and the Department of Justice and Equality. There is significant concern and tension building up there with a cluster emerging. What is being done to revise work practices in such sectors in order to reduce the number of hotspots? What is the level of engagement at sectoral level to ensure that workers and the wider community have suitable protection and that cases are rapidly identified?

Last week in the Dáil and repeatedly in private communications Fianna Fáil raised the issue of nursing homes. The comprehensive testing response and other measures are welcome. What is the exact situation in nursing homes? The funding package announced some weeks ago is too bureaucratic and not in spirit with this crisis. It involves significant paperwork which has caused much annoyance in the sector. What percentage of nursing home residents have been tested? Has the enduring issue of personal protective equipment, PPE, for staff been addressed? What information has been given to residents and their families? I raised that issue two weeks

23 April 2020

ago and the points I made were subsequently confirmed publicly. As all Members are aware, healthcare workers in all settings have been put in danger by the lack of appropriate PPE and they, unintentionally, have put others in danger as a result. After a terrible period, progress was made but, unfortunately, there are still reports of substandard and unusable PPE being distributed. I seek clarity on this matter. Is there enough suitable PPE? What is the assessment of need for the coming months?

The issue of when and how to lift restrictions is a dominant topic throughout Europe. To raise it is not to deny the priority of limiting the spread of the virus and helping those who have it. I do not detect any complacency among the public. The process to date for discussing this matter has simply not been good enough. It risks things being done poorly or in a rushed manner. For example, we need more clarity on the wearing of masks. Respected and reputable international experts are advocating the wearing of masks and people are anxious to get clarity in that regard. Although we cannot risk taking supply away from healthcare workers, other countries have found alternative approaches. Studies published in recent days suggest that protocols for wearing homemade masks can form part of revised measures. Is the current position being reviewed? Will it be changed? This is not an issue on which everyone should remain quiet until a plan is implemented. There should be no tolerance for half comments, off-the-record briefings or partially leaked memos. We urgently need clarity on the process and the exact benchmarks to be used to trigger action. What process will be adopted to consult on options? In Germany, governments at regional and national level have implemented a process of bringing in industry groups and a diverse range of academics to come up with options. It is obvious that some groups will lobby, but we need external disciplines which can advise impartially within the overall parameters set by epidemiologists. This wider group is using its expertise to look at ways of restarting activities within those parameters. Such a process should start here.

The economic impact of the pandemic and the response to it has been severe. The impact on unemployment, incomes and public finances has been dramatic. It should be put on the record that action must be taken to protect the rights of workers and creditors, particularly where businesses appear to be using the crisis to implement long-term actions. The treatment of Debenhams workers has been appalling. I see nothing wrong with the highly responsible and restrained demonstrations which the workers have undertaken. Demonstrations which respect social distancing rules are reasonable and should not be prevented. The contrast between those responsible demonstrations by workers made redundant and the actions of the group which gathered outside the Four Courts on Tuesday could not be more dramatic.

The situation in respect of public exams must be clarified once and for all. Instead of partial announcements, we need some certainty, even if this certainty includes conditionality around the level of spread of the virus at different dates. I have not met any person who is looking for a light switch moment when it comes to lifting restrictions. Equally, there is no air of complacency among the overwhelming majority of the public. There is still a national resolve to get through this, to limit the virus's damage and to protect ourselves from future outbreaks. We need clarity today about the current status of the virus in our community, our testing and tracing capabilities, and measures to protect healthcare workers. We also need much greater clarity on how we decide where to go from here. Just as our response to the pandemic has been a shared national effort, so too must be the process of planning and implementing measures to limit future risk and restart much of our daily lives.

An Ceann Comhairle: Glaoim ar an Teachta McDonald. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil biseach ort agus fáilte romhat ar ais.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Go raibh míle maith agat. I thank everyone who sent me kind wishes. Thank you all very much. It was very thoughtful of you.

Having been sick and having experienced the virus at first hand, it sharpens one's understanding of everything surrounding this public health emergency, most particularly the big gap there has been between, on the one hand, the very ambitious announcements that have been made and in many cases re-announced, and on the other hand, what was happening on the ground. I waited 16 days for a test result, and this was not unique - far from it. In fact, others waited longer times, and in some cases these were front-line healthcare workers. I think we can all accept that this is unacceptable and scandalous and that it needs to be fixed. The Taoiseach says that it is. I hope we see evidence of that fact. Just this week, I heard a woman tell her story on RTÉ radio, and she is still waiting for her deceased husband's test results. That man was tested on 27 March, and this woman said she cannot get a death certificate because of this delay.

The announcement and re-announcement of testing capacity never became a reality on the ground, and so now we have new targets. The Taoiseach said this morning that we have a target of 100,000 tests per week. That has to be real, it has to happen, it has to be seen to be happening and it has to be more than an exercise in collecting swabs and samples. The actual tests have to happen. We need efficient reporting and, crucially, contact tracing because contact tracing is reliant on the result of the tests being reported back.

The Taoiseach says he is concerned about complacency, and so am I, although it has to be recorded and said that communities, families and the Irish people have rallied magnificently to what have been difficult asks of them in very difficult circumstances. Nonetheless, I share the Taoiseach's concern on complacency. I am also concerned about mixed messages and kite flying from the Government. All of us want to see people back at work, businesses back functioning, schools and colleges and so on reopened. We all believe in that, but I put it to the Taoiseach that it is neither plausible, advisable nor safe to unwind public health restrictions until we have a wide, comprehensive and efficient testing system and the follow-up contact tracing, because the mantra has been to test, isolate and trace. We know that is how we keep people safe. We know that this is how we manage to stay ahead of this virus, not just in the here and now but in the coming weeks and months until we have effective anti-viral medications and, ultimately, a vaccine. Until that time, however, we need to be clear. Precautions and measures will have to be taken to keep people safe and to avoid deaths.

I again record our sympathies for all of those who have buried their loved ones in such heartbreaking and incredibly difficult circumstances.

The good news, as the Taoiseach has correctly recorded, is that our health service has not been overwhelmed. The good news is that we have collectively managed to flatten the curve. However, we must be cautious. Moving too quickly could allow the virus scope to spread and surge at a later date and perhaps even to mutate and become even more virulent. We cannot allow things to do that under any circumstances. There must be absolute clarity from the Government to all of us on that point.

Caithfidh mé ceist a chur ar an Taoiseach faoin ngéarchéim inár dtithe altranais. Mar is eol don Taoiseach, tá níos mó ná leath de na daoine a fuair bás sa Stát ó Covid-19 tar éis bás a fháil sna tithe altranais. Tá chuile cheann de na básanna seo fiúntach. I must ask the Taoiseach about the heartbreaking crisis in our nursing homes where more than half of the deaths in the State from Covid-19 have occurred. Every one of these deaths is meaningful, a life lost and

a story ended in the most awful circumstances, leaving behind families and friends who are absolutely devastated. The Government's approach to nursing homes has been characterised by a lack of urgency and mistakes and I ask for clarity on several points. The lack of urgency gave rise to some very important issues that have not yet been answered satisfactorily. We still lack a clear answer about why the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, refused to meet Nursing Homes Ireland in the early stages of the crisis despite its repeated requests. Why was this? The Minister only agreed to meet in late March when Nursing Homes Ireland went public with its frustrations. Why? There must be an adequate and clear explanation why the Department of Health criticised the decision of nursing homes to introduce a ban on visitors on 4 March. The Department said then that Nursing Homes Ireland was moving too quickly, but it is clear that was wrong, and the nursing homes were ahead of the system. Why did this happen when the World Health Organization was urging, almost begging, European Governments to move and to do so faster? Will the Government clarify the delays on the On Call For Ireland initiative, which has been very successful with health professionals responding to it in huge numbers. However, this time last week, only 1,300 applicants were processed through the system from a pool of 73,000, at a time when nursing homes in particular are crying out for staff as they are unable to fill rosters. Given the magnitude of what is unfolding in nursing homes throughout the country and other residential and congregated settings, we need clear and precise answers to these questions.

I will make some suggestions on what should be done for nursing homes and I would like the Taoiseach's response. Each acute hospital should be assigned the job of monitoring nursing homes and congregated settings in its catchment area and be fully resourced to allow for rapid local responses. The focus of the On Call For Ireland programme should be shifted to nursing homes and the process fast-tracked to ensure that they have the necessary staff. The HSE should use the spare and very expensive capacity in private hospitals to alleviate the pressure in our nursing homes where necessary. We should also make use of the community assessment hubs for this purpose. The supply of personal protective equipment should be accelerated to nursing homes and other residential settings from today. If we do these things now, and assess them and measure them, we have a chance to turn the tide of the emergency in our nursing homes and stand a better chance of saving lives. This is the very least that we owe to our elderly citizens and their families. As the Taoiseach has accepted, we have a particular duty to protect them and vulnerable groups in our society.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I wish to share time with Deputy Joe O'Brien. Our first thoughts are with families of those in nursing homes, where we have seen such a raging epidemic, and in other residential and congregational settings, such as in direct provision or religious orders, where we have heard stories about the number dying in recent weeks. That tragedy and the urgent need to continue to tackle these issues drive us to support the Chief Medical Officer and Government in taking whatever measures are needed to make sure we minimise the loss of life and put in place and implement, with absolute certainty, systems for testing, isolating and tracing at the scale needed to manage the virus and, at the same time, open up our economy. The job of the political system here is to strike a balance between the health imperative and the imperative to have our economy return to some sort of functioning order so we can pay for health and social welfare systems and ensure we can restore and protect our mental health, as well as our physical health, in response to the virus. I absolutely accept what Dr. Tony Holohan is saying, which is that we cannot be presumptuous on this and that there is nothing decided yet on opening things up, but we do need to start thinking about and preparing for the economic recovery because it will be as important a part of the management of this crisis as everything else.

I hear people from the construction sector rightly say they are used to managing health and safety and that we should be working with them now to set up the mechanisms by which we can determine how to get workers to and from building sites and operate within building sites. I refer to proper distancing during breaks and to the availability of proper hand-cleansing and other facilities. I hope the sector will be one of the first to return to action. If at any stage we see an increase in viral infection due to increased activity, we will obviously have to scale back again. It is important, however, that we start to get construction workers back to work.

With regard to tourism, one of the biggest difficulties we have at present is the lack of expenditure. Our economy is contracting. At some point over the summer, we will have to see people spending, particularly for the protection of our small businesses and the development and protection of the economy in rural areas, which are so dependent on the tourism sector. Again, we have to be careful about this. We do not yet know the dates on which we expect people to be able to start going on holidays. We will have to manage this in a way that will not result in a pick-up in the virus. Not many from overseas will be coming to Ireland this year but, likewise, we are not going to be going away on our holidays. If we spent our time this summer walking, cycling, swimming, driving and having dinners, it would assist. I read today that the Restaurants Association of Ireland is going to try to set up mechanisms by which we can have facilities in this regard set up in a safe way. It is appropriate for us to start thinking about and planning for some sort of uptake in our economy or life in our country later this summer if the numbers associated with the virus continue to go down. This is important. It is important that we give some signal that there will be a chance for holidays at home this year. Maybe it will be a very different sort of holiday but maybe it will be one that really reminds us what is important and great about our country.

On the international stage, with regard to the meeting of the European Council today, I am glad the Irish Government is continuing to support the issue of eurobonds in response to this crisis. Just as we need a stimulus here to get spending going and produce an economic lift, we need a similar attitude and response at European level.

From my reading of reports in the newspapers today, it seems one of the items that may be on the agenda for consideration, in addition to eurobonds, is the potential for the European Commission to borrow on behalf of the European Union and leverage that for economic recovery. It seems, again from reports in the newspapers today, that the introduction of an EU-wide digital or plastic tax might help to cover future repayments on such lending. The Taoiseach should not be afraid of supporting such initiatives.

An expansion of the EU budget is in our interests. Such an expansion will be difficult for any one country to fund because of the constraints under which we are operating. That Keynesian stimulus and expansionary proposal is one we should support. We should be doing that on a cross-Continent basis, showing solidarity at this time. It is in the interests of our country, the EU and the wider world that institutions such as the European Commission show that they are capable of managing the economic response to the crisis in a way that inspires our people.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I wish to open by expressing my condolences to the family of the 31 year old carer who worked in a private nursing home in Swords, in my constituency, and whose death was announced in recent days. That underlines the issues and questions raised by other Deputies regarding nursing homes.

In many respects, the virus and the State's response to it have given rise to a type of human

23 April 2020

rights audit. Whose health protection needs and rights is the State responding to most slowly? Those of asylum seekers and people in residential settings. Who are we leaving behind? Travellers, Roma, international students and undocumented workers. Few of us are aware of the fact that so many of the front-line workers in this battle against Covid-19 are undocumented workers, people unrecognised, unacknowledged and not appreciated by official Ireland. I recently spoke to two undocumented workers, and I want to represent their voices here today. Both are female live-in care workers who care for elderly women. They are cocooning with these ladies and tending to their every need during the crisis. Both have worked in this sector in Ireland for over a decade. They work in the shadows but provide an essential care service. There are likely to be many hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals in similar situations all over the country, undocumented migrants caring for elderly people and helping them to cocoon. This is just one sector.

As we move forward in developing a response to Covid-19, we cannot have people working in the shadows or being left behind, not only for their own sakes but for their sake of their rights. We need to develop a thorough and robust set of systems to allow us to eliminate and keep out Covid-19, but, also, it is only just and fair that those who contribute so much to fighting this battle are allowed to be full members of society. One of these women asked me to tell the Taoiseach: “We are front-line workers. We cannot go out, we are looking after our ladies, we are working all day, all night, 24-7 and we love them like our family.” She said she knows hundreds of other women from her home country who are working in similar situations across Ireland. Can the Government set up a regularisation scheme whereby undocumented people can view a set of fair and reasonable criteria that they need to satisfy in order to be regularised? I am not alone in calling for this - Chambers of Commerce Ireland, the unions, the National Youth Council of Ireland and the National Women’s Council of Ireland are on a list of bodies that are calling for it.

Bus Éireann employees are driving essential workers to and from their workplaces as we speak. Many Expressway and rural route buses do not have contactless payment machines. Coins and bank notes are being exchanged in close proximity between driver and passenger. This is a health risk for drivers but also a problem for limiting and controlling the virus. I propose that during this health crisis those Bus Éireann vehicles which do not have contactless payment machines operate fare-free for essential workers until another method, which does not involve the exchange of cash, is put in place.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Given her County Tipperary genealogy, I welcome Deputy McDonald back to the House and wish her well.

Since we met last week, 4,124 people have been diagnosed with Covid-19 and, sadly, a further 337 have passed away. Our thoughts are with the families and loved ones of those who have passed away and we wish all of those who have been diagnosed with the virus a speedy recovery. I think, in particular, of my friend and neighbour, Kieran Maguire, who lost his life in the past few days. I think of his family at this time.

We are in the middle of the biggest public health crisis that the State has ever faced. I wish to preface what I am about to say by thanking everyone in this crisis who is working hard across government, the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, the HSE and society all the way down to, for example, retail workers in shops. I greatly admire them, as I know we all do. They are all heroes in our battle and we truly cherish them.

However, I am concerned about the transparency in decision making. I wish to concentrate on this matter. When the crisis broke, our party stood alone in asking for an Oireachtas all-party committee to ensure accountability and transparency. It did not happen and was dismissed by many in the House. Seven weeks later, I now correctly hear talk across politics of the lack of democratic accountability and transparency. The process that the Dáil is going through right now does not negate that fact.

I wish to ask about governance during the crisis and how decisions are being made. NPHET was convened by the Taoiseach on 27 January for Covid-19. It was previously convened in 2019 to deal with the carbapenemase producing enterobacteriaceae, CPE, superbugs. Interestingly, the terms of reference that time were significantly longer and more detailed compared with the Covid-19 crisis, which is ironic.

A Cabinet sub-committee has been set up by the Government to manage this crisis. It is serviced by a senior officers group and a communications subgroup. That leads to NPHET, which includes an expert advisory group and has 11 subgroups ranging from acute hospital preparedness, behavioural change and so on.

I looked up NPHET's membership. It seems to have grown substantially since it was established. Did the Government agree to all the new members and, if so, where is that documented? If not, who appoints NPHET's members? Is it a case of the chair or other members deciding what public health officials and others are to be invited to the group? What is the process for approving new members? For example, the third or fourth meeting note, entitled "Expansion of NPHET Membership", in minutes from, I believe, two months ago reads: "It was agreed to expand the membership of the team to include a general practitioner, an intensive care specialist and an infectious diseases consultant and invites will issue to join the meeting on Tuesday next, 3rd April 2020." Obviously, nursing homes were not included. How was one member picked over another? Who made those decisions?

Interestingly, only notes of meetings are recorded. Are these actual minutes, and if not, why not? There is a big difference. Minutes reflect the record of the meeting and must be agreed at the beginning of the next meeting. Notes could be a subjective view of what happened. Were all these notes agreed by the participants after each meeting? Future generations will want to know, and deserve to know, where people stood on decisions, but this is not transparent. Why are notes or minutes no longer being published since the end of March? I have searched and searched everywhere. The group meets twice weekly, but there are no minutes. We cannot see how decisions are being taken. This is not acceptable.

There is a large number of people on the committee now, yet no disagreements on any decision have been documented. That is noteworthy. This is something that each member should consider, given that all decisions will undergo historical review at some stage. The issues arising in the nursing home sector are the most obvious example.

In the last published meeting note, dating from 31 March, NPHET discussed the paper on childcare for healthcare workers. The note does not say why the paper was not agreed and does not transparently say what decision was made. The Government is still grappling with this issue, yet we cannot see why the paper, which the Minister for Health showed me six weeks ago, has still not got through.

How many subgroups are there in NPHET? Eleven are listed in the national action plan, but

23 April 2020

no minutes have been published for nearly any of them. What are they doing? Can we see the minutes? Are there minutes? Will all of the market research and survey data from the communications subgroup be published? Who sits on the subgroup? It is referenced a number of times in the few sets of minutes we have but I would like to know what it is doing. Why, unusually, do the Secretary General of the Department of Health or director general of the HSE not attend? I would have thought they would be intrinsic members of the committee. What happens if either or both disagree with a decision?

A number of weeks ago, when the CMO made the decision to set a target of 15,000 tests a day and 100,000 a week by 5 May, which the Taoiseach referenced earlier, the Minister, Deputy Harris, said he expected it within days. We will, however, stick to 5 May. Did the CMO, through NPHE, do so with the agreement of the HSE, which is ultimately responsible for making such a testing regime possible in such a short space of time? I agree with it, by the way, but I am not certain, and I believe the Taoiseach is in the same position, that it can be delivered. Why was a decision made to announce this if the HSE did not believe it could deliver it? Of course, we cannot see this because there are no minutes.

Has the HSE or its board communicated in any way with the Taoiseach, the Government, the Minister for Health or the Department of Health regarding its concerns about overall governance of decision-making in this crisis? If so, will the Taoiseach tell us about it or publish any such communication?

To whom is NPHE ultimately accountable on a day-to-day basis? I understand it advises the Government. Who makes the final decisions? Must NPHE consult the Taoiseach or Minister for Health before making formal daily announcements that affect all of our citizens? I presume it does so and the Taoiseach might tell us how.

I want to make sure we have democratic accountability and scrutiny. To date, I and all of us in the House have fully trusted everyone, and continue to do so, but the lack of information on processes and decision-making, as I have just outlined, means I have to ask these questions on behalf of the public. Ultimate decision-making cannot be in the hands of the few. Elected office cannot be subservient in this crisis. We have to heed public health advice - this is absolute - but we also need to make sure that the formulas for providing this critical public health advice are working, robust and, most importantly, transparent. I trust the Taoiseach's belief they are working but they are certainly not transparent.

I say all of this today as we look to chart a roadmap out of the crisis. As I said last week, it is a roadmap that ultimately must be decided by the Taoiseach and the Government but shaped by the Chamber. The kite flying and mixed messages we had from the Taoiseach and Minister for Health last weekend must end. The Taoiseach must remember that absolutely everybody in the country is hanging on his every word and pronouncement. The roadmap must take full cognisance of NPHE's views on Covid-19. However, critically it must also take cognisance of wider health concerns. We have huge evidence that participation in normal health procedures is substantially down and, I might add, screening is non-existent. This will, no doubt, result in secondary effects, with some of the population having negative health outcomes and loss of life resulting.

The roadmap must also consider wider public concerns, health concerns and social and economic concerns that have a wider impact on the health of our people and the future of our country. It must be holistic and this may mean on occasion the Taoiseach and the Government

balancing decisions in a way they have not done to this point. I wish them well in doing so.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I want to take the opportunity to express our sympathies to the families of all those who have died during the pandemic, some of whom could not be with their loved ones at this critical and sad time. This makes it so much more difficult. The number of deaths in recent days is a stark reminder that the virus is still in a very active phase.

We are being informed that the numbers can be accounted for by delayed notification of deaths but there are grounds for doubting that this is the only reason. While there are positive signs regarding the occupancy of ICUs and the number of people who have been hospitalised in comparison with what it might have been, a particular source of concern is the nursing home sector. Many of those who have died did so in nursing homes, where there continues to be a critical issue in terms of the prevalence of cases and the ability to manage them in light of the availability of nurses and carers. Many nursing homes have staff who are ill and some are in hospital. The individuals in question are doing their absolute best to provide care, often to people who they have been looking after for years and who they care deeply about. However, additional staff are needed.

The testing regime has been particularly problematic. In the absence of comprehensive testing, it was impossible to know who needed to be isolated. We have been told in recent days that the illness presents differently in older people so those who were not obvious cases were not picked up. Having talked to some staff and owners of nursing homes, I know they are shocked at how fast residents are succumbing to the virus. There has been an escalation in the number of deaths. We only have to look at the death notices to see that. While I do not do so routinely, I am looking at those notices at the moment. The position is quite shocking and it makes me question what we are being told in regard to these being deaths that happened several weeks ago.

The big ask is for staff for the floor, namely, for nurses and carers. These have been promised and the funding is there, but I am told it is not happening at the coalface. I have been talking to owners of nursing homes who tell me they are spending hours on the phone trying to get staff. If they were being provided with staff, or if there was a level of co-ordination to deal with this, they would not be doing that. Will the Taoiseach address this issue specifically? Staff can only work 16-hour days for so long, and that is what is happening at present.

A second issue on which we expected to see progress is childcare arrangements for front-line healthcare workers. While this has to occur in a safe manner, which I accept, there may be several solutions. We need the Taoiseach to give us some sort of indication of what the thinking is, what options might be available and whether parallel planning is occurring in terms of working with the childcare sector to match childcare workers with healthcare staff.

Direct provision is an area about which I have deep concerns. We have seen at least one confirmed outbreak following the distribution of a group of asylum seekers from a centre in Dublin to another centre in Kerry, despite the group having been exposed to a confirmed case. Surely, herding groups of people around like this, when they really have no choice in the matter, is against public health advice. It is difficult to see how that movement can be described as being in any way different to people going from one part of the country to another over the Easter weekend, for example, when there was a concern that individuals were going on holiday. That needs to be dealt with and we need to have an explanation as to why it is happening. There are also many other concerns regarding direct provision, such as people sharing rooms and having

to buy sanitary materials.

If we are to get to grips with this virus and plan a transition out of the lockdown, it cannot be done unless we set some tests against which we plan that exit. Have those tests been set? A robust and comprehensive testing and tracing regime is essential and, again, we need to see the capacity. Is the modelling being done in the context of widening the definitions and how might that impact on the capacity? Given the speed at which this virus infects people, the Covid-19 app that is being developed might be very significant in the context of contact tracing, but it will come with a cost in terms of privacy and, ultimately, uptake.

If there is a doubt about its use and if there is a lack of transparency, there will not be the uptake. It requires a critical mass and that will not happen unless there is public trust. This is a measure one would not see except in the most extreme situations in which we now find ourselves. The public have to buy into what it is, how it is working, why it is being used and how it will be decommissioned. That is important. This could be a very useful tool if that public trust can be gained but that very much depends on how it is handled.

Another critical area we will have to consider is availability of hospital capacity, staffing and personal protection equipment, PPE. We hear yet again today concerns about the unusability of some PPE that has been provided. We will have to see also in that modelling a reducing of level of infection.

We need to hear about the kind of planning that is under way and the public need to hear that. Who is involved in the process, who is being consulted and what is the likely sequencing, while also acknowledging that health is the ultimate reference point for that? That is part of the reason some of us have sought more involvement in transition plans and a different involvement for the Dáil. The Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution is a very good example of a cross-party group getting to grips with a complex issue and being helpful. We have got to do things differently.

We have a huge economic crisis because of the virus that cannot be fully evaluated in the absence of knowing how this virus will act and how it ultimately will be tamed. There is a third component, however, and that is one of social cohesion. While the public have been magnificent in the part they have played, that cannot be taken for granted. The public are central players. They have been passive because that is what they have been asked to do but their involvement in unravelling this in an organised and safe way requires their consent and requires public discussion and debate. It involves this Parliament not reverting to a traditional adversarial style of politics. A totally new approach is required, at least in the short term.

With respect to the economy, any transition arrangements will need to bring on board and engage employer groups and trade unions but there is also a whole cohort of people in the gig economy - workers who are not organised - who need to be involved. In many ways, the public have been way ahead on this issue and on what needs to be done. They were calling for school closures before the school closures happened. They were calling for the cancellation of events like the St. Patrick's Day Festival before they happened. They were largely appalled that the Cheltenham Festival went ahead. They are asking questions now about ports and airports and how they are managed. There is a complete understanding that goods have to come in and out of the country and there must be some movement but how they are being managed is an issue that has to be got to grips with.

None of us envisaged the voluntary lockdown, which was responded to extremely well. We had hoped that the powers that we passed in this House would not have to be used but, understanding what happened around Easter, they had to be used. The gardaí did what they have done in the full knowledge that policing is done by consent and that is largely how we have seen that happen. There have been a couple of incidents that would be of concern. One was referred to by Deputy Martin in respect of the Debenhams employees but the other about the contrast with the courts is a serious source of concern. That is the kind of issue about which there will be public discontent.

We know there is a Cabinet sub-committee. Other Members referred to that, but we need to know much more. There needs to be much heavier involvement, drawing in expertise but involving the public in that debate. Otherwise, there will be a breakdown of the consent that exists and which is so necessary in dealing with this pandemic.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputy Barry. First, on behalf of People Before Profit, I again extend my deepest sympathies to anybody who has lost family or loved ones and my support and best wishes to anybody who has received a positive diagnosis of Covid-19. I also again pay tribute to all the front-line health workers and essential workers who are protecting us and to the wider public who have unquestionably, through sacrifice and hard-ship, succeeded in flattening the curve and protecting our health services from being overrun.

Clearly, people have genuinely embraced the idea that we are all in it together and the idea of solidarity that is necessary to overcome this challenge, but that must work both ways from the Government that called for it. I am frustrated at the failure of the Government to be fully transparent and communicative about key matters. My office was the only one whose representative turned up at the first NPHET briefing on 20 February last on the Covid-19 pandemic. At the meeting, my office's representative asked for the modelling in respect of the famous curve for capacity and likely infections. We never got it despite asking for it on multiple occasions. Directly following that meeting we asked, and have asked on multiple occasions, for the advice that the expert advisory group gave to NPHET on all the key issues. We never received it. This underlines Deputy Kelly's point earlier. We have been asking for five or six weeks to see the advice from the experts to the NPHET. Why have we not received it? I do not understand why, but it does not exactly engender confidence.

There are big questions about the deal with the private hospitals. We must have transparency on that deal. It would be absolutely unacceptable if some of the richest people in this country were to benefit or profit from this public health emergency and there are deep concerns and suspicions that this is happening. I hope I will get responses on those points.

Certain lessons that are simply beyond dispute arise from this crisis. First, there can be no question of a return to a semi-privatised, two tier, fragmented and under-resourced health service. That can never happen again. We have seen the cost with the nursing homes. The other day I met a general practitioner I know and with whom I play football. He told me his nursing home is overrun with Covid-19. Most of the staff and many of the patients have it. They have been trying to contact the HSE for weeks. As he said: "The ball was dropped and we were not on their radar". That is what happens when there is a fragmented health system with different parts under the control of different people with different motives. We must have a properly resourced, fully public, national health system and all healthcare capacities and services must be brought under that system. That must happen immediately and that commitment must be given immediately by the Government.

23 April 2020

There can be no return to people living in overcrowded homelessness facilities or to the direct provision *status quo*. That simply cannot happen. It was immoral before this crisis hit and it is now completely incompatible with the protection of public health. There can be no continuation of a situation where empty properties are in the hands of speculators and vulture funds when people in overcrowded conditions need that own-door accommodation to protect their health. There can be no return to the disastrous austerity that followed the 2008 crash and the reliance on the market to solve key issues. That means we must protect workers. I cited Debenhams and I have been specifically asked by the Debenhams workers to raise it. Bank of Ireland is a shareholder in Debenhams and the Government is a shareholder in Bank of Ireland. If we want to engender solidarity and that we are all in this together, how can we let Debenhams, which continues to operate and make profits in the North of this island and in Britain and in which the Government has a shareholding, treat workers like that? There needs to be intervention. There needs to be a guarantee that workers will not suffer loss of income and that workers will get decent pay and conditions and not pay the bill for the public health emergency we are now trying to fight.

Deputy Mick Barry: I start by offering solidarity and my sympathies to the families and friends of those who have lost loved ones. I offer sympathy also to all of those who are sick, and solidarity to workers on the front line.

I will direct my more health-specific questions to the Minister for Health later today. The main points I wish to raise now relate to the crisis, the question of jobs and the approach. Debenhams has shut stores, put more than 2,000 workers onto the dole and now wants to flee the country without paying a single cent in redundancy pay to those workers. This issue is not just for Debenhams workers now. It is a test case for how workers in society are treated and for how workers in the retail sector are treated. Retail Ireland has said that 110,000 jobs are on the line now due to the crisis. We have already seen the closure of Oasis, Warehouse and Laura Ashley. How the Debenhams workers are treated very much sets a benchmark. I believe the State could and should intervene to try to save the 2,000 jobs. The State has a stake in Bank of Ireland, which is part of the consortium that shut Debenhams down. That stake should be used to try to reverse the decision to close. At the very least the State has a responsibility to ensure that Debenhams is not allowed to abandon these workers totally. The State should ensure there is a moratorium on company liquidations at least until such time as the lockdown is lifted. In taking that action the State could prevent the High Court from appointing a liquidator next week and help prevent absolving the company of its responsibilities to the staff. This company still runs an online business and still hopes to reopen the majority of its stores in the UK. Its representatives should meet with the representatives of the workers and, at the very least, pay a decent redundancy package from the company's profits and resources.

I want to ask the Taoiseach about the use of emergency powers by gardaí to disperse a disciplined, socially distanced protest by Debenhams' workers in Henry Street, Dublin on Tuesday. Not only did gardaí instruct the workers to disperse and to take down the signs, which they have asked me to hold up here today as they were refused the right to hold up this sign on Tuesday, the workers were threatened with arrest and threatened with being put into the back of a Garda van. They were escorted to their Luas and bus stops by the gardaí and the gardaí instructed a trade union shop steward to desist from conducting an interview - well away from the store - with a journalist. I understand that the Irish Council for Civil Liberties will publish an article this afternoon in the wake of Tuesday's events. The article will contain the following words:

The ability to demonstrate and raise a collective voice is the cornerstone of a democ-

racy. The right to protest, therefore, must be protected and facilitated to the greatest extent possible [and goes on to say] Specific legislation has been passed to allow for the right to protest in other countries and to continue to be exercised during the current lockdown.

I have three things to ask the Taoiseach. Will the Taoiseach comment on whether he would support the idea of a moratorium on company liquidations, at least until such time as the lockdown is ended? Will he also comment on the point that is raised in the article by the Irish Council for Civil Liberties?

Does the Taoiseach agree with the comments of the Fianna Fáil leader that the Debenhams workers' protest on Tuesday was responsible and involved social distancing and that protests of that type should be allowed to proceed as a basic democratic right?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I join with other Deputies in extending my deepest sympathies to the families and friends who have lost loved ones during this shocking crisis. The country reached a shocking milestone yesterday; more than 1,000 people have died from Covid-19 on the island of Ireland. I thank all the men and women who are on the front line. They are working beyond the call of duty and are putting their own health and lives at risk for the most vulnerable. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude we should not forget when this crisis is over.

I acknowledge all of the work the Government has done over the last two months. The management of this crisis as it developed has been very difficult due to its enormity and the fact that we still do not know all of the different behavioural patterns of this particular virus. The role of the Opposition, however, is to propose solutions, to scrutinise the Government and to push it at all times to ensure better outcomes for the Irish people. The mortality rate in Ireland is shocking. It is the 12th worst on the planet. We also have one of the worst mortality rates in the world for those in nursing home settings. This is doubly shocking given the fact that we are an island nation and that we saw this crisis unfold in other countries and had time to prepare. We had a headstart in preparing. We also have a young and dispersed population. All of this would lead me to believe that we were in a better position to deal with this crisis.

It was wrong not to stop flights coming from the north of Italy at the start of this crisis. It was wrong to tell people who were returning from the north of Italy at that time to continue on as normal if they did not have symptoms. It was wrong not to risk-assess these people at the airports. One might say that I am speaking with hindsight and that this is history but that is not exactly the case. Right now, seasonal workers are landing in Ireland to pick fruit this summer. I raised this issue last week and the Chief Medical Officer said that it was not good public health policy to allow this in the middle of a pandemic. Statements from the Taoiseach's office that day varied from, in the morning, that these were essential workers and should come to, in the evening, that the Taoiseach shared the concerns of the Chief Medical Officer and that he was seeking an urgent review into this practice. It has since transpired that the Government actually lobbied the EU to allow the movement of these seasonal workers right across the EU. Does the Taoiseach agree with the Chief Medical Officer? Does he believe we should adhere to a policy of restricting people's movement? Will he make a change to that policy? We are still only providing leaflets at airports. Is it not time to have medical professionals in airports properly risk-assessing people entering the country?

I raise the issue of nursing homes which are in absolute crisis. Dr. Marcus de Brun, who was appointed to the Irish Medical Council by the Minister for Health, said that these are "the biggest political blunders in the history of the Irish State", that nursing homes "have featured as

23 April 2020

something of an afterthought”, and that the timeline of inaction with regard to nursing homes beggars belief. At the start of March, many nursing homes instituted restrictions on visitors. On 10 March, however, the Government said “socially restrictive actions around hospitals and nursing homes are not necessary at this moment in time”. Many nursing homes around the country opened up the next day and remained open for visitors for the next three weeks before visiting was banned by Government. On 17 March the HSE directed that nursing homes promote good hand washing and put up information posters. The number of people dead internationally on that day was 7,500. In March many nursing homes sought blanket testing for residents. On 4 April the Government promised blanket testing for staff and residents but that is only kicking in now and half of the nursing homes around the country still have not been tested in this way. The tests that are finally happening are revealing a shocking picture. There are now 1,944 confirmed cases of the virus in nursing homes throughout the country. This is 61% higher than the Government’s figure on Monday. The scale of this differential shows how important testing is, both with regard to the treatment of residents and workers but also in understanding the depth of the crisis in nursing homes. On 19 March, Nursing Homes Ireland, NHI, wrote to the Minister for Health seeking an urgent meeting or conference call. However, two weeks later the Minister for Health, in response to a press statement sent out by NHI that it still had not met the Minister, said that he looked forward to meeting its representatives soon. On 4 April we were also promised that a financial support scheme would be available to nursing homes but incredibly, yesterday we found out that not one cent of that scheme has been spent in any nursing home in the country as of yet. Staff at nursing homes and their representatives have been excluded from NPHE. Obviously we are in the jaws of a crisis and we need to focus all of our attention on fixing it but when this crisis subsides, for the sake of future health policy, I ask the Taoiseach to commit to an investigation of how the nursing home sector was handled in this country.

There will be no lifting of the lockdown until we are testing the outer ripple of the virus as it goes through the population. Testing is key to lifting the lockdown, saving lives and easing the financial burden on this country but testing also remains in crisis. On 19 March, the Minister for Health said that we would reach 15,000 tests in a matter of just a few days. One month later and we are testing at a rate of one third of that particular objective. People have been waiting for weeks for the result of their tests. Many medics will say that a delayed test means delayed treatment which in turn means delayed outcomes for patients. I too have worked with a family who lost a loved one. It was two weeks before the test result for the deceased came back to that family so they were unable to bury their loved one for two weeks. We had to chase up the test result for that family to relieve their stress. The criteria for testing at that point in the crisis were narrowed. They were not narrowed for clinical reasons but for capacity reasons and they still have not been broadened out again. Many people with symptoms of Covid-19 today will not get a test and the testing of asymptomatic people who have been in contact with confirmed cases, which is the Holy Grail in terms of actually solving this crisis, is still not even on the horizon. I understand that for a long time, testing reagents were simply not available in the quantities needed. Yesterday, startlingly, we found out that the State now has the capacity to test 10,000 people per day but how many is it testing per day? It is testing 5,000 people. We have the capacity to carry out double the number of tests that we are currently doing. That is an incredible figure given that we know how important testing is and that the WHO is saying “test, test, test”. Capacity is no longer a brake on testing. Government policy is a brake on testing at the moment, which is startling news. I ask the Taoiseach to commit to testing at capacity immediately.

Finally, hospital avoidance is a radical problem at this time. It is a significant threat to the health and the life of people. I heard of one hospital that sent out 60 invites to individuals for elective colonoscopies but only four people turned up. I have also heard of a number of people, including cancer patients, who have had their particular engagements cancelled. I ask the Taoiseach to do two things today. Will he commit to ensuring that cancer patients will not have any of their treatments cancelled in this State and to a public information campaign telling people who are in need of elective procedures not to avoid hospitals? It is estimated that a good chunk of the excess of deaths occurring at the moment are not Covid-19 related but are related to significant hospital avoidance.

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand Deputy Michael Collins is sharing time with Deputy Richard O'Donoghue.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: On testing, we are all aware of the situation as mentioned by all of the Deputies who have spoken. I offer my deepest sympathies to all of the people who have died as a result of Covid-19. I apologise to the families of friends whose funerals I could not attend owing to the restrictions in place. Not being able to say their final goodbyes to partners, relatives and friends at that time has been difficult for all families. I apologise for that.

I commend the Government on its quick response to Covid-19. It did not get everything right, but it has done its best. There are talks underway between all parties and none on a programme for Government. I have repeatedly made the point that when it comes to the appointment of Ministers those appointed must have expertise in the area for which they are to be given responsibility. In terms of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Taoiseach's medical background was significant to the early identification of many of the issues.

I commend our front-line workers for all of the work they have done, often without suitable PPE equipment. Much of the PPE equipment we have was imported from China, where Covid-19 was first identified. Companies in Ireland whose factories are closed but have the machinery and the know-how to make PPE equipment or to alter the equipment that we received from China have offered their services to Government but there has been no uptake of this offer. I have contacted the offices of Ministers about this but only some Ministers have come back to me on it. I am disappointed that some of them have not bothered to text, email or telephone me in response to the very important questions I raised. As a Member of this House I expected at least a response by text or telephone call such that I could put people in my area at ease.

The position in regard to farming and farm work that needs to be done is unclear. People have asked for permission to do essential work on their farms. The harvest season for farming is almost upon us. Under environmental regulations farmers are obliged to lay silage slabs, work which had to be postponed for the last number of weeks. They are now being told by some people in government that they cannot get concrete or other basic materials to do this work, while others are telling them they can go ahead. We need clarity on this issue.

There are people renting houses in rural settings who are building houses in respect of which there is a small amount of work to be completed. These people are making rent and mortgage payments for which there is no relief. Where social distancing can be upheld on these rural sites, where there is probably a week or two weeks of work left to be done, I ask that people be allowed to give back the rental houses and move into their new houses. They are being told they cannot do this and that there is no funding for them. We have seen HSE workers employed through agencies who are willing to help being given zero hours, but they do not qualify for the

23 April 2020

Covid payment as they are under contract to the agencies. This also needs clarity.

Deputy Michael Collins: Our sympathies must go out to the families who have lost their loved ones, and our thoughts and support must go out to them in these shocking times. The support of all, including the State, must also go to our health and front-line workers and the people in the community and voluntary sector who deliver meals on wheels. All this is hugely important to the people in their homes at this time. The postmen and postwomen are working tirelessly.

PPE is vital in the fight to prevent people from contracting Covid-19. Health workers in many areas, whether in nursing homes or home help, still have little or no PPE. I have been contacted time and time again by home help workers who have no PPE whatsoever. They are going door to door and are on the front line. They deserve more respect than to be left without PPE and we need clarity as to why that has happened. It leaves them wide open and very upset. Why are the health workers left without this equipment?

Many Deputies have mentioned delayed results. I have had numerous calls from people who have been waiting two or three weeks for results, even the other day from someone with stage 4 cancer pleading for his results. He will not be allowed get his treatment until he gets his results. It is not good enough that he is waiting for them. I was even told the other day by someone who left the country on essential business that our airports are carrying out no restrictions whatsoever. He sat on the aeroplane as he would sit at any other time in recent years. There are no restrictions whatsoever on people flying out of our country. Surely the airports and airlines must have the same restrictions as everywhere else.

Concerns in the community must be looked into. I respect that the Taoiseach has no magic wand to resolve all, but there is upset, especially among people over 66 years of age who are working. They feel badly done by. They are not asking for €350 in Covid money but are asking for the difference between their pension and the Covid payment to be given to them. They paid their taxes and continue to do so but have now been forgotten, just like rural social workers. These are part-time farmers or fishermen, many on the front line, delivering meals on wheels daily to people who need them urgently. They have lost their farming and inshore fisheries income and are left with €220 a week to raise their families. They surely deserve to have the difference made up to them, just like those aged 66 and on a pension. The only relief many of those over 66 have got in the past few weeks, after adhering to strict stay-at-home guidelines, is a grant of up to €500 from the Irish Red Cross and Age Action Ireland, two great organisations. This was to help with the comfort of our elderly. Applications were meant to be in by the end of August. Yesterday, unfortunately, it was announced that that application date had been brought ahead to tomorrow at 5 p.m., leaving tens of thousands of people who were looking for a few quid's worth of comfort unable to get their applications across the line on time. I urge the Taoiseach to ensure that the State steps in to help these people at this time. As I said, they are staying at home, they are adhering to the rules and they need help. I ask the State to consider stepping in and helping the Irish Red Cross and Age Action Ireland on this issue.

Another issue affecting the elderly in Cork is the mail delivery service. The mail delivery centre in Cork was closed and moved up to Portlaoise. Now elderly people and many other people trying to conduct business tell me their mail has not come for four or five days. Elderly people are ringing me saying they cannot get their *Southern Star* newspaper. Delivery is taking a week. These are small bits of communication these people need. In fairness to the Minister, he did give extra capacity to the broadband and mobile phone companies. This is

very important at this time because many people are trying to work from home and in rural settings. However, is that being fed down into the rural areas where these people have returned to work? At the moment it has not in Bandon, Clonakilty, Skibbereen and Bantry. People living in such places have been on to me continuously. The islands' economies are dependent on tourism. Due to the fact that islands are now closed to everyone but residents, that summer events have been cancelled and that ferries are running basic services, the islanders are worried. The populations of the islands had stabilised but they are now in a position whereby they might lose some of their people to the cities. What thought has been given to this? Again, I understand that a significant number of issues are at play but these are people's concerns. Tourism is the backbone of so many communities throughout the country. The hotel sector, cafes, restaurants and publicans are all in need of direction from the State because they are not sure where we are going. Will they be able to open their doors this year? If not, is something in place for them so that they can at least survive this crisis? We must look beyond this crisis. I need to talk about the farming and fishing sectors but I will do so at a later stage.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I tabled two questions in the foolish understanding that we might table questions and get answers but it seems this is not the way-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can do that. The Taoiseach will answer.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá dhá cheist agam, ceann amháin i nGaeilge agus ceann amháin i mBéarla. Baineann an ceann i nGaeilge leis na coláistí samhraidh. Thug mé fógra don Taoiseach go raibh mé chun an cheist seo a ardú. Tá a fhios aige go bhfuil cinneadh déanta ag an Roinn Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta nach mbeidh na coláistí samhraidh ag dul ar aghaidh an samhradh seo. Tuigeann na mná tí agus na coláistí samhraidh é sin agus ar a laghad tá cinnteacht ann anois.

Is é an rud a chuir isteach ar an earnáil agus ar na mná tí seo go raibh an fógra lom agus gan aon tuiscint ar cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an earnáil seo do na Gaeltachtaí ar fud na tíre nó ar na freagrachtaí atá ag an Rialtas don Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge agus faoin bplean gníomhaíochta a eascraíonn as an straitéis sin.

Fiafraím den Taoiseach an mbeidh sé sásta a rá go dtiocfaidh sé ar ais le sonraí ó thaobh pacáiste tarrthála don earnáil seo agus an fód a sheasamh i ndáiríre ar son na ndaoine seo mar tá rud difriúil i gceist anseo. Is é seo an chéad uair riamh a bheidh na coláistí samhraidh ar ceal. Níor tharla sé sin riamh roimhe laistigh de chéad bliain.

Sa bhreis air sin, tagann an earnáil seo faoi rialacha an Rialtais agus is é an rud is tábhachtaí an méid daoine agus gnóthaí atá ag brath ar an earnáil seo. Is croílár na nGaeltachtaí iad na coláistí samhraidh. Tá a fhios againn i bhfianaise a leochailí is atá an teanga agus na Gaeltachtaí, mar go háirithe bhí clár ar TG4 aréir - beidh an dara clár ar siúl an tseachtain seo chugainn - a chuir in iúl a leochailí is atá stádas na nGaeltachtaí. An féidir leis an Taoiseach mar sin teacht ar ais le sonraí ar phacáiste tarrthála atá práinneach?

I will zone in on nursing homes. The Taoiseach said that the real enemy is complacency. For me, the real enemy is us, as Deputies, thinking that we could rely on the narrative coming from this institution and other institutions. If experience has taught us anything, it is that we should never rely on the formal narrative. The real danger is that we would fail to learn, as has been stated previously by my colleague to my left, and that we simply go back to where we were. We must learn.

23 April 2020

On one level, this virus knows no bounds but, on another, there has been no equality in the way people have been treated. I had a quick look at the position relating to nursing homes with the help of the people who work with me and to whom I must pay tribute. This pandemic was declared on 11 March. When it was declared, it was accompanied by the comment that the virus was spreading so rapidly, the WHO had no choice but to declare a pandemic. The delay on the part of various governments in taking action was commented on. That was on 11 March. On 17 March, the Taoiseach travelled to the US. Less than five days later, there were four clusters in nursing homes but there was no action plan. On 24 March, there were clusters in nursing homes but there was no action plan. On 27 March, there were clusters in nursing homes but there was no action plan. I forgot to mention 26 March and other dates. Finally, the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, met representatives of nursing homes. It seems to me that nursing homes were utterly forgotten. To my horror, an expert from Trinity College Dublin told me that the issue in nursing homes had crept up on us. That captures my horror and upset. The real danger is that of losing the ability to feel upset at the level of deaths in nursing homes and residential centres, not to mention direct provision. Why were nursing homes not top of the list from day one? Why was action not taken and why is it not being taken in respect of direct provision centres, given that official briefing papers indicated an analysis was being carried out by the various local health organisations?

On private hospitals, as I drove to Leinster House today I heard that 75% of capacity in the two private hospitals in Galway is not being used. The State is paying €150 million a month to private hospitals. I ask that Deputies be given a copy of the contract with those hospitals.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Am I correct in my understanding that, rather than making a statement, I may ask questions and receive answers?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is correct, but the Deputy will have to leave time for the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I understand.

The Taoiseach is a doctor but I am not. That said, I understand that in medicine one does not put an emergency plan in place unless there is an accompanying medical recovery plan to come out of the emergency. Do we have a recovery plan? Does it set out criteria for when restrictions can be eased, such as in terms of transmission levels or ICU capacity? If there are such criteria, what are they? Have we already reached them? Undoubtedly, restrictions will be eased somewhat. Although we do not know what level of easing there will be, we will need testing. What level of testing and contact tracing capacity are needed in order to ease restrictions? Will an app form part of the contact tracing capacity? Is such an app being developed? If so, by whom? Will it use open-source coding such that one can see exactly what is being developed, what the app can do, to whom it can give information and what information about people it is processing? I have many other questions which I assume will be replied to by way of written answers.

An Ceann Comhairle: I invite the Taoiseach to respond to the questions of Deputy McNamara and, if he has a few minutes, to address briefly points raised by other Deputies. I acknowledge he is pressed for time.

The Taoiseach: Absolutely. On being pressed for time, I must represent the country at the European Council which starts at 2 p.m. I would not like the country to be unrepresented at it. In addition, as Members are aware, there is a two-hour public health rule which states that we

will become close contacts if we are in the same space for more than two hours.

I will first answer the questions asked by Deputy McNamara as he kindly left me time to do. A recovery plan is in development. It is the plan to allow us to unwind the restrictions that have been imposed on people. We expect to receive it and to be able to share it with the public before 5 May. We very much welcome consultation with Opposition parties which wish to make submissions on the plan. There is engagement with unions, employers and other sectors of society on how the unwinding of restrictions can best be achieved.

An app is being developed by the HSE. I do not know whether it will be ready before 5 May, although the Government would like it to be ready by then. I do not know enough about the area to be able to comment on whether it is open-source data content but I will find out and revert to the Deputy.

On the criteria for when restrictions can be eased, they are essentially the criteria set out by the World Health Organization. There are epidemiological criteria such as whether the number of cases and other data are going in the right direction, which is important. Second, there is the question of how are we doing in terms of ICU, bed capacity and overall health service capacity. In addition, there is the criteria of whether we have testing and contact tracing in place to respond to a second peak or a return of the virus, if that were to occur. Those are the kinds of criteria that come in.

Deputy Kelly raised-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: I do not mean to be rude, but I left time for the Taoiseach to answer my questions rather than repeat them.

The Taoiseach: Which question did I not answer?

Deputy Michael McNamara: What are the criteria in terms of transmission rates and ICU capacity?

On the app, the Department of Health stated it will not be open source. My fear is that it will lead to a similar fiasco to that created by the public services card which Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, stated had no lawful basis and, obviously, did not have buy-in from the public. We need to have buy-in for any app that will be developed.

The Taoiseach: On the open source issue, I do not know but I will check that out and come back to the Deputy. It is not an area I have particular expertise in.

We do not have exact numbers for the criteria yet. If there are to be magic numbers, they have not been set yet and we do not have any advice on that from NPHE yet. The criteria are the instance of transmission, including in relation to outbreaks in residential and other health-care settings, ICU occupancy, which is an indicator of transmission in the community, and public health capacity, that is, having adequate testing and contact tracing in place. Those are the criteria.

In the time allowed, I will try to touch on some of the other matters Deputies mentioned. On the Government's response to Covid-19, and it is not just the Government but it is the wider Government, including the HSE, healthcare staff and all of us who are fighting this virus, I have always felt we are fighting it on six fronts, namely: PPE to make sure our staff are protected;

23 April 2020

testing and tracing; ICU capacity; ventilators and bed capacity; the economic and welfare package to protect businesses and livelihoods; societal actions such as social distancing and lockdown; and protecting vulnerable groups, including those in care homes, prisoners, Travellers, Roma, the homeless and those in asylum seeker accommodation centres. People often ask which one of those has been prioritised over the other but it has never been a case of prioritising one over the other. We have always tried to fight this battle on all six fronts. I never attended a meeting where anyone ever said we should prioritise nursing homes over PPE or testing over social distancing, for example. That is not how it works. There are six fronts with six battles and we are trying to fight on every front every day in order to give each one equal attention and as much attention as possible. We have been running into problems every day, whether that is with PPE, testing, vulnerable groups or the economic and welfare questions but we are trying to do our best on each of those every day. It is a misunderstanding of how this pandemic is happening and of the challenges we are facing to think we would ever somehow set out a ranking order and say that PPE was less important than nursing homes or that testing was less important than the homeless. That is not how it works on the six front lines I am fighting on and it misunderstands the challenges we are facing.

On transparency, I accept the points Deputies are making about the need for greater transparency but I ask for their understanding. People are busy and they are swamped. They are struggling to read their emails and to read the interesting and important documents being sent to them every day from people all over the country who want to help and make good suggestions. This is a rapidly changing situation. Facts and data change by the day. Things we thought were true a few days ago may not be true today. Even our understanding of what the symptoms of the virus are has changed in recent weeks. The data changes on a daily basis and is very often out of date.

On testing, I am advised by the HSE that there is capacity to ramp up testing to 10,000 people per day in the testing centres and ideally the testing centres will provide an appointment time 24 hours from referral. Hospitals are doing testing for patients and healthcare workers in the hospitals at a rate of about 1,500 tests per day. The National Ambulance Service has ramped up testing to an average of 1,500 tests per day. The testing criteria have changed over the course of the pandemic and they will change several times. Initially anyone with symptoms was eligible for testing. That had to be changed in line with the World Health Organization guidance when we had a particular backlog to include only those who had fever as well as respiratory symptoms and also healthcare workers. NPHET intends to widen the criteria again. We have more capacity than demand at the moment, as was mentioned, so it will be possible to widen the criteria and NPHET will advise on that, perhaps as soon as tomorrow, with a view to widening the criteria next week so we can test more people. However, I need to be frank and honest with people. When the criteria are widened, it is done so on the basis that it is thought there will be extra demand but that is not known for sure. Therefore, there is an inherent risk in widening the testing criteria that we may find ourselves overwhelmed and running into problems with backlogs and so on all over again. That is not a mistake or a failure on behalf of anyone. It is just that one can only guess how much a change in criteria will impact demand. Everyone is doing their best on that front.

Deputies mentioned testing asymptomatic patients. Until a few weeks ago, the scientific advice around the world was that it was not useful to test asymptomatic patients because the viral load would be so low that the test would be negative even if the patient had coronavirus. That has changed and it now appears that SARS-CoV-2 can be picked up in patients who are

asymptomatic. People will be aware now that for the first time we are probably one of the few countries in the world, if not the only one, testing asymptomatic patients in nursing homes where there has been an outbreak. Two or three weeks ago, the science was that those tests would not be valuable and we did not have the capacity to do them anyway. However, we were always testing symptomatic patients in the community and in nursing homes.

On nursing homes more generally, the funding package is live and applications have been made to it. I believe that, so far, they have been small. Money has not been issued but will be soon. Personal protection equipment, PPE, deliveries are regular. As I said, testing is under way. I absolutely would have preferred that it would have been sooner if it had been possible. It was not possible because of the backlog and the prioritisation advice.

On staffing, there is an agreement with the unions to allow HSE staff to work in the nursing homes. It is voluntary and we are now asking people to volunteer to take up posts in nursing homes to help out there. In some cases, local hospitals have taken over governance. Dealgan House Nursing Home is an example of that and there may be more. For the record, there are different types of nursing homes in this country: public, private, and voluntary. I have seen no evidence yet that shows that any one sector has performed better than the others in terms of cases, deaths or infection control. Those which have made the news have largely been public ones, but some of those are excellent institutions. Even in really good institutions where there are great staff, where there has been PPE available and there are single or double rooms, and where everyone has done everything right, we have still seen the virus get in just as flu does in the winter season. It is important to bear that in mind.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will leave it there, please.

The Taoiseach: I ask that the Business Committee consider how we can do this better in future. I have written down nearly six pages of questions.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Someone in the Taoiseach's office can forward us the answers over time - the next couple of days.

An Ceann Comhairle: For the record, the Business Committee agreed to requests for questions and statements. If people consume all the time of the ten minutes making statements and including questions, it leaves no time for the answers. Deputy Martin's suggestion is best that the Taoiseach can respond in writing to points that he has not managed to cover.

Sitting suspended at 1.58 p.m. and resumed at 2.03 p.m.

Covid-19 (Irish Economy): Statements

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Before I begin, I would like to offer my condolences to those who have lost loved ones as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. I pay tribute to our public servants, healthcare professionals, carers and shop workers.

2 o'clock I acknowledge the remarkable solidarity shown by the overwhelming majority of Irish people towards their own families, friends and neighbours, but also towards strangers and the broader community as a whole, over recent weeks.

I welcome this opportunity to present the stability programme update to the House today. This is to allow Dáil Éireann an opportunity to debate the document before the Government

formally submits the final version to the European authorities at the end of the month. We have kept our assessment to the current year and next year. There is simply too much uncertainty to do otherwise. We have presented scenarios in our presentation. The economic projections set out in the stability programme have been endorsed by the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC. This is a legal requirement.

The discussion of our public health and economic status is honest about today but it is also honest about our future prospects and about what we can achieve. We can and will renew the economy of Ireland when we have recovered our public health but we are now in the midst of a severe recession, both globally and domestically. For Ireland, my Department is expecting gross domestic product to fall by 10.5% this year. This scenario rests on the assumption that the current containment measures remain in place for about three months – covering most of the second quarter of the year – and are incrementally eased thereafter. Recovery in the second half of the year is, accordingly, steady, while behavioural changes on the part of firms and households mean that the level of economic activity will clearly be below what would be the case had there been no pandemic. Therefore, we are now considering a U-shaped recovery.

It is evident to all in this House that jobs, and our people, have borne the brunt of an unprecedented economic decline. Our labour market has been turned on its head: transformed from a position of full employment to one where unemployment has risen at a completely unprecedented speed and scale. As highlighted yesterday, our unemployment rate could hit 22% in the second quarter of this year, having stood at just 5% as recently as January. Let me re-emphasise, however, that we can and will recover. Our economy can grow again next year, employment can grow, unemployment can fall, and our public finances can improve. This is because, as the experience relating to the previous financial crisis and great recession shows, our economy and jobs market are very resilient and have real underlying strengths that this crisis has not altered. In particular, the internationally traded sectors of our economy, such as those relating to technology, pharmaceuticals and medical devices, have shown themselves to be highly resilient during the current crisis. Moreover, we have entered recession because of a health crisis not because of imbalances in, or mismanagement of, the economy. In fact, none of the imbalances that characterised our economy previously - credit growth, borrowing from abroad through a balance of payments deficit - is evident at present. Household and large companies' balance sheets are, in many cases, in a much better position than a decade ago, at least at an aggregate level.

Once the pandemic is contained, we will be in a position to recover. The gradual recovery assumed in the second half of the year is projected to gain momentum next year, with the economy growing by 6% during 2021. We can expect economic activity to reach its pre-crisis level in 2022. A central focus of our recovery effort will be getting as many people back to work as the public health situation allows. We want to make the recovery a job-rich one - like the recovery from the financial crisis - and we will ensure that the right policies are put in place to deliver this in the context of a fundamentally different new normal in our economy. It is possible, for example, that we could see employment grow again next year, if we are successful in our public health efforts and if we see the global economic environment perform as we are currently projecting in the stability programme update. We could see an additional 115,000 jobs put back into homes and communities and that this will reduce the unemployment rate to below 10%. At 10% or even below that, it is still too high but it is a significant change from where we could be in the coming weeks. A strong and diverse jobs market has been the engine of our recent economic success. We are determined that this engine will once again be able to provide

a job for everyone who wants one as we move into the post-Covid 19 era.

I will now update the House on the budgetary situation. In budgetary terms, the responsible manner in which our public finances were managed means that we are in a position to absorb a short-term and significant increase in borrowing. As the House knows, we achieved a surplus of 0.4% of national income last year. That would have accelerated considerably this year. We also set up a rainy day fund and we have been steadily reducing our debt ratio in recent years. That is the foundation of our ability to respond now.

For this year, a sharp deterioration in the public finances is now expected, with a general government deficit of approximately €23 billion, or 7.4% of national income. To be clear, this projection is based on assumptions about public health, what will happen with economies elsewhere and on policy decisions that have already been made. As such, it excludes decisions that could be made by this House, this Government and the Government yet to come. When those assumptions change from a policy point of view, or if the economic recovery is delayed, the deficit could change, too. It could be as large as indicated in the stability programme update, €30 billion, or approximately 10% of our national income.

However, in the event that we recover in the way I have outlined - I have every confidence that we can when our public health allows us - it is feasible to foresee an economy that begins to recover, albeit at a pace in line with where we are with public health, this year and grows next year by approximately 6%, with important qualities in our labour market creating jobs. This in turn will create the ability to reduce the deficit next year.

This year's deficit arises from a combination of decisions that have been supported by the House. I wish to emphasise my appreciation for the way in which many of my colleagues in the Oireachtas have approached the decisions we have needed to make at speed. Measures have been taken to support homes, support our citizens who are facing a considerable loss of income and support firms in keeping jobs. That was entirely appropriate and is the way in which budgetary policy should be used. The very reason we run surpluses in good times is to ensure that we have the resources available to us at times such as this.

The House will be aware of the expenditure commitments that have been made to support income. The additional funding that has been provided is based on the projections that I have updated the House on previously and will in turn impact on our public finances. The debt-to-national income ratio is forecast at 69%, an increase of ten points. Meanwhile, our debt-to-GNI* is expected to increase to 125% for the year. To put those figures in context, the changes are in line with the international norm. Our budgetary position is very much in line with that of other advanced economies responding to the crisis. It will mean that, within the Stability and Growth Pact, it is likely that we will see the triggering of an excessive deficit procedure. However, we will share that with many other countries within the European Union.

In terms of repairing our public finances, economic recovery can drive most of the improvements. Growth will boost tax revenues and reduce unemployment, both of which will benefit the public finances. Furthermore, if the right decisions are made at international levels, we can avoid the pain of the last crisis.

This does not mean that this or a future Government will be able to do everything. Our deficit will have to be reduced, our national finances must return to a position of balance again. The daily debates about making choices within limited resources that existed before this crisis

will endure and continue after the crisis has passed. What we value and prioritise and how we pay for it will continue to be a central debate of democratic politics.

We will be able to fund our deficit for this year and next. The situation is currently favourable. The National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, had approximately €22 billion of cash on its balance sheet at the end of March. Part of this was used to refinance an €11 billion bond that matured this week. An additional bond matures in October and there are a small number of bilateral loans that mature this year. The NTMA will also finance the Exchequer deficit of €15 billion, partly through cash balances and with new financing, which will be long and short-term in nature. The NTMA has announced its 2020 bond-funding range schedule and, importantly, we can borrow at less than 0.5% on ten-year debt at the moment. I also note that there are no bonds maturing for next year, which gives us important space. The State is in a strong position to fund the deficit that has developed. Equally, it will be essential that as our economy improves, so will our public finances.

Let me be unequivocal. Ireland will recover from this crisis. We will come out the other side of it. We have the economic and social capabilities that will pull our country through. This Government, the next Government and the Dáil can and will make decisions that will get our citizens back to work, that will help small businesses reopen and that will get trade flowing again. The State will be stronger, more resilient and have greater capacity, which I am sure will be needed, to meet the needs of our society as a result. That recovery will take time, determination and significant resources. It will involve difficult decisions but we can rebuild our economy. When we consider the alternatives to the measures we have undertaken we quickly realise the value of a caring society. The Government acted quickly and decisively in the interests of all of our people. This intent was supported and strengthened by the House. I have made the point on many occasions that I am the Minister for Finance of an economy within a society and not a society within an economy. As we have seen in recent weeks, Ireland is more than just an economy, it is a society. The stability programme update provides the backdrop against which decisions to protect and renew both will be made.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I will share time with Deputies Cowen, Calleary and Troy. I will vacate the Chamber as soon as I have completed my remarks. I convey my deepest sympathy to all of those families who have lost loved ones due to Covid-19 and to all of those families who have lost a loved one for whatever reason and as a result of whatever cause in recent weeks. It has been an incredibly tough time for everyone.

On the stability programme update published this week, it is fair to say that we have never seen a stability programme update or economic document prepared against a backdrop of such extraordinary uncertainty. The truth is that the future paths of our economy, of the public finances and of the global economy are inextricably linked to the future of this virus. If the virus lingers, the economic impact will also linger and recovery will be delayed. While the forecast makes for pretty grim reading, the document acknowledges that the reality could, potentially, be worse, although we hope it will not be. Added to all of the uncertainty surrounding the virus we have the outstanding questions on Brexit, which remain deeply unresolved.

The truth is that the ability of other countries to manage this virus will also have a direct economic impact on Ireland - even if we get to the point where we have contained its spread - because of the nature of our open and trading economy. In the midst of such uncertainty, it is understandable that the stability programme update provides only a two-year forecast as opposed to a five-year forecast horizon. We are truly in a period of uncharted economic territory.

The overwhelming weight of economic opinion and international economic advice has been that governments must provide the necessary fiscal supports to their economies and, in particular, income supports to workers and businesses. They must also provide the working capital those businesses need to stay alive. The Government has made significant efforts in this regard, supported by this House. During this phase of the crisis, sustaining these supports is vital. There are operational issues around different elements of those schemes, which we have spoken about before. For example, regarding the wage subsidy scheme, many firms are falling foul of not having had their February payroll return in by 15 March, in some cases for very good reason. Revenue is saying its hands are tied by the legislation and, while I know that raises more fundamental issues about this House and the Government, it is a real issue affecting many firms.

There are other issues that need urgent attention, for example, insurance. The scale of working capital support for SMEs is not yet at the level it needs to be at. To date, we have had no intervention in regard to guarantees or credit lines for larger firms above a turnover of €50 million, which will need access to those. The issue of commercial rents is causing very significant problems, the nature of forbearance offered by the banks is a significant issue, and we will soon need further announcements from Revenue on the deferral of certain payment obligations by taxpayers and companies. Over time, we will need to move to the preparation of a national economic recovery plan, which will need to apply sector by sector, with specific initiatives for areas such as tourism, retail, hospitality and construction, to name but a few.

Like the Minister, I am confident that our economy will recover. Over time, we will need to reduce what will be a very substantial deficit and we will need to be able to demonstrate a pathway to debt sustainability. Ultimately, that will be vital for Ireland. We do not want constant debate again in this House about bond yields and how much cash the NTMA is holding. However, those decisions are for another day. We need to sustain the supports that have been made available, improve them where necessary and work on the recovery of our economy. We need to help businesses refloat and get back up and running, and support workers in getting back to employment.

Deputy Barry Cowen: National solidarity has been key to our response to this crisis. Leadership, empathy and communication of the decision-making process on foot of public health expert advice has won public favour, understanding and appreciation. The curve is being flattened and, no doubt, many lives have been saved, despite our losses. I join others in commiserating with the families of all those who have died in recent weeks as a result of this crisis and beyond, as Deputy Michael McGrath has said. We have a duty to play our part in keeping this strong sense of common purpose, which requires trust in our political system and leadership. As we see the curve flattening, we also see the catastrophic impact on the economy, the public finances and jobs. Of course, this puts great pressure on that trust. It would appear, by my reckoning, that we are unfortunately reaching the legal limits associated with this Government's ability to respond to the crisis. In that vein, I ask the following questions in regard to public expenditure.

Under the Central Fund Act 1965, the Government is committed to spending four fifths or 80% of what was authorised in the Appropriation Act of the previous year before the Estimates are brought to and approved by Dáil Éireann. Some €54.6 billion was authorised in the Appropriation Act 2019 for 2019 expenditure. At a macro level, this would mean the Government has some €43.6 billion to spend before it needs to bring forward Estimates for 2020 to the Dáil for ratification. According to responses received from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection will hit the 80% limit in June and, so, will be unauthorised to make further expenditures until an Estimate is voted

on and passed by the Dáil. That being the case, has the Government sought and received legal advice, for example, as to whether Estimates can be brought to the Dáil under the current arrangements? We do not want a situation where Departments need to make adjustments to their individual budgets to prevent the Vote from reaching an 80% allocation.

On another issue, it is unclear when the pandemic unemployment payment expires. If it expires in May, as seems to be suggested in the health Act that was signed some weeks ago, then the Minister would, no doubt, need to sign an order to extend it. This needs to be clarified. When in law does an order need to be signed to extend the pandemic unemployment payment? Further, under the provisions of that Act, that order needs to be laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas. It needs to be clarified when this will take place. Moreover, it needs to be clarified whether it is possible to lay an order before the Seanad even though the Seanad is not constituted fully. My understanding is that the order must be put before both Houses of the Oireachtas and that each of the Houses has 21 sitting days to annul the order if each House so wishes. In terms of the key questions, when after the order is made must the order be laid before both Houses? Can such an order be laid before the Seanad if the Seanad is at that point in time not fully constituted as is currently the case?

In regard to capital expenditure, most if not all major capital projects have been halted during the course of the lockdown. Has a plan been put in place to get these projects up and running? What happens if deadlines are missed and the contractor incurs additional associated costs? I am thinking specifically of the children's hospital but also of many other projects. How do the relevant contracts deal with that? Will we have to spend yet more money on the children's hospital because of delays caused by the lockdown?

Those are pivotal questions that need to be answered in the context of the Government's legislative programme, or lack of it. It may have those tools in the recent Act but the Minister needs to clarify that to ensure that we can move on.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are having an economic discussion but we are having it in the context of a health emergency where 769 people, as of the latest figures, have passed away, including 250 in the North of the country. We have to think of their families and the questions they will have that need to be answered but, equally, we also have to have a debate about the consequences for our economy. I am aware that discussions are taking place at EU level and I note the German Chancellor's remarks that this is the biggest test of the EU. Let us hope that the EU is up to that test. The EU was set up in the context of the division of Europe after the Second World War. Now, if it is to face the biggest test, it should do so in the spirit of European co-operation and not some of the game-playing that seems to be going on at the moment. I wish the Minister well in that regard.

There are a number of specific areas we need to discuss. To get our country back up and running economically, the issue of testing arises. I know that is a matter for the Minister for Health but the Minister must also have an input into it in terms of the level of testing he has seen and on which he is getting advice to allow the economy of the country, and work, to return. There are specific issues on which I seek clarification. Those over the age of 66 who are not getting the pandemic payment are not looking for the full €350. They are people who were working up until the middle of March. They want their incomes to be brought up to the €350 and are willing and want to go back to work as soon as possible.

Every single sector is facing challenges but there are sectors, including our farming and fish-

ing communities, that are facing a particular challenge. They are part of the response to this, and they have been hailed for their response, but they are facing massive pressures. They need clarity because they do not have control over their supplies. They do not have control over their production. That is in somebody else's hands.

When we look at the response in Northern Ireland, they are giving business grants to small businesses and to the hospitality sector. They are not giving low-cost loans. A low-cost loan at 4.5% is no such thing when we consider the current cost of funds. In terms of getting small businesses back up and running, some have already been told that they will not get facilities from their banks or an extension of their overdraft. If we are serious about getting businesses up and running, they will have to go into a low-cost loan scheme. That is what is being rolled out in Northern Ireland and also in Denmark, which we are looking at closely.

Yesterday, the Minister mentioned tapering the payments. Instead of tapering them can he link the reform of the payments to reforming the wage subsidy scheme because the more he reforms the wage subsidy scheme, the greater chance he has of keeping a link between employer and employee? If that link is strong and supported, there will be less need for the pandemic unemployment payment. I note all the changes the Minister has made. He has made some very good changes and responded but more changes are necessary in order to keep people in the scheme.

Tá fadhb mhór le cúrsaí Gaeltachta freisin. Entire parts of the economy of the Gaeltacht regions have been wiped out by the necessary decision not to proceed. The acting Minister of State, Senator Kyne, is working on it, but early indications will have to be given about the supports that are available.

Finally, we acknowledge the massive work on the part of the Government and front-line workers, HSE workers and staff in retail and service operations throughout the country. We would be in a far worse position were it not for their efforts.

Deputy Robert Troy: The IMF is predicting the worst global recession since the Great Depression. Earlier this week, the Minister outlined the stark effect of Covid-19 on our domestic economy. The policies deployed today will determine the pace of our economic recovery. I will focus briefly on the SME sector, a sector on which the Irish Exchequer is heavily dependent. First, I have raised the issue of business interruption insurance policies umpteen times. It is clear there are insurance companies that are ignorant of their responsibilities. We urgently need an independent arbitrator. We can use a reformed and adequately resourced financial ombudsman that can give an efficient, legally binding decision to the affected businesses. They need clarity and certainty, and they need that now.

The Government must explore access to trade credit. Without Government intervention post Covid-19 it will be extremely difficult for businesses to get trade credit. Suppliers will not have the confidence to supply their creditors and that will reduce the ability to trade normally again. Other EU states are considering trade credit schemes. As such schemes require EU approval, we must examine the position in respect of them now. Germany is leading the way and is currently awaiting EU approval.

The greatest risk with companies going out of business is that they will not open again. The wage subsidy scheme is helping businesses and is maintaining the link between the employer and employee. The Minister made some changes to the scheme but more are needed. It is

23 April 2020

wrong that tax-compliant, sustainable businesses are refused entry to this scheme if they are even a day late with their January and February returns. The Minister must direct the Revenue Commissioners to be flexible in this regard.

In the area of liquidity, almost everything the Government has offered so far is debt finance at commercial lending rates, with non-normal application criteria. This does not compare favourably internationally and it is not getting down to the businesses that need support. I ask the Minister to intervene. Much more must be done. A national recovery programme must be put in place-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): The Deputy must conclude.

Deputy Robert Troy: I am finishing now. This must be done by a new Administration. We need a new Government, and we need it fast.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): We only have a certain amount of time. If Deputies speak for more than the allocated time, they will deprive others. I am sorry to be abrupt.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Since the public health emergency began, sectors of our economy have had to be closed down to contain the spread of the virus, with economic activity brought to a standstill. As a result, thousands of workers have been laid off with households losing much, in some cases all, of their income. With trading brought to a halt thousands of businesses are struggling to survive. This week's stability programme update offered a stark warning of the impact Covid-19 has had, and will continue to have, on jobs and our economy unless the Government acts.

The report forecasts that our economy will not recover until 2022 at the earliest, with 220,000 jobs lost this year and a rate of unemployment next year that will be twice that which obtained in 2019. This pandemic has plunged our economy into a deep recession. The forecasts published this week were made on the basis of no further Government response. That means the length and depth of the recession are not yet set in stone. It will depend on the success of our public health response and on the economic response of the Government. A severe downturn, long recession and cuts to living standards must be avoided. They can be avoided if the right decisions are made. The Government's response to this crisis must come in two stages, namely, containing the economic fallout now and building a recovery that rewards rather than punishes workers and families.

First however, just as we seek to contain the spread of the virus, we must move quickly to contain the economic damage it has caused. Last month, on 23 March, I wrote to the Minister for Finance outlining Sinn Féin's proposals for an immediate response to the crisis. They were based on the principles of acting fast and doing whatever it takes to protect incomes, to support businesses and to prepare for economic recovery. Among the measures we outlined was an income support scheme that would subsidise 100% of workers' net weekly pay up to a maximum of €525 per week. The wage subsidy scheme that was rolled out by the Government later that month fell short of these proposals in a number of areas. Employers were only required to pay 70% of employees' wages and workers with weekly take-home pay of less than €500 were receiving less than they would on the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment. This gap led to a reduced uptake in the scheme. I welcome the fact that the minimum payment of €350 was introduced for employees with previous net pay of between €412 and €500 per week, but

anomalies still remain in the scheme. A full-time worker on the minimum wage will receive less than €310 under the scheme, which is €40 less than the pandemic unemployment payment. Until this is addressed, fewer workers and employers will sign up to the scheme, increasing unemployment once we reach the other side of the emergency. The longer the relationship between worker and employer is broken, the more likely it is to remain permanently severed. The numbers speak for themselves. More than twice as many payments are being made through the pandemic unemployment payment than through the temporary wage subsidy scheme, and this needs to be reversed. Already we hear of Government preparing to taper off or cut these supports for people who have become unemployed and whose wages are currently being supported. To be clear, when the Department of Finance projects that as a result of this pandemic 220,000 people will still be unemployed at the end of this year, there is no way we should even be talking about reducing supports for these vulnerable individuals at this time. If anything, the crisis has shown us that our social protection system was not fit for purpose. This is not the time to cut income supports. It is an opportunity to rebuild a social protection system that provides adequacy and provides households with a floor beneath which no one can fall.

At a time of national emergency and with so many households in financial difficulty as a result of job losses, it is essential that all institutions play their role. This must include banks and the insurance industry but so far, this has not been the case. On 23 March, the Government and the five retail banks announced a three-month payment break for mortgage holders affected by the crisis. The Minister for Finance claimed that these actions provided real support for those most affected by Covid-19. The reality is very different. What is being offered by banks is not a break but a deferral, which comes at a very hefty price. I will give one example for the Minister. I spoke with one individual who is a customer of Permanent TSB, a bank owned by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, on behalf of the people of the State. The person, a mortgage holder, applied for a three-month mortgage break. The bank replied to the customer that he would pay more interest over the term of the mortgage than if he did not avail of the payment break. Permanent TSB made clear to this customer that the change in the cost of the credit as a result of the payment break would be €7,739. This is the Covid-19 penalty that Permanent TSB, a State-owned bank, is imposing on an individual who is finding it tough at this time, along with many others who have lost their jobs and seen their household incomes destroyed by this crisis. They are being penalised by banks with additional debt as a result of this emergency. It is unacceptable. The interest should be waived during the period of the emergency for those who are unable to pay their mortgages or debts. These people should not be re-profiled with additional interest applied. I put it to the Minister that it can be done. It has been done by banks in other jurisdictions, including in European jurisdictions. This caretaker Government must demand the same from Irish retail banks, particularly those banks we either own or where we have major shareholdings. The Minister can start next Wednesday at the annual general meeting of AIB by demanding that it does the right thing.

Let me also make clear that there are major issues around the insurance industry. Despite calls by the Central Bank for the insurance industry to offer rebates to customers, the insurers are refusing to do so. They are still refusing to offer premium reductions or rebates to motorists despite a sharp decline in cars on the roads and in the numbers of claims being made. For businesses the problems go much deeper than that and are no less challenging. As thousands of small businesses are battling for survival, insurance companies are determined to make that battle harder by refusing to pay out for business interruption despite this being included in black and white in insurance contracts. On 26 March, and again last week, I stood in this Chamber and raised the issue of FBD Insurance. Despite that insurance company giving written assur-

23 April 2020

ances to businesses that their policies would cover interruptions arising from an outbreak of Covid-19, it is now failing to pay out, forcing individuals to take it to court. We need to step in and to ensure that the Central Bank does as I have requested and audits the way in which insurance companies are handling these claims.

As I have said repeatedly, it is a disgrace that the Minister has refused to sign into law legislation that was passed by the Dáil and the Seanad in December last. This legislation offers additional protections for individuals and businesses with regard to insurance contracts. In some of the court cases of which I am aware, that legislation would have provided additional protection. The Minister should do the right thing. These Houses have passed that legislation. The Minister should sign the letter to allow it to take effect.

The challenges faced by businesses are very great. Large swathes of our economy are in lockdown. Cash flow problems are becoming more severe and debt is mounting. Businesses' survival is on the line. They require immediate liquidity supports if they are to survive to the other end of this public health emergency. The Government-provided supports to date have been inadequate. Existing supports such as the SME credit guarantee scheme and the Covid-19 working capital scheme not only require additional funding, but reform. The working capital scheme in place to provide short-term liquidity to businesses charges rates of up to 4.5% and is subject to the banks' own credit procedures. I have spoken to businesses and they are not applying for these loans. They do not want additional debt at this time. They need zero-interest loans. At a time when we are borrowing at negative interest rates on the international markets, that is the least we could do for our companies.

Last month my colleague, the Minister for Finance, Conor Murphy MLA, rolled out a series of business grant schemes in the North that provided £10,000 to eligible businesses impacted by the pandemic. On Tuesday he provided grants of £25,000 for affected SMEs in the hospitality, tourism and retail sectors. Together with a commercial rate holiday, rather than a deferral, for affected SMEs, the Government should provide similar short-term liquidity supports for businesses.

I am running out of time as I am sharing mine with others. There is a need for a sector-by-sector economic recovery. This should be funded by stimulus and ensure that we build the homes, create the jobs, deliver on universal healthcare, and transform our social insurance system. There is role for Europe to play in this. I have written to the Minister about our proposals in that regard. Let me be clear; there can be no return to the way in which both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael dealt with the last crisis, which was to implement austerity which deepens and lengthens the recession. We need to invest our way out. We need to use this opportunity to build social networks and safety nets for our people and citizens.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Covid-19 crisis has caused a major economic shock. Hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their jobs and many businesses are struggling to stay afloat and face an uncertain future. We need an economic and social plan for the here and now. We also need a plan for when we start to emerge from this crisis - which we will - and we have to get it right. We have choices to make and we must make the right ones in the time ahead. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the past. The Minister's Government cannot rule out or dismiss solutions previously rejected as politically impossible. A return to austerity is not the answer. We need a stimulus package that creates jobs by investing in housing and infrastructure and which also provides decent healthcare, a roof over people's heads, and decent work and pay. We need balanced regional development and sectoral recovery plans for sectors that will be

deeply hit by this crisis. We also need to challenge those profiteering from this crisis, including the banks and the insurance industry.

Austerity, emigration and building an economy on low pay and precarious work can no longer be part of the solution. They are the failures of the past. Previous Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments before, during and after the last economic crash cut the minimum wage and income supports for lone parents, to give two examples. They saw emigration as a release valve and solution. What we now need is a living wage for all, not some vague aspiration to achieve this. We need a real living wage in the here and now for workers. We also need a bailout for workers and families.

I also want to applaud all of our front-line workers. However, the front-line workers of today cannot be the forgotten workers of tomorrow. Many of the front-line workers in retail are on low pay, have if-and-when contracts and are victims of precarious work. We need to end all of that and end the hollowing out of our public services. We have a clear choice; we can continue with the low road chosen in the past of building an economy based on low pay and precarious work or we can take the high road and build an economy based on decent work, decent pay and decent public services. The choices we make will determine how long this economic recession lasts. If we make the right choices and put proper supports in place for workers and families, we will come out of this crisis an awful lot quicker.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am really honoured to stand here today for my first address to the House. I am the first person from Knocknaheeny in Cork, a community that I am proud to represent and where my family is proud to live, to do so. I want to thank everyone who supported me on my journey through politics and in the recent election including party members and supporters, my family, friends and club, as well as the people of Cork North-Central who voted for me. I particularly want to thank my wife Michelle and our daughters, Aoife and Orlaith, my two sisters, Sharon and Noreen and especially my father Tony, who is a great man and a brilliant mentor. Unfortunately my mother passed away 27 years ago but I know that she would have been really proud to have her only son elected as a TD. I want to sincerely thank everyone who voted for me and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. The people of Cork North-Central have been neglected and abandoned for far too long. There is a lack of infrastructure, including the northern ring-road and hospitals, as well as a housing and health crisis but I will do everything in my power to fight for the constituents of Cork North-Central whether they are in the city or the county, on the north or the south side.

Today I have a question for the Minister from the people of Cork North-Central about the Debenhams workers. Has either the Minister for Finance or the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation contacted Debenhams Ireland to ask it to reopen its stores at the appropriate time and to keep its workers in employment? Debenhams has announced an initiative in the UK which will see it reopen the vast majority of its stores and keep its staff in work. If Debenhams refuses to reopen its stores here then it must guarantee its workers the redundancy payments to which they are entitled. It must negotiate with the unions on a fair and proper redundancy package. If Debenhams gets away with what it is doing now, it will set a precedent and my worry is that I will be in this Chamber speaking on behalf of thousands, if not tens of thousands of other workers-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): Thank you Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I beg the Chairman's indulgence and will conclude on this. The

23 April 2020

Debenhams workers have been treated terribly. It is time for this Government and the Minister for Finance to tell Debenhams and all other employers that workers will not be collateral damage in this crisis.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): I am sorry to interrupt but if we do not stick to the time, other people will be deprived of the opportunity to speak.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I appreciate that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): The Green Party is next with Deputy Leddin.

Deputy Brian Leddin: It is our duty as parliamentarians to not only keep our citizens safe during the immediate crisis, but to ensure that we plan for the future. The Irish people have never lost faith in their future and that of Ireland. It is at our toughest times that we must hold onto and safeguard this faith in our future. As a nation we have endured hardships but we have prevailed and will do so again. It is with this faith that I address this House.

The framework for recovery already exists in Ireland. We already have the resilience that will be required. What we need from the State and what we as Deputies must ask of the State is to support our communities. We must place faith in our communities and remember, *Ní neart go cur le chéile*, there is no strength without unity: we are in this together. It is the duty of this House to ensure that the recovery, when it comes, brings about prosperity for every corner of Ireland. With leadership, foresight and honest application of hard effort, this Dáil can guide Ireland through these dark days. With a unity of purpose and trust in the highest principles of public office, those of duty and service, we can achieve a balanced recovery for our nation. I firmly believe that this recovery can take root through following green principles. The Green Party's policies are integral to achieving a fair and prosperous society for all.

In Thomas Kinsella's translation of *The Táin*, Nes asks, "What is the present hour lucky for?". What can we say when we are asked the same question now? How can we answer, except to say we used this challenge as an opportunity to show our abilities, our determination and our self-belief. The front-line heroes have responded magnificently to this crisis and we must trust in ourselves to carry this effort forward to recovery.

While the State has many avenues through which it can support its communities, I want to raise the issue of balanced regional development. This regional development can unlock the strength of Ireland's communities and ensure a fair recovery for our cities, towns and villages that reaches all parts of our island. We have a duty to learn from our mistakes and apply new technologies, practices and knowledge. We need to enable people to work from every corner of Ireland to ensure every corner of Ireland can work. As we seek to rebuild our economy we can do it in a more balanced and beneficial way. Limerick, Cork, Waterford and Galway have immense potential in their own right and as leaders of their respective regions. We have a duty to ensure that each city has the infrastructure to be best poised to move from this devastating moment towards a bright future. One size, of course, does not fit all. Thankfully, our country is home to talented, knowledgeable experts, many of them young and well travelled who can unravel the diverse requirements of each city and region. The gifted generalists must learn to work with these highly educated, bright, multidisciplinary professionals, urbanists, transport planners, architects and designers. We must employ them at the great rebuilding task that is before us.

What then is the necessary infrastructure of the next recovery? What are our strengths that we can build on and what opportunities can we take advantage of? Now is a good time to take stock and think about the future. The public and private sectors have shown during this crisis that remote working can work. In many respects, among the unknown heroes of this period are the IT professionals who worked tirelessly to ensure whole industries could move from offices to homes. They have kept people working and we owe them our gratitude. Can we learn from this experience? Can we make it possible for more people to work remotely from all parts of Ireland in the future? I am hopeful that we have learned a new way of working that we can use to cut-down on long commutes and allow more people to work from rural communities. Where we need to expand our public service in the coming years, we should do so in a cost-efficient way, not necessarily by basing new public services in Dublin but by locating offices in cities that can benefit from economies of scale. Decentralisation was politicised in the past, but it can work well if we focus our efforts on our regional cities.

We are seeing so many inefficiencies in our capital owing to the cost of office space, housing and transport. We want to see Dublin thrive as an international city but to do that we need our regional cities to be more attractive in order to ease the pressure on Dublin. One of the reasons for my entering politics is that so many of my peers in Limerick saw no future for themselves in the city and so moved to Dublin or further afield. I believe we can do more to keep talent in the regions. We can develop regional cities that complement Dublin, to allow Dublin to become a more affordable city, to remove the traffic that is choking our capital's historic core and to give the city and its citizens the space to breathe. We have seen how other European countries have recognised that regional cities can be significant drivers of national economic growth and exist and prosper on the European and global stage. We should have a similar ambition for Ireland.

I wish to talk about our towns and villages. Rural Ireland has been let down by poor planning practices. Once-bustling towns and villages have been undermined and gutted through haphazard, ill-thought-out policies. A viable and resilient rural economy cannot exist unless towns and villages are attractive places in which to live and work. We can ensure that our towns and villages are compact, walkable, vibrant and thriving once again. This can only happen if we, the State, provide the necessary infrastructure, whether broadband, shared workspaces or ambitious public realm projects that embrace the natural and historic characteristics of our towns. Our economy depends on efficient transportation to help people to access education and work. High-quality and reliable public transport in rural areas will connect our communities and bolster our rural economy. I wish to acknowledge the success of Local Link but we need to expand it significantly. We can and must increase speeds on our intercity rail network to ensure our regions are well connected. Cycling and walking must be a mainstay of transport policy so we can benefit from clean air, better health and safer streets. I do not want my generation to be the last to experience the joy of cycling to school.

Our capacity for investment will be limited as we emerge from this crisis but it is fundamentally important that we are able to meet our needs without compromising our children's ability to meet theirs. This applies to our economy as much as it does to our environment. So many of the false divisions in our society - between private and public, urban and rural, young and old - mean little as we all seek to work together. We face many challenging decisions in this House in the months to come. Whatever shape the recovery takes, it must be felt by all and in all parts of our country. Our economy must serve our communities rather than our communities only existing to serve the economy. We can end long commutes if we lead the way with community-strengthening infrastructure such as public transport. If we can revitalise communities such that

23 April 2020

people have the time and energy to get to know their neighbours and to coach their children's sports teams, we will have succeeded in leading a community-focused recovery. As we build a new society, we must ensure that care is extended to all, that as a community we can say we look out for and after one another. I have faith that together we can revitalise a community-based, considerate and loving Ireland.

I will finish by thanking the people of Limerick for their mandate and their support. As the rallying call of Patrick Sarsfield's Wild Geese went, when they fought on overseas battlefields for Ireland, "Cuimhnigh ar Luimneach". I will be here to ensure that Limerick is remembered. I will place myself at the disposal of all Limerick people to represent their interests and issues to the best of my ability.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I congratulate my near neighbour on his maiden speech. The financial projections published by the Minister earlier this week, particularly the bleak outlook on job losses and the financial deficit in which we find ourselves, are very worrying. I know these are uncharted waters and that some of this involves guesstimates, but this is increasingly worrying given the devastating impact it will have. Covid-19 has obviously had a devastating impact across the global economy and it will affect us in a proportionate way. Our near neighbours in the UK are facing their worst decline in centuries, and other countries are not faring much better. We had a Party of European Socialists, PES, group meeting today at which different proposals regarding help at a European level were discussed. While we know that the short-term outlook is bleak, the decisions the Minister, the Government, the future Government and this House take in the near future will shape our economy and our recovery.

There are essentially three questions that need to be asked. First, when and how do we open the economy and in what proportion? Second, how much will we ultimately spend? Who will pay? While the physical well-being of our citizens is paramount, we need to start giving some hope to people. I referenced this earlier today and last week. We need to start letting people, particularly those who are expecting to get back to work in the short term, know that there is a plan in place and that there is hope. Any plan that is published must give a loose timeline. I accept that it cannot be ultimately defined point by point but we need to give workers some peace of mind, allow our citizens to feel like they will be getting back to some form of normality and give employers a chance to figure out how they will create that normality. In other words, we cannot allow a vacuous space. We need to predict, hopefully, and allow for employers to adapt.

Much of what happens in the next few weeks will be trial and error. We may need to reimpose restrictions at some point if things change again, as they have done in other countries. The past six weeks have been devastating for businesses and employers. What we know for sure is that the rights of workers cannot be undermined at this time. Others have spoken about Debenhams and the manner in which workers have been treated. These workers have had no say in what comes next and are not allowed to fight for better terms in an exit strategy. That is not acceptable. It cannot be allowed to continue. Many Deputies from regional areas know that there have been many job losses at regional newspapers. Many of us here feel very strongly that this is being opportunistic because the companies are quite profitable. This example is similar to the one at Debenhams. It cannot be allowed to happen. We cannot allow circumstances to be used to treat workers in this way.

As we face into continuous restrictions, one area I want the Minister to concentrate on is the hospitality industry. As the Minister knows, I previously worked in Fáilte Ireland and Bord

Fáilte. This industry will be affected in a different way compared to everyone else. We all know that many parts of this sector such as entertainment, events and other forms of hospitality like pubs and restaurants will probably not be able to function for a significant period of time or in some cases, may be able to function in a short space of time but in a restricted way so we need particular supports and plans relating to that and I hope they are being worked on.

The way we really test the true extent of our solidarity in the State is how we extend our support to those who are most vulnerable. We know that many people are under enormous strain because of temporary lay offs along with people who have lost their jobs altogether. Unfortunately, just because we are in a pandemic does not mean that rent does not have to be paid, electricity bills do not have to be paid and living expenses do not exist. I think I was the first person in this Dáil to say, and I keep repeating it, that we need a plan for the crystallisation of rent debt. People are not able to pay their rent. It is not a case of just pushing it off, having rent caps and saying that people cannot be evicted. I know that if the Government extends it from three months to six months, as worthy as that is, it will extend this issue down the road. The fact is that rent debt will be crystallised. People will have serious debts so what is the plan to deal with it? Otherwise, at some point in time, landlords will evict them. Could the Minister tell us what his solutions are?

It was hard to listen this week to a minority of employers who said that hordes of employees were leaving and signing on for the Covid-19 payment. It reminded me of something from Victorian times and it was disgraceful. What I would like to find out from these employers is why they are paying their employees so little in the first place. Maybe by going through this bad period, we can respect and support the workers in retail, security and other sectors and get them a living wage, which they deserve because, ultimately, we are so dependent on them.

The Minister's projections and stability programme update predicted that unemployment will peak at 22% this year.

Going by those predictions, 200,000 people will be out of work. We need him to put forward comprehensive plans to address this. The Labour Party believes that the exceptional supports must continue and that we must not abandon workers and their families. We need a national conversation on this crisis and major decisions to be taken now on how we will manage its cost. Figures published by the Department of Finance indicate a deficit of €23 billion. We are in a space where it would be more affordable to borrow more and add to the national debt than to impose savage austerity on citizens. That is the belief of the Labour Party. It is clear that it is better to borrow and spend to protect the vulnerable than to cut off public spending too soon. The Minister has major decisions to make.

A solution also exists at EU level. The Union has made funds available. In particular, I wish to put forward the proposal of the Party of European Socialists, which was supported today by Pedro Sánchez, my Spanish colleague. He proposes the creation of a €1.5 trillion economic recovery fund. The logic is simple: no member state can recover while other member states are in deep recession. We all need to recover together to enable us to restore our previous levels of trade. Collectively, the EU can borrow money at a cheaper rate than can countries such as Spain and Italy that are carrying higher debt and have been hardest hit by Covid-19. The proposal is for a once-off fund and it will not tie the EU into future collective debt-sharing. The collective borrowing of money will allow for a lower interest rate, which will ease the difficulties being faced by indebted countries. The Spanish proposal is a simple and effective one. It is also a simple and effective test of EU solidarity. The Minister should consider it.

23 April 2020

My third question is the most crucial: who will end up paying for all of this? A price is currently being paid by those who have lost their jobs or businesses, particularly small businesses. Let me be clear that my party is, and always has been, opposed to unfairness. We must not have unfairness in this situation. In 2009, the Labour Party stood alone in opposing the bailout of the banks. Today, the banks are profitable and, until recently, bankers were looking for increased salaries while we are still paying for the bailout. In the same vein, the Labour Party will oppose any situation whereby low and middle-income families end up bearing the brunt of the cost of the pandemic while high earners and big corporations do not pay their fair share.

In the minute I have left, I wish to raise two issues. There is a lack of consistency in the approach of the banks in respect of mortgage payments. The Minister knows that as well as I do. It needs to come to a head. The banks should be brought in. Rather than the banks marching in to see the Minister, he needs to call them in to do what they said they would. In addition, we need some form of regulation by the Central Bank of lenders that fall outside this catchment because a number of lenders are behaving in an abhorrent way towards their borrowers who are struggling with mortgage repayments.

My final point is in respect of the insurance industry and the companies that have a business interruption clause in their insurance policy which is not being respected. I know of cases in which Covid-19 is mentioned in the policy but the insurance company is still not honouring the claims. This must also be brought to a head. Those watching these proceedings, the small and other businesses across Ireland that are struggling and have these policies deserve those policies to be honoured. In particular, I ask the Minister to start by addressing businesses which are struggling and badly need the business interruption clause in their policy to be honoured, as well as those whose policy specifically refers to Covid-19.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: None of the talk here today will count for anything and none of the projections will come to pass unless we get one thing right, namely, the question of tracing and testing. The entire strategy for addressing the pandemic in this country is to have a substantial testing and tracing regime in place such that a minimum of 15,000 people per day are tested. There has been talk about that for several weeks. Currently, only 5,000 people are being tested per day. None of the proposals being made today will matter or come to pass unless a substantial testing and tracing regime is put in place. Talk about lifting the restrictions and getting back to any kind of normality is without any basis unless the testing is put in place. We know that if there is any relaxation of the lockdown, there is a high probability there will be a second wave of this pandemic. The only way to address and be prepared for that is to have a full test and trace regime in place. That is the number one priority we must all focus on and we are far from being in a position of having that regime fully up and running.

The stability programme update, SPU, announced by the Minister yesterday was unsurprising in many ways, given what we have come through in recent months. On behalf of the Social Democrats, I support the Government in the main in the action that has been taken. I certainly support the approach that has been taken on the health front in following the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, notwithstanding the serious issues in nursing homes which I will come back to later on with the Minister for Health. We also support the approach that has been taken to move quickly to protect people's incomes to the greatest extent possible. It is important, however, to point out that the kind of projections set out in the SPU yesterday envisage a three-month horizon for restrictions being lifted. There is no certainty about that. That brings us back to the question of testing and of our ability to test.

The other matter I am concerned about with the stark picture and the huge economic challenges that were set out yesterday is the Government's approach to funding this substantial deficit of a minimum of €23 billion this year. That could well come up to €30 billion or even €40 billion unless we get everything right in the health response. The question then arises of who will pay this substantial bill. I am quite concerned about the Minister's approach as set out today in his speech where he says we have sufficient reserves ourselves and that the NTMA has a lot of cash on hand and will be able to raise loans. While we recognise that interest rates are low at the moment, there is no way we should be put in a position where we are at the mercy of the bond markets. My big fear is we will have a repeat of the kind of responses we had to the earlier housing and banking crisis of ten to 12 years ago. I fear that we will end up in a situation where, rather than having stimulus in our economy, we will be talking about retrenchment and austerity. When we look at what happened in the last recession, we see that the burden of that austerity fell on the shoulders of ordinary families. We are still living with the legacy of that austerity and people are still trying to recover from the huge hit they took in their lives and incomes during that period. I am not encouraged by what the Minister is saying about who and how we will pay for this enormous deficit that is facing us in the coming months and years.

I am concerned about the approach Ireland seems to be taking at EU level. We know the Taoiseach is joining with his counterparts in other European states this afternoon. The message coming from the Irish Government on the approach to European funding is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, the Government has signed the letter with the other eight states saying all of the European firepower should be made available to address this. On the other hand, the Government is sending the message that it will deal with this itself by raising its own loans. The implications of that are enormous for the Irish people if the Government goes down that road.

This is a crisis that is affecting every state across the eurozone. The response to that has to be a Europe-wide one. There is substantial economic and fiscal firepower in the EU and there is no reason Ireland should not be arguing as strongly as it possibly can for an EU response that concerns some kind of instrument that will ensure that people across Europe do not have to pay the price for this pandemic, over which they had no control whatsoever. There is huge potential if we learn from what happened after the First World War, for example, when many loans were made available to Germany and the UK which were repayable over 100 years, making them effectively meaningless as it was in many ways free money. Money is currently available at zero or negative rates of interest. There is no reason an instrument cannot be put in place to ensure that European money is made available to member states to allow them to deal with the huge deficits which arise from the pandemic. That must be the approach. It is the only fair approach that can be taken. The future of the eurozone is at stake. We need to see substantial evidence of solidarity across the EU and to do that, we must recognise that the huge debt hanging over all the EU states must be mutualised. Any other response will inevitably lead Ireland into further years of austerity.

The rules for the wage subsidy scheme are overly strict. Its lack of flexibility is really hitting small business. Businesses have contacted the Minister on this. If they are even a day late in making their payroll returns they are refused the wage subsidy scheme, which makes no sense, and there is no appeals system in place either. The purpose of the scheme is to keep people attached to their employment but the strict operation of these rules works against the scheme's intention. I ask the Minister to re-examine this and address the issue.

There are other issues around the mortgage breaks which my colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, raised yesterday. He appealed for an extension to the mortgage repayment breaks

23 April 2020

from three to six months. It is really important that happens. Some 45,000 households are affected by that. In the main, those who applied for the three month break have not seen their circumstances improve, if anything they have disimproved. There is a very strong case to extend that to six months. There is a wider issue of why people in Ireland are paying 3% interest on their mortgages. If the Minister was serious about addressing this, he would ensure that our banks pass on the kind of favourable interest rates, which are practically 0%, to their mortgage customers. There is no reason mortgage holders in this country should be paying anything like 2% or 3% interest rates, it should be 1%. The Minister should be leading the way with the banks that are owned by the State. AIB should be forced to provide those kinds of mortgages.

The position on pandemic payments for those over 66 years is very unfair. There has been an appeal to the Minister that he ensure that people who have been working and are over 66 years can have their State pension topped up to the level of the pandemic payment of €350. It is only fair.

As I said, there is a definite need for the response to this situation to be a stimulus package rather than austerity. The pandemic has exposed huge frailties in how things are done in this country in terms of how we provide public services, including healthcare, nursing home care, access to affordable housing and childcare, all of which are inadequate. There is also low pay and poor working conditions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister has already thanked those at the coalface saving us, but the way to thank them properly is by ensuring they are properly paid.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil sé deacair ach tá an t-am srianta do chuile dhuine. Táim ag bogadh ar aghaidh go dtí People Before Profit agus Solidarity.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputy Barry.

I welcome the fact that the Minister said the economic strategy should be led in the first instance by public health concerns but those words have to have meaning. They cannot just be a rhetorical commitment to putting public health first. In the immediate term, putting public health first means we have to have the resources to ramp up dramatically the testing and tracing regime. That will mean permanent increases in laboratory capacity, laboratory technicians and all the equipment and investment that is necessary to have a testing and tracing regime of the scale necessary to have some chance of moving back to normality. It cannot be temporary; it has to be permanent. That requires a lot of investment and there has to be a clear commitment to it. Professor Samuel McConkey said the nursing homes need 20% to 30% more staff. That has to be permanent. The nursing homes were understaffed, under-equipped and under-resourced. That has to be put right, and it has to be permanent.

A friend of mine, a nurse, put herself forward for the Be on Call for Ireland initiative four weeks ago but she still has not been placed. She is willing to work in nursing homes. Why is this not happening? I would hate to think it is because the Government is being careful about how many people it recruits in case it has to keep them employed at the other end of this crisis. That would not be good enough.

The same point applies to ICU capacity. We need permanent increases, probably a doubling

at a minimum. The additional ICU capacity is temporary and once we restart the rest of the health service, it could potentially be eaten up. Therefore, we need permanent increases in ICU capacity. Even to bring us up to the European level, we have to double it. A key part of that is staff, not just equipment. One has to employ and train the staff, which has to be paid for. There has to be a commitment, if we are serious about public health concerns leading this, to permanent and dramatic increases in capacity and staffing in the health service and in the resources necessary to deliver the tracing and testing regime. That means health workers have to be paid. We could not recruit them over the past year or two because we were not paying them. My nurse friend asked me why she has not been recruited. Is it partly because it is being done by Cpl, meaning there is an agency factor and reluctance to recruit people and pay them properly as permanent new members of the health service? It all seems so obvious. There has to be an integrated health service. The lesson has to be an end to the two-tier system. The Taoiseach says of the public and private sides that there is no proof one is performing any better than the other, but there is absolutely clear evidence that there is a lack of coherence, consistency and integration in our health services. That can be achieved only by having a single, integrated public health service. The clue is in the phrase “public health”. Profit has to go out if we are to transition back to where we were while living alongside Covid-19 and to protect ourselves against these things in future. That is a no-brainer. To me, it is beyond doubt.

Professor Samuel McConkey pointed out, in the document he produced weeks ago, that to do as I describe, there has to be social cohesion. To have social cohesion, he says, we need widespread social trust, and to achieve social trust we need a widespread perception of social equality. To achieve a perception of social equality, we need social equality.

Deputy Mick Barry: Socialism.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Exactly, socialism. One cannot have workers such as Debenhams workers thrown out by the private market, which is interested only in profit, and left on the scrapheap, particularly when the State has a stake in that. That cannot be done. The alarm bells of austerity ring when I hear the Minister for Finance talking about divisive choices and tapering off Covid-19 payments. There can be no return to austerity if we are to have the social cohesion and trust necessary to transition out of this crisis and into the new social contract that we need in order to come out the other side of this crisis.

Deputy Mick Barry: According to this morning’s edition of *The Irish Times*, “There is growing concern in the Department of Finance that current unprecedented State supports are unsustainable in the medium term.” I think that refers to the wage subsidy scheme but the particular subject of the article was the Covid-19 payment of €350. That payment is key for huge numbers of Irish people at the moment to put dinner on the table and keep a roof over their heads, not just for themselves but for their families. Without it they would go underneath the waves. I understand the decision is to be made in mid-June on whether to continue with the payment, how to continue with it and what happens next. That decision should be based on the needs of the population. No doubt the Minister will say it should be based on the needs of the population, while also taking into account the finances of the State. The needs of the population, however, are paramount. Can the State sustain that payment? Yes, it is possible if the right policies are followed. For example, there is €14.3 billion in a bank account that the European Commission awarded to the State in back taxes from Apple. The Government has refused to consider seriously the question of wealth taxes but that is a luxury that can no longer be afforded. *The Sunday Times* tells us there are ten individuals who have €53 billions’ worth of personal wealth between them. We will have to have serious wealth taxes if we are to sustain

the measures that are needed to sustain the population. Premature dismantling of those supports would meet with powerful opposition from ordinary people, all the more so when they can see that wealth is available within society but is untouched by the caretaker Government.

The report in *The Irish Times* went on to state “Government sources were also tight-lipped about the prospects for the final instalment of the public sector pay deal”. That is the 2% increase due to 300,000 workers and more at the start of October. I remind the Minister that included among those 300,000 public sector workers are nurses, ambulance personnel, firefighters, doctors, the teachers the Government is asking to supervise the leaving certificate examination and so on. The framework document that Fine Gael has put together with Fianna Fáil states there will be no tax increases in the lifetime of this Dáil but it should also say that the public sector pay increases agreed with those workers, including those front-line workers, will be respected.

There is furious international lobbying by big business for states to reopen their economies as quickly as possible. The attitude is summed up by the former chief executive officer of Wells Fargo who stated:

We’ll gradually bring those people back and see what happens. Some of them will get sick, some may even die, I don’t know, ... Do you want to take an economic risk or a health risk?

There is no room for that type of approach when it comes to reopening the economy. I have no doubt but that the Government is under a lot of pressure from lobbying by business interests in this respect. Working people want to see the economy reopen but terms and conditions apply. It has to be safe. The health and lives of working people have to come before business profits. Working people should decide when different workplaces and areas of the economy go back to work.

They should not be compelled to return to work against their wishes. Workers who are particularly at risk in terms of health should have the right to stay at home, not in poverty, but on full pay. When workplaces reopen, health and safety matters must be decided by the workers. On construction sites, for example, Covid-19 compliance officers should not be stooges of the management but should instead be democratically elected by the workers to decide what is safe for them.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The economic commentary relating to Covid-19 can at best be described as depressing. There is no doubt that we, as a country and a people, are facing a monumental task in getting our economy, society and lives back again once we have pulled through the worst of this health emergency. We must also be conscious of the fact that, if we talk down confidence, we will further undermine our ability to recover and build new communities that are fairer for all. Even with dire economic warnings, we must provide hope. Hope has a powerful role to play during times of great uncertainty. We need a plan that gives hope to employers and workers, the self-employed and farmers, families, and old and young people. We need to make it clear that, whatever decision is made on lifting restrictions on 5 May, it will be taken not just on public health advice, but also on the basis of mental health and wellness and economic advice. We need to open our country, but we must do so responsibly.

As a first step, the Government should list specific businesses that can open under certain conditions. We must go further, though, and allow people to act in a responsible and mature manner themselves, that is, allowing those who can demonstrate social distancing to return to

work. There are many who do not fall neatly into any category but who pose minimal risk because they, for example, work alone. There are other jobs where several employees can easily comply with social distancing rules. However, this should be conditional on them placing a yellow notice on public access points to their workplaces or businesses outlining exactly how they are complying with those rules. On that notice, they should also provide the public with a contact number to register a breach or complaint with, for example, a local authority, the Health and Safety Authority or a combination of State agencies. After such heroic efforts by every citizen in the State to stop the spread of the virus, we cannot allow a second wave of infection under any circumstance. If people breach the rules, they should be shut down immediately and face a stiff fine.

The Government must take on a leadership role and state that people returning to work or those meeting others outside of their families should cover their mouths and noses from this point on. I am referring to face coverings, not medical face masks, which we all acknowledge are in short supply.

We are conscious of the fact that it will not simply be a case of business as usual from next month and that we will have to find new ways of doing things. Social distancing will present challenges that are unique to each industry, profession and business. Now is the time for those people to start planning how they will be able to reopen safely when the time comes and what will become the new normal. Businesses and employers must, now rather than on 5 May, start considering their strategies for reopening. For example, Supermac's has already decided to reopen some of its restaurants where social distancing can be safely observed. Others must follow suit.

Rebuilding our economy must be done through a Covid-19 recovery plan, one that will take up to 1 million individuals off the unemployment register and into a new economy that works for our people rather than just works our people. The Finnish Government has put it well by calling it an economy of well-being. In such an economy, public resources are allocated for improving people's well-being. "Well-being" means that people are healthier and more innovative and productive, and they work and pay taxes. We have a golden opportunity to reinvent our economy but we need a new decision maker and a new decision-making process to make this happen. The public needs leadership and this can only be provided by a stable Government with a clear mandate. This needs to happen quickly.

While the caretaker Government, working with public health officials, has brought us to this stage in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, to progress to recovery mode and provide certainty for the people, the eight Regional Group Independent Deputies believe it is now imperative that we move from talking about Government formation to real and substantive talks on an actual programme for Government. In tandem with a new Government, I suggest that as part of the programme for Government we establish an independent Covid-19 recovery squad, made up of four innovative and experienced Irish men and women. These would be people who have stepped back from their roles as business people, entrepreneurs, financiers and academics, who want to give something back to our Republic that would last for generations to come. They would take a day or two a week to look at the merits of proposals that come not only through traditional policy avenues but from business people, innovators and our citizens. They would have a different perspective on providing solutions to age-old problems. As Deputies, we already receive innovative suggestions, such as, in the past, the Gathering in 2013. We now need a new way to assess these and a new way to look at and tackle the problems. The Covid-19 recovery squad could look at a proposal or solution, or put forward a call for solutions

to a problem, and give their views directly to the Government.

The current end-of-term Government does not have the luxury of sitting back and waiting for a new Administration. It must, in the short term, act decisively. An immediate step must be to minimise the need for people physically to return to work by setting out key practical measures to support a national remote working strategy. There are huge opportunities for Ireland to become a global leader in remote working, which would attract new foreign direct investment to all regions and even to our villages. This could offer a real opportunity to deliver jobs for rural Ireland and breathe new life into our rural communities. The Government must set a target of transitioning to a post-Covid-19 economy where remote working makes up 30% of the workforce by 2030 in our public and private sectors, including IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland supported companies. The question has been answered for companies as to whether remote working can be done. The challenge now is to sustain it and ensure it is managed so that productivity and employee engagement is positive. This will start today with the Government delivering clear guidelines for employers and employees on remote working and simplifying the process of establishing remote working employment. A new approach must provide meaningful tax incentives for employees and employers. The feedback I have received on Revenue's e-working allowance is that it is unwieldy to apply for. This must be streamlined with immediate effect. We must look at the value of this incentive. In the example on Revenue's website, where an employee works from home for 90 days, the total amount claimable, if that person were to do so directly, amounts to €43. This will not incentivise the type of change that is now urgently needed.

While on the issue of regional job spread, we have to do our utmost to protect the jobs we already have in regional Ireland in agriculture, farming and tourism and in Bord na Móna and the ESB in midland counties. These sectors cannot wait for a new Government. We need to see action now to protect our family farms and our workers, some of whom need to be provided with alternative decent work options. We need directions from the Government now and not next year.

There is a long road ahead of us to recover from the effects of Covid-19. This is something we can do together as a nation. We have tackled many problems in the past and with the right approach we can do so again. We need to encourage innovative solutions and find new ways to incorporate them into Government policy development. If we do this right, we can have a practical and profound effect on the future of our nation, the economy, the people and the generations to come. There is no doubt the road to recovery will be a long one. It is critical that we start to plan now for an Ireland living with, and an Ireland living after, Covid-19.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Donoghue, who is sharing time with Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: We have heard from other speakers that broadband is a major issue in rural areas. I recently opened an office in Kilmallock, County Limerick. When I had broadband installed, four different people came to my office before they got it up and running. People who live within half a kilometre of me, who are on a main route between Charleville and Kilmallock, have been forced to go to work in 19 different businesses because they cannot get broadband at home. I have been sent around in circles trying to get broadband through the services that are available to us. This affects 19 businesses. One employer has 60 people employed and he cannot open his doors because some of his employees cannot work remotely from home. These are the issues we are facing.

We listen to the Green manifesto on the need to bring down emissions. Broadband will bring down emissions in this country and it has been promised for years. If people are in a town or a city, or on a route between a town and a city, they can get broadband, but if they are any way off the beaten track, they cannot, unless they are working for the Government or the HSE. Everyone should get it because the service should be the same for everyone.

Members spoke about the five major banks, the five major banks that let everyone down, but none of the speakers mentioned the credit unions. All of the directors of the credit unions are volunteers. The credit unions are regulated by the Central Bank, like other institutions, but they are run by volunteers. I did not hear People Before Profit mention them, despite the fact they are volunteers. This is the only sector which came out, when people needed a three-month break from their payments, to tell them it would give them the three months and this would be added to the end of their loan, without interest being added on. Nevertheless, they were not mentioned with the five major banks.

I have written to the Government to ask if it has met with the credit unions but I have not yet received correspondence in reply. This is the only sector with directors who are volunteers and which is giving relief to members who have loans. The credit unions have rewritten their paperwork so that this happens at the end of the loan term so there are no repercussions.

Insurance companies have come out and insulted the people who have policies with them. I am told motor insurance customers have been offered €5 of a rebate, which is disgusting. These companies should be held to account. There is less traffic on the road and fewer accidents but, again, they insult us by doing this. Other insurance companies even mention Covid-19 on their policies, yet they want to bring people to court. They want to see whether companies can withstand Covid-19 and reopen, or whether they will close in the interim.

With regard to front-line services, there is a question I want answered. If people are in construction or a similar business they will have apprentices who are paid throughout their training. I have brought up this issue previously. When this Covid-19 pandemic is brought under control our trainee nurses have to be paid while they train. We see the importance of our front-line services in a pandemic, as is the case now. They must have the same rights as any other trainee in this country, and they have to be paid. Our front-line service staff are essential, in the same way that our farming sector is essential. As I said earlier, farmers are contacting me on a daily basis who are trying to get work done for the harvest. They are being told by one office that their work is not essential but if they phone a certain party they are told that they are now available to do their work. Farmers keep food on our tables. Their work is essential. In terms of all farming work for the harvest season, a measure should now be implemented to ensure farmers have full rights to get materials to complete their work.

Deputy Michael Collins: As the Minister knows well, the tourism and hospitality sector has been decimated in the past number of weeks. As I said earlier, the Minister does not have a magic wand to resolve every issue but it is something we have to look into further. This sector is the largest indigenous employer within Ireland and it is currently devastated by business closures and significant job losses in Cork. Tourism makes a vital contribution to our economy. The future of many jobs now hangs in the balance as we do not know when hotels can reopen. Equally, when they do reopen, we do not know how our local domestic and international markets will respond in these uncertain times. The only certainty we have is that this market will take a long time to recover so we need to put safeguards in place to try to protect our people and their businesses across the bed and breakfast sector, restaurants, cafés and pubs.

23 April 2020

Some of the measures could include waiving local authority rates and water charges for at least the next 12 months. I would also urge the Minister to consider removing the VAT rate for tourism until the industry recovers and, equally, reducing employers' PRSI. We know that cash flow will be a significant challenge and some Government grants will be needed. Interest free loans and arranging payment breaks on senior debt for at least 12 months would be very important.

For those over the age of 66, which I mentioned here this morning, the Minister is the Minister in charge. These are sole traders, many of them self-employed, who are paying income tax and yet are not entitled to the Covid-19 payment. It is astonishing that many people over the age of 66 who have had to continue working to top up their pensions and who are paying tax are not entitled to the Covid-19 payment. Why are the people over the age of 66 who worked hard all their lives and continue to work hard beyond the retirement age being penalised by not being given a Covid-19 payment or even the difference to make up the €350 payment, for which most of them have been honest enough to ask?

One of my constituents is a 68 year old woman. She is one of many who has worked all her life. She has bills to pay and other financial commitments. Those commitments have not changed because of Covid-19. Why can she not receive the difference in payment which would make up at least partially for the job she has lost and may never get back? Hers was only one of a vast number of calls we have received from people in the past few weeks. I presume every other Deputy has received them also. Our older people should not have to suffer any more than anyone else due to Covid-19. We are asking the Minister to reconsider topping up the payment to the full Covid-19 payment of €350 for people aged over 66 and who have pensions but who have lost their jobs due to Covid-19 and those who are self-employed or sole traders.

The same is the case with rural social workers who are currently playing a huge part on the front line trying to do essential work such as meals-on-wheels or whatever. Some families are earning €220. They have lost their outside farming income. They have lost their outside fishing income. They are simply asking if their payment could be made up to the €350. They should be shown some respect in these difficult times.

I refer to the issue of the Debenhams workers in the Covid-19 crisis. Two thousand of those workers nationally were informed by email on 9 April that the company's 11 stores in the Republic were not expected to reopen because of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the company liquidating its operations. The staff have kept this business going for the company and worked very hard. Debenhams staff have taken many cuts over the years and they are now devastated to be told via email that their jobs are gone. This is a shocking time to lose their jobs. Every assistance the State can give should be given to those workers at this time.

A sector people do not talk about much is the taxi and limousine business. I know one businessman in Kinsale whose taxi and limousine business, like those of many more, has fallen to zero due to Covid-19. The limousine would be more a service on the tourism side. There is no tourism and no school transport and hotels and pubs are closed. The businesses to which I refer are seeking to apply for microfinance loans over three years. These loans are Government-backed through Microfinance Ireland. The businesses in question are on the verge of collapse. I fear that by the time the restrictions are lifted, they will no longer be in operation. They provide a vital service for the community and have built up great relationships locally. Some of them have been operating for 20 years and a number employ 15 to 20 people in the locality.

I have little time left. I wish to spend it discussing farming and fishing. Farmers are in dire circumstances at present, especially those in the beef sector. We need to see what aid is available. The inshore fishermen are pleading with me in call after call, day after day, to find out what is available to them. The larger trawlers are moored at the piers and there is no aid. They have the Covid-19 payment and nothing else. They owe millions and have employees. They need some type of aid and I would appreciate it if the Minister would address that.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I listened to the Minister's statement and we spoke last week in the Chamber. I raised a number of issues then and I will return to some of them now because, unfortunately, I have not yet received answers. I appreciate that it is a difficult time, but I hope to receive those answers at some stage this week.

I wish to address tourism in particular. Obviously, there are many concerns for everyone in the tourism sector as to whether there will be a tourism sector. We will need clarity very quickly. I appreciate that some easing of restrictions will be announced on 5 May, but we do not know what that will be. The sooner clarity can be brought to bear in respect of the situation the better, and the better chance there is of salvaging some of the tourism season, whether that is confined to domestic tourism for people in Ireland who probably will not be going abroad and will holiday here or if international tourists will be coming here and, if so, in what circumstances. We definitely need some clarity on that.

Being from the mid-west, I have a particular interest in the aviation sector and a balanced aviation policy. Perhaps this crisis, which I do not wish to diminish in any way, might afford us an opportunity to somehow rebalance the aviation sector, particularly in view of the fact that 90% of the people who travel to Ireland, many of whom are tourists, come through one airport. Will that be possible in the medium term? Obviously, we will open up. Dublin Airport and Shannon Airport are open, but there will have to be a limit on the number of people travelling through a busy airport in order to reduce the number of people meeting each other. The Government should examine now whether the other State airports, particularly Shannon and Cork, can be utilised more if we are going to bring people into the country in order to ensure that they are not funnelled into one airport with the obvious risk of transmission that would entail and make it more diffuse, even on a temporary basis. If that is to happen, the number of transport links between all the centres, and particularly from Shannon and Cork to Dublin, would have to be expanded. I urge the Government to consider that now so we can seek to salvage a tourism season.

I have already addressed the Minister on the difficulty people involved in the tourism sector are encountering with regard to the Covid-19 payments. They were not in employment on the date in question so they are not entitled to the social welfare payment. The people who ordinarily would be employing them by now are also not entitled to claim it. The Minister outlined the number of persons who are in receipt of it and the difficulties that increasing the number would involve for the economy at this time. However, we must examine supports for the tourism sector because it is particularly affected both in terms of the lack of a season and also how it is going to kick start itself given that people who would ordinarily be in employment are not now and may or may not be available for employment.

That brings me to the next topic, namely, people over 66 years of age. Persons over 66 years of age who are self-employed or who run businesses are not entitled to the Covid-19 payment because they are in receipt of pensions. That is all well and good if one is trying to maintain oneself, but if one is trying to maintain a business and pay the overheads of a business, it gets

difficult without any assistance. There is a large number of persons who are over 66 years and have a business. They are still incurring that cost so I urge the Minister to examine that. We need to look at the issue of debts building up generally and not just for people over the age of 66. There are, for example, small retail outlets with standing charges for utilities and rent, which is still clocking up even if it is being deferred. There are also, perhaps, standing charges for rates. What is to happen with regard to rates? Will no rates be charged for the period? We still do not have clarity on that. Will the rates not be charged now or will they be pushed back? At the end of this crisis many businesses will look at what debts they have incurred during this period and they will ask if it is feasible to return. We must look at whether grants or some debt forgiveness can be given in order to make it worthwhile for those companies to come back.

With regard to agriculture, marts need to reopen quickly and there has to be aid to private storage considerably over and above that announced by the European Commission. I have put forward questions on this and I look forward to receiving answers.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, for the efforts so far on the payments. I share the other speakers' concerns, which I will not repeat except in relation to the three month mortgage deferral and the interest rates and also the inconsistencies on the ground where people who are actually working are receiving less. I thank the Minister for his efforts on the payments, however, and it was the right thing to do.

I support Deputy Shortall's contribution on testing. We cannot talk about a recovery until we know exactly what we are dealing with. It seems to me that not enough testing is being done. I am no expert but I have listened to the experts. Even though there have been inconsistent messages from the experts, one consistent message has been the importance of testing. While 1 April can be a bad date, it worries me that in one of the briefing documents on 1 April we were told that sufficient test centres were open to meet current testing demand and lab capacity. Presumably the lab capacity was more the problem than demand because everybody would have come forward to be tested had they been encouraged. Now we have the lab capacity but we are still not meeting the testing capacity. I am worried that this is being done on a financial basis. I ask the Minister to tell me it is not. Will the Minister tell me that he is following strict health guidelines? I suspect that it is being done based on the finance involved in testing so many people. This is a worry. I am trying to get my head around the inconsistencies. Four testing centres were opened in Galway but now we have only one. I understand there is a community hub in Merlin Park Hospital that is not being used to its full capacity. Yet, we have no idea of the extent of the virus in the community, depending on which expert one listens to. I have a difficulty with that and we certainly need more transparency and accurate information.

I have some general comments on the recovery. I welcome the Minister's point that it is not just an economy we talk about, that it is a society. I hope the Minister will go one step further to say that an economy must always serve the people and must serve all the people in the most equal way possible because in the long term it is the better way to deal with it. Quite clearly the question the Minister and all Members should be asking is what all of this will cost. The more important question is around the cost of not doing it and what costs we have now incurred because we failed to have a one-tier public health system. This is despite repeated warnings over the years from various doctors around the costs of not implementing that. These figures are readily to hand and the Minister is much better at figures than I am. I take the figures that I hear from various Departments on the cost of not implementing A Vision for Change. Extrapolating from Northern Ireland figures it is, I believe, more than €12 million but I understand it is much higher than that. There is a safer figure to be had on the cost of not doing anything about

domestic violence, which costs the economy more than €2 billion each year. Let us ask what is the cost of not doing it and then ask what we need to do for a vision for society where we are all involved and where everyone can have the same choices and opportunities in life and let us work from that.

I looked at the framework document the Minister has produced and I despair really. Despite the preamble and the nice flowery language I do not see where anything has been learned. Consider public housing. There is absolutely no commitment around public housing on public land in view of the serious problem.

It is not stated anywhere. I see no statement in respect of the Irish language. A decision was made - rightly so and I understand why - to stop the summer colleges in the Gaeltachtaí operating. However, it was just a bare statement which showed absolutely no understanding of the role of the coláistí and the mná tí in the economy of all of the Gaeltachtaí or of how vulnerable the Irish language and the Gaeltachtaí are. An announcement was made without any context as to the 20-year action plan or the economic value of the Irish language.

The arts sector has been utterly ignored. I understand it has produced a comprehensive albeit brief document which contains seven points. I do not know if anyone has met with those in the sector, but from listening to the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, it is clear that she has not taken what they are saying on board. One of the points that jumps out is that those in the sector wish to be in a position to plan for next year.

My time is up. I have given out to others today so I will stick to my time.

An Ceann Comhairle: That completes our statements on the economy. This is obviously a matter to which we will be returning on several future occasions. We move now to No. 6, before which we will take a five-minute recess.

Sitting suspended at 4.01 p.m. and resumed at 4.06 p.m.

Covid-19 (Health): Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I welcome this opportunity to update the House on Covid-19 and our response to it. First, and most importantly, I wish to express my sincere condolences to the family and friends of those we have lost to this disease since this House last met. I am conscious that news bulletins every night are full of statistics and reports of new cases and new deaths but we should never forget that behind every number, every death, is a grieving family, friends, colleagues and a grieving community. That grief is compounded even further by our inability to grieve in the normal ways that we usually do in this country. We think of them today; we think of them every day and we offer our sincere condolences to their families.

Against the backdrop of such tragedy, I can often feel uneasy even discussing progress when it comes to Covid-19 but it is important, if not essential, that we reflect and acknowledge the difference people right across this country have made. Members will remember that when I was here last week I updated the House on the modelling work in relation to this virus. The reproductive rate had fallen to between 0.7 and 1.0. I am very pleased to inform the House today that

23 April 2020

the reproductive rate has now fallen even further to between 0.5 and 1.0. That means for every one person who contracts Covid-19, we now expect that he or she will spread it to no more than one other person and hopefully, to fewer than that. This progress is a huge tribute to the solidarity shown by the Irish people. However, this number is not static. We have achieved this progress by staying apart and we need to continue to keep that distance. If we continue we will suppress this disease even more. That is our national goal. We must not give up when we are starting to see that what we are doing is working and crucially, is saving lives. There are other encouraging signs as well. The model shows that at the beginning of April, around 100 people per day were being admitted to hospital with the virus. I am pleased to inform the House today that the model now shows that this figure has fallen to around 40 people per day which is quite a significant reduction. The number of people in intensive care is also falling and the number of people being discharged from ICUs is rising. I thank each and every one of our citizens and our front-line staff for all their work and for continuing with us on this difficult path. When better days come, these will be among the reasons we can be proud of our country and our people for the way they have acted in trying to defeat this national and global threat.

The significant number of clusters of Covid-19 in our residential facilities is the area of greatest concern and we have put in place significant measures to protect residents and staff. These measures include infection prevention and control teams, active screening of all staff and ensuring PPE supply to long-term residential care settings and home support providers. A total of 18 Covid-19 response teams across the country, each one led by senior nursing supports, are now assisting nursing homes and long-term residential facilities with senior clinical expertise, infection prevention and control and public health input in preventing and crucially, in managing those clusters. We have established a financial assistance scheme for nursing homes which is open for applications. As already mentioned, now that we have additional testing capacity, and I commend the HSE on its excellent work on this, we are now prioritising the testing of staff and residents in these facilities. By the end of today, 18,000 tests will have been carried out in long-term residential facilities. I thank the National Ambulance Service for the heroic work it has done since this work started last Friday. Tonight, I will meet again with HIQA, the HSE and the Chief Medical Officer to keep a continued focus on this area.

I am aware there has been much speculation and discussion surrounding the potential easing of restrictions from May. I understand why. It is human nature. It is what keeps many of us going, that need for a light at the end of the tunnel - families missed and friends missed, the simple things in life that we took for granted that we now really miss. I promise that we will set out the next steps, but I need people to keep focused on the here and now because the here and now matters. What we do in the next few days matters. For the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, to make these decisions, all of us as a people have a job to do. This involves staying the course, sticking with it, washing one's hands, coughing into one's elbow, social distancing and cocooning and protecting oneself. These are things which, perhaps, we are tired of hearing and saying but they are things that are vital in the next 12 days.

Covid-19 is a highly infectious disease. We are fortunate that the measures we have taken are reducing that infectivity but we are by no means in a safe place. It is important to stress that we are not in a safe place. If we had to decide on lifting measures today for tomorrow the Chief Medical Officer advises me he would not be in a position to recommend any change but we are working on a roadmap, which we will finalise over the next week. This will allow us to have a frank and honest conversation with each other about the weeks and months ahead, one that must acknowledge that increased movement carries increased risk. There is a very thin line between

where we could have been, where we are and where we may yet be in regard to this virus.

When I think of the roadmap, I think of it as a new social contract between Government and the people, a way to try to get our country back on track. This will require the involvement of every part of Irish society. It will demand communication and honesty from us on the public health risks and, also, consideration of the mental and physical wellbeing of all of our people. I wish I could tell the people right now what the future holds. We all crave that certainty, but it is too soon. The coming days matter. They will shape our future so please stay the course and please stay at home.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is ten minutes allowed per group for questions and answers. Would Deputies prefer one minute questions followed by one minute answers or five minutes of questions followed by five minutes of answers from the Minister?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Deputy Browne and I would prefer to split the time and take five minutes each for questions. My first question will probably take a bit longer than one minute but I will lay it out in a way that allows the Minister to respond.

An Ceann Comhairle: Okay.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Big efforts have been made to get our hospitals ready for a surge, which have been successful. Efforts were also made to ensure that surge was as small as possible, which have also been successful. The same efforts were not put into getting the nursing homes ready for Covid-19. As we sit here today, seven in every ten Covid-19 fatalities in Ireland are from a nursing home or community care home. Nursing homes are desperately short of staff and personal protective equipment. A nurse told me earlier this week: “Many of our residents have psychological conditions, there is Covid-19 in the air, Covid-19 on the walls and Covid-19 on every door; our senior nurses are all-out with Covid-19 or are self-isolating; we cannot get staff and we cannot get the masks that we need.” In this regard, there are two contributory factors. As Covid-19 began to move through the country, nursing homes did not have a voice with the Government or the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET. The Government’s Covid-19 action plan from mid-March mentions nursing homes only once and only then as facilities to which patients could be discharged from hospitals. There is no mention of supports needed for nursing homes. What of the public health emergency team? According to the minutes available from January to end March, the first time nursing homes were mentioned by NPHET was at its 12th meeting on 10 March. At that meeting it was agreed “that unilateral or widespread restrictions of visiting, which the nursing homes and some hospitals were implementing themselves, is not required at this time.” The first time nursing homes were mentioned by NPHET was essentially to advise them to stop their own restrictions. It was a further three weeks before the minutes show that NPHET agreed that action was required on nursing homes. This was at the end of March. The minutes show that NPHET made the decision to close the playgrounds a week before it decided that support was needed for nursing homes. NPHET has about 45 members and 11 subcommittees. GPs, patients, people with disabilities and the voluntary sector are all represented; nursing homes are not. Nursing homes are represented neither on NPHET nor on any of the subcommittees. The Minister’s position is that nursing homes do not need to be represented because they now have good access to him, which is fine, but the Minister also said in his weekend interview with Hugh O’Connell that every single decision he makes on Covid is informed by NPHET, that not a single decision he has made has not been recommended by NPHET. I am not disputing that, but if that is what he is saying then with the greatest of respect, while it is fine that the nursing homes have access to

23 April 2020

him, surely in terms of effecting policy they must also have access to NPHEt.

Will the Minister as a matter of urgency give the nursing homes representation on NPHEt? Can he say how many of the NPHEt meetings he has attended and at how many of them he has brought up these concerns that the nursing homes have been raising with him?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Browne has a minute and a half.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We will take our five minutes if we may.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have five minutes for an answer.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thought I had five minutes and then Deputy Browne had five minutes. I apologise.

An Ceann Comhairle: No. The slot is ten minutes in its entirety: five minutes for the question and five minutes for the answer. I call Deputy Browne.

Deputy James Browne: In those circumstances I will ask my questions as quickly as possible but they will probably not have much context. My focus is on mental health and the issues of disability coming out of Covid-19. Covid-19 is now our new reality and will be for the foreseeable future. We are already focused on the immediate Covid-19 curve and flattening it, but there is another curve that is rising, and that is mental ill health. This curve too needs to be flattened. The fallout of this pandemic will be experienced long after Covid-19 has passed. It will bring a secondary crisis in the months and the years to follow. The mental health of the general public is suffering from unprecedented social anxiety due to health, economic and family strains. Even before Covid-19 there was an epidemic of isolation and loneliness in Ireland. Isolation is now Government policy, for understandable reasons, but that does not lessen its impact. I know many people suffering from the impacts of isolation. I think too of our health-care workers who are having to make some very tough decisions and may suffer moral injury.

Will the Minister establish a mental health task force to flatten the mental health curve and prepare for the inevitable mental health fallout of Covid-19, which will last much longer after the virus itself? Will he put in place very specific mental health supports for our healthcare workers, who may suffer serious mental and moral injury as a result of decisions that now have to be made? Will he put in place specific bereavement supports for those who have lost loved ones during Covid-19 and cannot grieve in the normal traditional Irish way? Will he ensure necessary funding supports to allow people with disabilities who are currently in residential settings, inappropriate settings, who want to live independently but have not been facilitated by the Government to date, to do so?

Deputy Simon Harris: I do not think it serves us well in our understanding of public health to differentiate between a response in the community and a response in terms of long-term residential care settings as though they are not linked. Had we not managed to flatten the curve as a people in the community, I shudder to think what the situation in our long-term residential care facilities would be like. I shudder to think how many staff would not be able to go to work in those facilities. I shudder to think how much more prevalent the virus would be. In public health policy terms it always makes sense to put in place measures to suppress the virus in the community. I assure Deputy Donnelly that this was not entirely sequential, that a lot of work was ongoing in parallel. I assure the Deputy that nursing homes do have a seat at the table of NPHEt. However, it is not for nursing home owners but for the people who regulate nursing

homes, the people who set the standards for which this House has legislated, the people who set the standards to ensure that our residential care facilities are safe. HIQA has been a member of the National Public Health Emergency Team since the very start. HIQA knows nursing homes better than any of us - upside down and inside out. It even knows the floor plans. HIQA is therefore on the National Public Health Emergency Team. I note that Deputy Donnelly has not asked for representation for the nurses who work in the nursing homes or other staff members but actually for the nursing home owners. I do not believe that would be an appropriate membership of NPHE, but it is appropriate - I agree with him on this - that we listen to Nursing Homes Ireland. We have a very good relationship with Nursing Homes Ireland and I am now meeting them twice a week. I assure the Deputy that there are people on that call on NPHE. HIQA is on it, the HSE is on it and senior officials in the Department of Health are on it. I am looking at other ways we can further involve them in the decision-making process because they have an important role to play.

Regarding my attendance at NPHE, I do not attend it. I do not believe it would be appropriate for me to do so. NPHE is an opportunity for the Chief Medical Officer to engage on a technical level and often a scientific level. I am briefed before and after NPHE meetings and am in constant contact, as the Deputy can imagine, with the chair of NPHE, namely, the Chief Medical Officer.

With regard to nursing homes, on 19 February, before we had a case of Covid-19 in this country, the head of the HSE held a meeting with the CEO and chair of Nursing Homes Ireland to discuss their Covid-19 preparedness. I also acknowledge on the record of this House that the World Health Organization did not publish its infection prevention and control guidance for long-term care facilities in the context of Covid-19 until 21 March after we had put a number of measures in place so a lot of work has been done with regard to nursing homes. The Deputy is right. This is the front line now. We now need to look at how we can break the chains of transmission in nursing homes and other long-term residential facilities, as we have begun to do in the community. This is why the decision by NPHE now to test residents and staff in those settings who are asymptomatic makes sense. People can ask why we did not do it before now. It is a valid question but the truthful answer is that now as we have grown our capacity, we are directing it into that area in terms of a priority.

Deputy Browne is right. I will work with him and this Oireachtas about how a task force could happen. I think it makes sense. We have put in place a number of supports, including *gov.ie/together*, which is a website that tries to pull everything together in terms of what somebody can do to protect his or her mental and physical health during this crisis. We have also allocated an additional €1 million towards online counselling services for staff and the public. If more funding is needed there, that will certainly be forthcoming. From my conversations with the HSE, I know that a number of supports are in place regarding occupational health around bereavement and mental health but I am sure that this is an area where we can do better so I would be very happy to engage with Deputy Browne, his party and the Oireachtas on this. There are things other than Covid-19 that can make people sick and mental illness and protecting our mental health are areas we really need to watch. There is a lot of tragedy, grief and difficulty in families and communities and the Deputy's suggestion of a task force under the auspices of this Oireachtas at the right time seems sensible.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will share time with an Teachta Kerrane.

Before I ask my questions, I acknowledge the passing of a care worker in a nursing home in

Swords who died of Covid-19. I have been in touch with some of the families in the care home, who are devastated, as are the residents and the people with whom she worked. I do not want to come in here and not acknowledge that because it is a big blow to the community.

The nursing homes sector is reporting a severe difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. In a survey of 252 nursing homes, we have been advised that there are over 1,000 vacancies, of which 330 involve nurses and 427 are healthcare assistants. Further pressure on recruitment has been caused by the failure to address the childcare needs of healthcare workers. As I am sure the Minister is aware, the proposals he made were not just offensive to lone parents, they were functionally useless for the vast majority of people, as illustrated by the response of the unions. If somebody does not have a spouse working in the public service who is not on the front line, there is literally nothing for him or her.

The Minister said that the CEO of the HSE met with Nursing Homes Ireland on 19 February. Would he not have noticed at that stage that there was going to be a problem? The failure to prepare happened. They clearly were not ready. It is a bit mysterious that the CEO did not realise that. There is an urgent need to address staffing issues and to assist the sector to respond. To that end, has consideration been given to utilising the capacity in private hospitals to assist the nursing home sector? I acknowledge that securing capacity from the private sector was the right thing to do but there was no need for it to be a bonanza for it either. The announcement on 24 March was made but from what we can gather no deal was done for some weeks. That time could and should have been used to negotiate a deal that was good value for money. This open-ended arrangement is far from that. The taxpayer is on the hook for a minimum of €345 million. Has consideration been given to using the capacity that exists within the private hospital sector or redeploying some of the workers, who are telling me that the hospitals have up to 80% vacancies and are so quiet that some of them may be forced to take annual leave?

It was the Minister who raised the potential relaxation of restrictions in his interviews with the media at the weekend. Immediately following those interviews, I was contacted by parents and other people anticipating relaxation. The Taoiseach said this morning that we cannot be complacent. He is bang on in that regard. In addition, we must not encourage people to be complacent. The Government needs to stop sending out mixed messages. It needs to be consistent and not fly kites because doing so raises expectations. The Minister did so and, in response, people contacted their local representatives and talked among themselves about when and how the restrictions will be lifted and whether it will be on 6 May or at another time. Those questions were not in people's minds until they were put there.

Will the deficit in nursing homes be addressed? Will the capacity in private hospitals be used? I ask the Minister to provide details regarding where nursing homes and home carers can get a steady supply of masks. I am not referring to medical masks but, rather, non-medical masks, as now recommended. In addition to those working in nursing homes, home helps need access to such masks and they wish to know where they can access them. Several of them have, rightly, contacted Sinn Féin.

Is consideration being given to the usage of masks in the community as an element of any relaxation of restrictions? I ask that the Minister provide details of the supply chain for those masks. In certain other countries, masks are being handed out on public transport and in public areas. Is that where we are going? If it is, are we ready for it?

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I wish to ask the Minister about current waiting lists for home

care packages. All Members know the importance of keeping older people and those with underlying health conditions safe in their homes. Where possible, we must ensure that they receive an appropriate level of care at home to meet their needs. Nobody should ever be left waiting for home care when they have been deemed to need it, but that is especially true at this time. The most recent figures pertaining to my constituency are from last month and relate to the waiting list at the end of February. There were 141 people awaiting new home care packages in County Galway and 69 in County Roscommon, with 27 people across the two counties awaiting additional home care supports. Have those waiting lists been cleared? If they have not, I ask the Minister to provide the up-to-date number of people awaiting home care in each county in the State. These are the very people who need this care provided to them now. They are the very people we need to keep safe at home during this pandemic. I ask the Minister to put the necessary funding in place to ensure that those waiting lists are cleared and that those who require care at home receive it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I join Deputy O'Reilly in offering my sympathy and condolences to the family of the care worker to whom she referred and indeed to all families who have been bereaved. We think of them all.

On staffing in nursing homes, Deputy O'Reilly made a valid point. All Members know that nursing homes often face staffing challenges and that there is often significant competition between elements of the health services, be they public or private, to obtain staff. One of the best things we can do to help nursing homes on staffing, after engaging with them, is to ensure that there is a quick turnaround time for test results for staff in nursing homes. Last week, a very high number of staff were out of work awaiting tests. I will not quote the exact figure in case I get it wrong. As most of those tests will come back negative, allowing the staff to then return to work, the decision to prioritise that testing will result, it is hoped, in many more people getting a negative result and being able to go back to work. The HSE stated that it has so far directly redeployed 61 people into the private nursing home sector. It is a small number but it must be borne in mind that such redeployment is through voluntary agreement. The HSE is carrying out a census tonight and expects the figure to be higher, but that is the current position.

On childcare, I do not wish for anyone to think anything is offensive or discriminatory. What we are trying to do - and I admit that it is more challenging than we anticipated - is find a way forward that respects the public health advice. What we want to do is twofold. First, we wish to allow public service employees to stay at home on paid leave if their partners are front-line healthcare workers. Second, we wish to look at the possibility of allowing registered childminders into the homes of such care workers. However, we can only do so when the NPHET tells us it is safe to do. That will be looked at in the context of the roadmap. I engaged with the INMO yesterday and today and will engage with them more formally tomorrow on this issue.

On the Deputy's point about the CEO of the HSE not realising that there was a problem when he met Nursing Homes Ireland, realising there is a problem and challenge is different from being able to keep a virus out of nursing homes. The rate of infection in nursing homes is a problem the world over. There may have been attempts to suggest this problem is specific to Ireland. Of course, it is not. Sadly, the rates of infection and mortality in this country are similar to those in many other countries. We know that many countries, including some very nearby, are not recording data in the way that they are being recorded here. We are going into nursing homes and trying to identify the virus and not masking it by only announcing deaths in hospitals and not in nursing homes. Dr. Siobhán Kennelly, who is the clinical lead for older persons services, made the point which has been lost in the debate that there are more people

23 April 2020

recovering from Covid-19 in nursing homes, thank God, than sadly passing away. I say that because I am conscious a lot of people are possibly watching in here who are worried about their mum, their dad or their loved one in a nursing home. The majority of people are recovering from Covid-19.

On private hospitals, the Deputy made some sensible suggestions as she often does. I reject the phrase “bonanza”. As I have said to the Deputy before, I know these are phrases she feels she has to say but let me be clear that nobody will make one cent or one euro from the private hospital deal. I published it fully, as the Deputy requested, and all that will be paid is the cost of running those facilities. I want to make them busier. We have seen more than 3,500 patients go through them up to now and we have seen 127 consultants sign up but we need to see more and all costs that we pay over can be scrutinised by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The point the Deputy makes about the spare capacity in private hospitals in the context of nursing homes is a valid one and is something we are actively looking at.

On the relaxation question, when I am asked questions I try to answer them. Sometimes I give the right answer and sometimes I give the wrong answer. I was asked as the Minister and as a citizen what I would like to see coming back at a safe point in time. An awful lot of the commentary has been around the economy and the wishes of certain interest groups in the economy, which are important issues. I get an awful lot of letters and correspondence from kids telling me they are missing school and their friends in the context of their mental health and well-being, and I made the point that I would like to see a way for schools to come back at the appropriate time. I was asked if there is a timeline for that and I said “No”. I was asked when that would be and I replied that it would happen when NPHET deems it appropriate. We need to publish this roadmap over the next week so people can see what the different phases look like because I am conscious of not wanting to give out mixed messages. The next 12 days really matter.

NPHET will consider the more broad issues regarding masks and I will come back to the Deputy specifically on the supplies for the nursing homes that she referenced.

I will run out of time but on the issue of home care, I have a note here on the fact that we have been looking at both priority 1 and priority 2 clients for how, in some cases, we could perhaps re-allocate resources from some lower priority cases to help those more in need. We have only done that, however, where there are other supports in place. All cases are reviewed by a public health nurse. If the Deputy has any specific cases, I would be happy to discuss them with her. We are also asking the HSE to closely map the impact of this pandemic on the provision of the home care targets set out in the national service plan.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Feighan.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Do I have ten minutes or am I sharing with Deputy Durkan?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should know that. It is not for me to tell him.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I have ten minutes then. I thank the Minister for coming in here today. Most importantly, I want to express my sincere condolences to the families and friends of those we have lost to this awful disease. I also want to pay tribute to the front-line staff of all professions. Their vocation has been incredible. I know they have the support of the entire country in trying to help them out.

It is encouraging that the reproductive rate of Covid-19 has fallen even further to between 0.5 and 1. The one issue is the clusters of Covid-19 in residential facilities. That remains an area of huge concern. I also want to thank the National Ambulance Service and all of the people who carried out the 18,000 tests in the long-term residential facilities. It is an issue we certainly need to deal with.

We have to be very careful that we open up certain businesses and schools at the right time. A lot of people are phoning me about builders providers and garden centres. They genuinely want to do the right thing. I know this is not the Minister's decision but it is an issue that is raising its head. Everyone who has contacted me wants to do the right thing. A lot of people want to make use of the good weather to paint and to work on their gardens. It is one issue we can deal with but I will leave that up to the experts.

I refer to what happened yesterday in light of the restrictions currently in place in our Courts Service. During the week there have been images in the media of large numbers of people congregating. Does the Minister think these gatherings have put public health in danger? What efforts does he believe should be made in the courts to stop these types of gatherings from occurring again? People who are self-isolating have been greatly frustrated by what happened yesterday. Only down the road from there, the Garda Síochána moved people on. I realise that many of these individuals are looking for attention and that it is up to the Garda to interpret this. Should the people pictured be forced to self-isolate for the next 14 days? Will the Minister join me in condemning their actions?

Yesterday it was announced that the voluntary hospice groups would be provided with an additional €10.5 million until the end of the year. I would like a breakdown of this funding by hospice. How much will the North West Hospice in Sligo receive? For what purpose is this funding to be used?

I refer to the delivery of PPE from China and the problems which arose with one fifth of the original delivery. Was the problem resolved in the context of subsequent deliveries? Will the cost of the incorrect PPE be refunded to the State? I commend the Aer Lingus staff, IDA Ireland, the embassy staff in China and all those involved in securing the PPE.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I support the expressions made by other Deputies about the victims of this pandemic. It is something that happens to individuals and their families. It hits them like it hits no one else. The battle goes on, as it must. I support what others have said that we must be safe. We must continue with the restrictions that are in place in order to achieve the best possible result. Even with all those restrictions in place, there will be casualties, as there have been everywhere. What is confusing is when people can congregate, here or elsewhere, with what seems like impunity. They do not seem to appreciate the damage likely to be done and the message it sends to others who may think "Why not?" when it comes to gathering and that it is all right to do so. Some of us spoke of these things about international events at the outset, although we will not go into that now. We must go forward cautiously and carefully, and observe the restrictions which have been put in place to the letter.

Deputy Simon Harris: I join Deputies Feighan and Durkan in thanking our front-line staff, including those in the ambulance service, for the work they are doing. I get the point Deputy Feighan made about builders providers but taking into account the reminder that Deputy O'Reilly gave me about not speculating, which was fair, these issues will be examined by NPHE to ensure that there is clarity for all industries on what is appropriate and safe, and what

may not be.

I do not want to comment on a specific incident which may or may not have happened in a court except to condemn any action by anybody which jeopardises the public health and well-being of anybody and particularly anyone going to work to provide essential services at a time when most of us have been told to stay at home and stay safe and well with our families. Every day there are people who get up and go to work and put themselves in harm's way in order to keep essential parts of our country running. We have a duty of care to those individuals. The law is clear and An Garda Síochána is doing a very good job in the context of enforcing the legislation passed by this Oireachtas and the regulations which I developed.

I am pleased that the Government made an additional allocation of funding to hospices. This was not a direct result of Covid-19-related mortality, rather that some hospices had received less funding from the Exchequer than others and there was a need to equalise that. They had seen a very significant increase in bed occupancy because they had helped us to decongest our hospitals, for want of a better word, to prepare for a potential surge which, thankfully, we have not yet seen. They have also seen their own funding base dry up. I am very pleased, in regard to the hospice the Deputy mentioned in Sligo and a number of others, that we were able to provide an allocation. The HSE will be in touch to finalise the amount. It has been widely welcomed.

With regard to the issue of personal protective equipment, as raised by the Deputy, our first batch, worth €31 million, has now arrived. It has been quality checked and distributed. Our second batch, worth €67 million, was due to land in May and June but the HSE has managed to expedite it. I thank and commend the HSE, particularly Mr Paul Reid, for this. The first planes arrived from China on Saturday. The HSE has now ensured a continuous supply, or continuous arrival, of more personal protective equipment for ten weeks. This is really good work by the HSE. The third order, costing €130 million, is now in the pipeline. Some 74,000 gowns and protective suits arrived on Monday of this week, with further deliveries of an additional 300,000 gowns expected this week. We now have 275 long-term residential facilities accessing personal protective equipment purchased by the State.

As is well known, there was an issue with some components of the first batch. My understanding from the HSE is that this has been resolved in regard to future batches. There is always a degree of risk when ordering equipment we may not be used to in this country and when we do not have people on the ground. I assure the House, however, that the equipment is all inspected and quality assured before it is distributed to our front-line staff.

I thank Deputy Durkan for his comments. He made the correct point that this country is in a dark place and that there are many families grieving and many people sick. There are many people hurting for a variety of reasons, including reasons of economic well-being. We are thinking of all of them.

The Deputy was also correct to point out that we could have been in an even darker place were it not for the advice of our public health experts and the dedication of the people. It should be remembered that the modelling of Professor Philip Nolan showed that, even with a reproductive rate of 2.7, which is where we were in March, we would have seen 800 people in our intensive care units last week, 2,000 in intensive care units now and 12,000 losing their lives by the first week of May. It is important to outline the context in terms of recognising the difference the people are making.

The Deputy also made a point about people needing to stay the course. Dr. Tony Holohan talks about the risk of anticipatory behaviour. When we shut down elements of our country, in many ways the public were sometimes ahead of us. They thought this was coming so they started cocooning. The risk is that if we arrive at a point where we try over a period to reopen some of our country, the people will start getting ahead of that as well. That would be really dangerous so we need people to stay the course and follow the advice.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I wish to share my time with Deputy O’Gorman. Are we paying our radiography students? I understand that the student nurses are now being paid. Out of fairness, they should have an equal deal. They are dealing directly with Covid-19 patients every day.

I also want to ask about the power to prescribe. I am aware that the Minister has issued an executive order broadening the power to prescribe to pharmacists. That is welcome. Optometrists have asked to have the power to prescribe antibiotic eye drops to take the pressure off general practitioners at such a difficult time.

I want to ask the Minister about contact tracing. I raised this last week in the context of Google and Apple creating an app together. We obviously need effective contact tracing to move on to easing the restrictions. Mobile technology has been central to South Korea’s success in tracing the contacts of every person infected with the disease. The European Commission is tracking at least 14 apps that have been developed by member states. *The Irish Times* reported that a company named NearForm is developing a contact tracing app on behalf of the HSE but we have not seen any specifications or release plans for it. I have a background in software and medical statistics and I am concerned that we have only one chance to deliver a useful app. We should not rush an inadequate solution in front of the public. If the adoption rate is low, the purpose will be undermined.

How many people are currently actively working on contact tracing? How many Covid-19 victims have they identified and notified? What is the daily rate of such identifications? What is the planned release date for the Irish contact tracing app? Who is developing that app? Will the Minister publish the technical, data privacy, cryptographic and API specifications for this app, just as Google and Apple have published theirs? Has a data-protection impact assessment been carried out? If not, will it be? Will the app comply with the recommendations of the European Commission’s e-health network as to how such apps should handle privacy? Recently the French Minister of State for the Digital Sector, Cédric O, said that privacy specifications outlined by Google and Apple should be relaxed in order to give more control over data to national health authorities, which is a controversial position. Does the Minister share that position? Studies indicate that for this kind of app to be effective, we need more than half of the population to voluntarily adopt it. It is similar to herd immunity. What is the Minister’s target penetration level of usage for this app? Does he agree that it would be better not to rush out this app and to answer these questions before launch?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: When the Taoiseach spoke this morning he warned against complacency in the battle against Covid-19. While the strong national response has been recognised by many, we have all heard of and seen situations where social distancing rules are not being adhered to. Up to now the public information campaign has been very much of a “let’s all pull together” nature. Would the Minister consider bringing forward a harder-hitting advertising campaign to highlight the risks of not adhering to social distancing? I remember the advertisements in the 1990s advising people to use condoms as part of the campaign to stop

the spread of AIDS. They were very hard-hitting. I think there had to be a parental advisory warning before they were played but they made the point and were effective. Would the Minister consider something similar to highlight the very real dangers and consequences for the most vulnerable from any potential breakdown in adherence to the social distancing rules?

My colleague, Deputy Ossian Smyth, has referred to the importance of contact tracing in the ongoing fight against Covid-19, particularly as we move towards potentially opening the economy again. Can the Minister indicate what sort of technology is being considered at this stage? Is consideration being given to the use of mobile phone information and records to facilitate contact tracing? I understand that this approach has been adopted in Norway. If we do seek to use mobile phone information what are the implications of that for the general data protection regulation, GDPR, particularly for individuals' rights to privacy?

Earlier in the month, a constituent informed me that their elderly relative who was living in a long-term residential setting had become ill and was exhibiting three of the Covid-19 symptoms. This person, who had an underlying condition, died on the third day of their illness. The family was advised that their loved one would be tested by swab for Covid-19 post mortem but the family subsequently discovered that test was never performed and the cause of death was given as aspiration pneumonia. This definition was based on the person's previous medical history. There was no test or post mortem. This happened four weeks ago but it raises a major concern about our ability to identify clusters in locations such as this long-term residence where the State cares for the people who are most vulnerable to this illness. Does the Minister know how common it was not to test people in these long-term residential settings who had Covid-19 symptoms and who died? Is he satisfied that the situation I have described is not being repeated and will not be?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputies Smyth and O'Gorman for their questions. I do agree that we need to sort out the problem in respect of radiography students. I need, however, to find a mechanism similar to the one we used to resolve the issue for student nurses. We have not paid student nurses but we have offered them the right to be employed as healthcare assistants and have paid them for that. I have asked the Department to come forward with proposals for other students usefully working in the health service and whom we need. I hope to bottom that out before we meet here again, which I presume will be next week.

Regarding pharmacy regulations, we did that to free up general practitioner slots, reduce physical movements and help pharmacists at a busy time. I will ask officials in the Department to give me a view on optometrists and I will revert to the Deputy directly.

I thank the Deputy for the question on contact tracing. I have a detailed note with me and will try to refer to some of its most important points. NPHE has made a number of changes to contact tracing policy to respond to international advice and enhance our process further. For example, at its meeting on 31 March, it extended contact tracing to suspect cases within prioritised groups and to encompass the period from 48 hours prior to the onset of symptoms, given the risk of asymptomatic transmissions.

The level of resources supporting contact tracing has increased significantly in recent weeks, and an IT system called the Covid case tracker has been built to underpin this work. Significant resources from across the public service have been redeployed to newly-established contact tracing centres. We now have nine centres in operation, with further centres identified to come on stream when required. Some 1,700 people have been trained to date. This includes person-

nel from our higher education institutions, the Civil Service and agencies, Army cadets and HSE staff. In direct answer to the question, I am told that there have been on average close to 200 people deployed per day in those centres over the past fortnight to meet the current level of cases. This is in addition to staff working in public health, occupational health and infection prevention and control.

The current efforts to develop capacity across all aspects of the testing process, including contact tracing, will continue this month - a paper is due to be delivered to me on the matter by Friday - in order to build the capacity that we will need in order to aggressively identify and isolate cases on a real-time basis, with “real-time” meaning within a day or the following day. This will provide the ability to respond to any planned expansion of the case definition for testing or easing of restrictions at some point. The HSE has appointed a senior manager, reporting directly to the CEO, to lead this work across the full process, end to end, of testing and contact tracing.

As to how many people have been contact traced, the HSE currently advises that calls to confirmed cases and their contacts are being made on close to a real-time basis once laboratory results have been notified to the HSE. It has been acknowledged by the HSE that previously there were delays in the process for notifying results, but it reminds me that it is also important to note that there can sometimes be difficulty in contacting people in terms of having accurate contact information and people answering calls.

The median number of close contacts remains at two per case. Over the two-week period from 6 April, the average number of close contacts per confirmed case was 2.9.

I agree with Deputy O’Gorman that it is better not to rush the app. A great deal of work is being done by the HSE to develop this new mobile phone app. The idea is to complement and enhance the contact tracing process while being fully GDPR compliant. The app is being developed by a coalition of developers and analysts led by the HSE. It is at an advanced stage of development, including work to integrate it into the current manual contact tracing process. When restrictions on public life are lifted, it could provide an enhanced ability to identify potentially exposed close contacts, namely, those not directly identified by direct contacts. It could further support our healthcare system in interrupting the chain. Obviously, it is important that the app be fully developed and carefully tested. I agree with the Deputy that we will only get one chance in this regard. I suggest that, at the Opposition’s briefing from the HSE next week, it has a specific discussion on the app and its status. Presuming that the Dáil will debate Covid-19 again next week, I imagine that I will specifically include an update on the mobile app in my opening comments.

I agree with Deputy O’Gorman on complacency. The HSE’s public advertising has been good, but the Deputy is right that we must constantly challenge one another as we move into new phases. This is not just a virus that impacts older people, although we know the mortality figures in that regard are concerning. This is a virus that can affect anyone. We have seen children getting very sick from the virus, and the average age of people who have got it is approximately 48 years. Everyone needs to be aware of Covid-19 and there should not be any part of society that believes it is immune from the serious dangers the virus presents. I will consider the Deputy’s suggestion on a new public advertising campaign.

Regarding the older resident in the long-term residential care facility, I extend my sympathies to that person’s family. I would be happy to take the details of that case as an example

23 April 2020

and follow up on it, but what I can say now is that we are doing two things. We are trying to identify and report publicly - I am not sure whether other countries are doing this - suspect cases of Covid-19 deaths. We are also undertaking a full mortality census. At a time when most countries are not even publishing confirmed Covid-19 deaths in nursing homes, we want to find as many of them as possible - it might seem like a peculiar thing to say - so that we can have a full understanding of the prevalence of the virus.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Our hearts go out to all those who have lost loved ones and friends throughout this pandemic. It is important that we not become desensitised by the sheer scale of death that we have witnessed in society. I will focus on long-term residential facilities such as nursing homes. We are very fortunate that we live in a society where care for the elderly is still characterised by compassion and humanity, and so we express our deepest gratitude to front-line workers throughout the country for the work they do hourly, daily and weekly.

Today, I want to speak for those people who live in nursing or care homes. I applaud the Minister's handling of the crisis but there are some questions we feel need to be answered. Today, RTÉ reported that according to NPHET there are 1,944 laboratory-confirmed cases of the virus in nursing homes. According to that report, this is 61% higher than the number of nursing home infections revealed by NPHET on Monday. This represents an increase of 740 cases in two days. The number of nursing home deaths is absolutely frightening and an increase of 740 in two days is astronomical.

What we need is clarity, transparency and a clear communications policy on what is happening in nursing homes. We need to know who exactly is in charge of managing the crisis in nursing homes at present. Is it the Minister, the HSE, NPHET or the Chief Medical Officer? Where exactly does the buck stop? What we need to see is a clearly communicated plan that would give certainty to residents, families and workers in the sector.

Why is the number of cases of Covid-19 in long-term care facilities increasing this far into the crisis? Will the Minister please describe the relationship between stakeholders operating in the State health sector, namely, the aforementioned Chief Medical Officer, NPHET, the HSE and the Minister, and the owners of private nursing homes and their representative bodies? I hope the Minister will disabuse me of this notion or perception I have that at present, there is friction between how the State sector is managing the crisis and how Nursing Homes Ireland is managing its affairs. I perceive some friction in the relationship and I put it to the
5 o'clock Minister that now is the time to ensure the safety of older people who are residents of nursing homes. Now is the time to ensure families know who is in charge of managing this element of the crisis. It would be very useful for families of those in nursing homes to have sight of records relating to the day-to-day management of the crisis as it relates to their loved ones. The very notion that in certain circumstances in this society, but for the compassion of individual nursing and care home staff, relatives would not have access to information on how their loved ones died is just not sustainable.

I would like to know exactly what is the status today in real time of the national and regional Covid-19 infection control teams announced on 4 April. How long will they remain *in situ*? How many clusters exist today in nursing homes? What are the real-time figures? According to the RTÉ report today, 102 people in nursing homes are presumed to have died from the virus. How does the Minister respond to this?

What relatives who do not have access to information about how their loved one died want

is clear communication. They want to ensure they know exactly the manner in which their loved ones passed away and, in certain circumstances, that clarity is still not there and they feel they are not being properly communicated with. I know the Minister is doing his best but he might give us some clarity about how he intends to manage that.

In respect of the 18,000 tests that have been carried out in long-term residential facilities, will the Minister tell us how many more have yet to be done? Is there a sunset for that process in terms of completing the testing regime?

I want to deal with two further issues. First, I am hearing from primary care facilities that they are still in need of PPE and they are very concerned about the shortage. In one instance involving a large community primary care facility, I am told they have a week's supply in store. Second, although this is not directly within the Minister's brief, I know he will look through the health prism at the resumption of childcare for working people, not only for those who are front-line workers but across society. I am sure the Minister will appreciate that where two people within a family are working while also trying to manage childcare, it gives rise to domestic challenges. What is the Minister's perspective on whether the Government plans to roll out a childcare scheme that could see more workers outside certain sectors filtering back into the workplace, or at least free up time for people who are working within the home at present by enabling them to send the kids to crèche or a childminder at least to alleviate some of the pressures happening on the domestic front at present?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is correct that we are seeing a very significant increase in the number of infections in the nursing home setting. One of the reasons for that, I would imagine, is that we are actively looking for it in that setting. Particularly since Friday, we have seen a concerted effort, starting with nursing homes where there has been a significant outbreak, to test all asymptomatic patients and asymptomatic staff. We are moving then to nursing homes where there is one case and testing everybody - asymptomatic staff and residents - and then looking at nursing homes where there is no Covid-19 and starting by testing all asymptomatic staff there. The ambition was to have this completed within seven to ten days, starting from the weekend, which is the timescale they are working to, and they are doing everything humanly possible to get through that as quickly as possible.

In regard to who is legally in charge, legislation passed by the House defines the person in charge. Every nursing home, private or otherwise, is meant to have a person in charge, generally a clinical person, often a nurse. From my perspective, in terms of how I am managing the crisis, yes, I am engaging with Nursing Homes Ireland twice a week, and it is appropriate I do that as it is a representative body. However, the engagement I am having in terms of overseeing this is with HIQA, which is the regulator and is responsible for the safety of people in facilities and for reporting when it is not safe. By the way, I do not just mean that as a stick to beat the private nursing homes. They also have an obligation, which they take very seriously, to let us know when we are not doing what we should be doing. HIQA has published a new regulatory assessment framework, in line with the Health Act 2007, as passed by this House, and it is going to start visiting public and private nursing homes and inspecting them. As the Deputy knows from his constituency, this will present as many challenges for public facilities as for private facilities. HIQA will also be asked to check with the nursing home owner or the person in charge that the supports we have said should be in place are in place and to report back. There is a meeting on this tonight between HIQA, the HSE, the Department and myself, and that is the way I intend to manage it.

23 April 2020

I must conclude as my time is nearly up. With regard to clusters, my understanding is there are 302 clusters in long-term residential centres, 179 of them in nursing homes, which were the figures given out as of last night. In regard to childcare, we will move forward on this as soon as it is safe to do so, but I take the point that it is a very sensitive issue. I assure the Deputy that I do have views on how we need to reform nursing home care and that we need to change after this pandemic. Now is not the time for it. The time now is for everyone, public, private and voluntary, to muck in and do everything we possibly can to keep people safe.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Róisín Shortall.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I will try to ask five questions in five minutes and hopefully I will get five answers. The first relates to the strategy the national effort is based on, that is, a strategy of test and trace on a large-scale basis - 15,000 a day. We have heard that promise for several weeks now and we are currently at 5,000 a day. Does the Minister accept that the point at which we can start to ease restrictions and get back to some kind of normality is entirely dependent on reaching that figure of 15,000 tests a day and having the capacity to continue that for the foreseeable future? Does he also accept that the level of national debt that will be incurred as a result of this pandemic is entirely dependent on putting in place the strategy which has been promised from the very beginning, which is to test and trace 15,000 a day? We are very far from that at this point. We are doing 5,000 tests a day, and we have no data in respect of the numbers that are traced. The Minister did not provide that figure when he was asked for it earlier. I am asking the Minister again for the second week if he can tell us when that figure of 15,000 tests and trace - end to end - will be achieved. Is he in a position to guarantee that that will be available for the foreseeable future?

With regard to nursing homes, this has been the same problem that we have throughout the health service where our services are hospital-centric and there continues to be an overlooking of social care settings. That is exacerbated by the fact that there has been a move in recent years to privatise large numbers of nursing homes and other care settings and to disconnect them from the main health service and the HSE. Apart from saying *mea culpa*, does the Minister accept that that was a serious mistake? Can he tell us when we will get to a point where there will be adequate staff, adequate testing and adequate PPE for the vulnerable patients in all of those care settings? There is shared responsibility for that. It is the owners of those facilities and it is also the State but there has to be an acknowledgement that the privatisation of these services is a core problem.

Equally, when it comes to social care, there is the lower level of care and the higher level of neglect of the needs of community services - home help services and home care workers - who again have been left to the four winds when it comes to ensuring their safety and the safety of the clients they visit. Many of them are visiting several clients every day. Again, it is about privatisation of this service. It is about pushing it out and keeping it at arm's length from the State. That has been the critical mistake. When will responsibility be taken for ensuring that all of those very low-paid workers, and their clients, will be given the protection they deserve? Who do these people contact when they need PPE? There seems to be a great deal of ambiguity about that. These are people working at community level on very low pay and left exposed.

My fourth question relates to the issue that arose last week in respect of Keelings and the fact that it seems to be acceptable that large numbers of seasonal workers are coming into this country. We are being told that they are following the guidelines that are set down but can the Minister tell us what, if any, supervision exists in respect of particularly large groups of people

who come in from other countries and settle down somewhere in this country? We do not know anything about the conditions in which they are living. Apart from somebody handing them a leaflet at the airport, how can the Minister give us any kind of guarantee that those people are self-isolating properly in proper conditions? Can he tell us if he intends moving to a situation where there will be quarantining of people in those circumstances?

My last question relates to the deal that was done with private hospitals. When will we get a breakdown of the figure of €1,461 per bed per day to be paid? It is very hard to understand how that figure was reached considering the equivalent figure in the UK is a small fraction of that. Does it include earned income from private patients who are *in situ* in those hospitals? Will the Minister tell us the actual figure involved and the basis of that figure?

An Ceann Comhairle: There are a lot of questions.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will do my best to answer them.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There are five.

Deputy Simon Harris: There are a few parts to them. I thank the Deputy for the questions. Regarding testing, tracing and public health surveillance, that will be a major part of the easing of restrictions at whatever point that happens. However, it will not be the sole factor. Restrictions are not in place in Ireland today because we do not have the public health surveillance in place, but because the virus is not where it needs to be. The document published by European Commission President von der Leyen outlines the criteria that must be in place before the easing of restrictions. Public health surveillance, testing and tracing is one of three items. The others are capacity and the behaviour of the virus. However, the Deputy is correct. The HSE tells us it has capacity to undertake approximately 10,000 tests per day. This is in laboratories in hospitals and in the community, including the NVRL, Enfer, smaller laboratories and some international provision. The HSE is due to give an update to NPHE at its meeting tomorrow regarding how it will achieve the roadmap, as it were, to the 100,000 tests per week that NPHE believes is necessary. When the Deputy says we are far from it in terms of the number of tests being done today, it is important to point out that with the case definition as of now, there is not the demand for that today, but there will be a broadening of the case definition in the coming days. We are using the extra supplies now to prioritise the nursing home sector.

The Deputy asked if I can guarantee that this will be available into the future. Only an idiot would do that. The best government and public health service in the world cannot give cast-iron guarantees in respect of all the moving parts, be it reagent, supplies or laboratories. The HSE has said it can do 10,000 tests per day in terms of capacity and it has secured a significant amount of additional reagent. It has built up a very good system. It has put a senior manager in place to deal with end-to-end testing, including the contact tracing. I am confident it is moving into a very good place.

Regarding nursing homes, in the time available I do not want to get into that debate other than to say I am saying a great deal more than *mea culpa*. I did not bring in the privatisation agenda for nursing homes and I agreed the Sláintecare plan with the Deputy, which moves us in a very different direction. It is important to say *mea culpa* when one gets things wrong, but some of the tragedy we have seen in loss of life has been in our public health facilities as well and we must acknowledge that. We have seen a significant mortality rate in a number of HSE facilities as well.

23 April 2020

As regards PPE, we are providing PPE to more than 200 nursing homes. We are delivering 2,500 to 3,000 cartons and pallets each week to residential units, in excess of 1 million pieces of personal protective equipment, including hand sanitiser gel, gloves, goggles, face shields, gowns, aprons and face masks. On Friday, 17 April alone, 378 deliveries were made to nursing homes, providing 750,000 items. The Deputy is correct that there is a shared responsibility. If one runs a private health facility, one has a responsibility for the safety of one's staff, just as one has in every organisation. We are trying to supplement that, not replace it.

Regarding home care, we made a decision that home care providers have parity of access to PPE with nursing homes. If there is any confusion in terms of who they contact, I will take that up. We are not differentiating in this regard. If there is an issue with PPE, we are not differentiating between public or private. We are trying to protect the citizen. I will follow up on that directly with the Deputy.

The Deputy referred to overseas workers coming into Ireland. I would make the point even more broadly. We must tighten up further with regard to anybody coming into or back to our country. This will become even more important as we arrive at a point where we begin to ease restrictions. The Deputy is correct that currently we ask people to self-isolate, but that is not checked. NPHEAT has made a number of recommendations to the Cabinet committee and I expect to be able to announce them shortly. We have to consult a few more key stakeholders. What it must involve is a person at the airport being required to fill out a form saying where he or she intends to stay for that period of time and that being checked. We need to put that mechanism in place. While there is not a significant volume of people coming into the country now, we must be sure that we are not in a position where we are all following best practice here and people coming in from abroad are following a different one. I expect an announcement on the further tightening of restrictions at the airports and more than just taking somebody at his or her word that he or she is following the isolation restrictions.

On the question of whether the State must provide accommodation, quite frankly, the answer is "Yes" if a person is not in a position to self-isolate. We believe that many people will be able to self-isolate. However, a person must tell us where he or she is self-isolating and we need to be in a position to check that.

On private hospital costs, I will get the breakdown of figures sought by Deputy Shortall.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Cuirim fáilte roimh na hathruithe ón tseachtain seo caite ó thaobh ár dtithe altranais agus na hoibreacha ann. Dá mbeadh an réimeas seo againn ó thús, d'fhéadfaí a lán saolta a shábháil. All of our sympathy and solidarity goes to those who have lost their lives, those who are ill and the families who are facing the consequences of this.

I have a question on the death rates in nursing homes. I understand that the most up-to-date figure is 450. Not all of those deaths were laboratory confirmed, but most were. Of the 450 people to whom those deaths relate, nine were sent to acute hospital settings. Does the Minister not find that figure incomprehensible and, in the future, will he be able to stand over every single case where a decision is taken not to send a person to an acute hospital setting? I am aware that there can be many complications and that the onset of symptoms can be very quick. However, referring only of nine out of 450 people to an acute hospital setting does not seem right. Will the Minister be checking in every single case that the right decisions were made, in the right setting and with the right advice?

I shall now turn to the next catastrophe we are facing. Direct provision centres are the next possible catastrophe. In a report released yesterday, the Ombudsman, Mr. Peter Tyndall, stated that the highly contagious nature of the virus “brings into sharp relief just how unsuitable and unsustainable it is to have three or more people in the same room”. We are told that this is the provision being made for those who live in direct provision. I put it to the Minister that it is an issue of immediate concern and that we need to ensure that everything is done to try to avoid a situation whereby direct provision will become the next serious cluster. There are healthcare workers who live in direct provision and we were told that they would be put into separate accommodation.

My next question is on the protection of other workers. Bus workers are driving up and down the country without being protected. There are no screens on Bus Éireann’s fleet. The unions have asked for free public transport in order to stop any interaction with passengers. They have not been given that. We are told that the Health and Safety Authority has no role to play in health and protection during this public pandemic crisis. The Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, has informed us that those responsible are looking into the HSE playing a role, insofar as the role of environmental health and safety officers will be expanded to check out workplaces. Will the Minister for Health elaborate and tell the House that building workers, bus workers and others who resume work will be protected in their workplaces by means of the necessary protocols and by the provision of personal protective equipment, if necessary, screening and social distancing measures?

With regard to the deal with private hospitals, the Minister and the Taoiseach have said that no one should profit from this crisis. At a cost of nearly €1,500 a night per bed, unoccupied, it beggars belief that vast profits are not being made by some of the wealthiest people in this country who have major shares in the big private hospital chains. I ask the Minister to please explain that anomaly.

My final question relates to masks. How does the Minister feel about encouraging - not forcing - members of the public to wear masks?

Deputy Mick Barry: Some 20 years ago, 80% of nursing homes in the State were in public ownership and 20% were private. The position now is completely reversed, with 80% in private ownership and 20% public. This has been the result of 20 years of Government policy incentivising the development of the private nursing home sector. I will not go into that now but it means that the majority of nursing home workers do not have access to the HSE’s occupational sick pay scheme. It also means that the majority of nursing home workers do not have access to an equivalent sick pay scheme. I would venture a strong guess that the majority of nursing home workers do not have access to any sick pay scheme. This means that, if they get sick or feel the need to self-isolate, their maximum income is likely to be €350 a week. This is a big cut from their weekly wage. In some cases it would be a cutting in half of their weekly wage. This is very wrong. I will give the Minister two reasons as to why it is wrong. While I am sure that if the majority of nursing home staff woke up in the morning and did not feel 100% they would take the financial hit and self-isolate, this means that there is economic pressure on those workers to take a chance and to go to work. We talk about absenteeism. There is an opposite - presenteeism. This is a push factor as regards presenteeism, which is a danger to health, safety and lives.

It is also very wrong that if such workers get Covid-19 and are off work, those front-line workers will take a cut in pay of possibly half. The other day, SIPTU’s Paul Bell said that the

23 April 2020

private nursing home sector should be taken into public ownership for the duration of the crisis. I believe it should be taken into public ownership full stop. Is the Minister in favour of giving access to the HSE's occupational sick pay scheme to those nursing home workers who do not have it straight away and for the duration of this crisis at least in the interest of health, safety and safeguarding lives? I would appreciate it if the Minister would answer that question.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputies Bríd Smith and Barry for their questions. In fairness, Deputy Bríd Smith acknowledged that the cases of those in long-term residential care may be complex because a number of factors quite apart from Covid-19 may be involved in someone deciding to leave his or her home - which is what a nursing home is, his or her home - to seek hospital treatment. That decision is generally made on the advice of a doctor or other clinicians, often in consultation with the individual's family and taking account of his or her wishes. It can also be the case that people have made it clear what they would wish to happen to them with regard to the treatments they wish to get if they get sick. I assure the Deputy that these are clinical decisions. They are not my decisions as Minister - the Deputy is not suggesting they are - or hers or those of the Oireachtas; they are individual clinical decisions made in the same way she or I would expect decisions about our health and welfare to be made by our doctors rather than by the Oireachtas or by the Minister. The clinical guidelines in place in respect of Covid-19 are the same for all of us. Regardless of who we are, what age we are or where we live, there is one clinical guideline governing Covid-19. Of course there are other factors with regard to living in a nursing home, including some of those I have outlined.

Obviously there are many protections in place for anybody who is concerned about any outcome or any conduct of a health professional, although I am not suggesting that issue arises. HIQA also regulates in this area. I am satisfied with the guidelines in place and, having talked to the Irish College of General Practitioners, I am satisfied with the approach being taken by our GPs.

With regard to direct provision, which is an issue the Deputy highlights regularly, the Department of Justice and Equality has undertaken a lot of work to ensure accommodation is available for anyone who has, or is suspected of having, Covid-19 to isolate. I saw a statement from the Department in this regard as recently as today.

On the specific question regarding healthcare workers, there are now 278 people who work in the Irish health service taking up our offer of accommodation. I do not know all of their backgrounds but I know that, so far, 278 people have taken up our offer of alternative accommodation. That is available to anybody working in the health service, regardless of whether they are in direct provision. There are good details on how to apply for that on the HSE's website.

On the issue of bus drivers, or indeed anybody else working in any part of our economy and society, even in environments where it is not possible to fully physically distance, measures must be put in place to safeguard people. These may include guidance on PPE, where necessary. I am thinking of places such as factories and construction sites. I want to be clear that the National Public Health Emergency Team will be monitoring this area very closely as we move towards any decision to reopen any part of the economy. On the specific issue of bus drivers, I will talk to the National Transport Authority through my Department and revert to the Deputy directly.

On the issue of private hospitals, I believe I am going to run out of time to answer. I am

happy to stay here and talk as long as Deputy Barry wishes but I am confined by the clock. On the issue of private hospitals, I published the deal last week and laid it before the Oireachtas for all to see. The issue is that nobody should make a profit. We will be paying the cost of running the facilities and it will be subject to scrutiny by the Comptroller and Auditor General. I am quite sure, and it would be entirely appropriate, if not necessary and essential, that the Committee of Public Accounts will scrutinise this as well. Deputies must bear in mind the conversation we would have been having if we had not secured this agreement. Deputies would be asking me where are the ICU beds, ventilators and isolation facilities. It is some achievement for the HSE and the Department of Health to have secured the use of 19 hospitals for the duration of this crisis. What I want to see now is us making sure we are using those assets and protecting against a surge. By the way, the surge might come. I heard somebody say we should rip up the agreement. It would be an awfully brave politician who would say we should rip up the agreement, give back the ICU beds and give back the ventilators. He or she would be an awful lot more certain about the path of this virus than I would be. We are ripping up no agreement. We are keeping the assets that we have but we are going to make them work. I have heard Deputies in this House, including Deputy O'Reilly, suggest that. We are going to make sure that they are busy.

On the issue of masks, NPHET will guide and inform my view in this regard. The team made a change already in relation to health care professionals and health care workers, and it will look at the issue of the broader public as we ease restrictions. On the issue of the sick pay scheme as raised by Deputy Barry, I do not have any plans to extend that scheme to people working outside of the health service but I will correspond with him further on it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: On a point of information or clarification, it sounded like the Minister was suggesting that I suggested that the agreement be ripped up, but I did no such thing. I think the Minister may have misspoken but that is certainly what it sounded like to me. I did no such thing and nor would I.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy absolutely did no such thing. I just happened to catch her eye at the time but Deputies in this House did, in recent days, contact me through a variety of fora and suggest that we should rip up the agreement and give back the private hospitals, but I have no intention of doing that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The point is clarified. We now move on to Deputy Matt Shanahan on behalf of the Regional Group.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I begin by expressing my condolences to all families who have been recently bereaved because of Covid-19. A heavy price continues to be exacted on our population. Also, on behalf of the Regional Group of Independents, I applaud the efforts of our national medical and clinical care staff and wish a full and speedy recovery to those diagnosed in hospital or home care settings at present.

I wish to highlight some areas of innovation and potential in ongoing Covid-19 management which I hope the Department of Health will acknowledge and support. PPE in development in Ireland at present has no expedited access or pathway to gain certification or standards approval so that it can be formally supplied to public, community and national health services. I am aware of two projects in Waterford attempting to navigate the standards approval process. The first is a barrier face mask, the design of which has already been approved for use in France by means of a standards reclassification, but as yet in Ireland we have been unable to accelerate

23 April 2020

standards consideration. The second is a new clinical full-face mask being developed by the South Eastern Applied Materials, SEAM, research centre at Waterford Institute of Technology, WIT, one of our 15 national technology gateways. Development is in conjunction with University Hospital Waterford's ICU consultants, Boston Scientific, Consort Packaging and Jabil Healthcare. This mask may prove a significant development for clinical care lead protection and I ask for the support of the Minister's office in the coming weeks to assist in the certification of this product. The SEAM technology gateway at WIT is assisting some of the foremost names in medical device design and manufacture in the country. Its 3D printing facility has been manufacturing face visors for local healthcare concerns since the Covid-19 outbreak began. I urge the Department of Health to support the release of approved funding granted in 2018 for the purchase of a CT scanner for industrial X-ray. This apparatus is needed to support the innovation and problem solving that has been second nature to many businesses in Waterford and the south east for many years.

I will now move on to the issues in our nursing and residential care homes. The situation regarding PPE has been well flagged, but there are broader issues which have not been flagged as yet. Some social and political commentary has inferred that we have substandard nursing care prevalent in our community and residential care settings, but I know this to be untrue in my county of Waterford. What is puzzling to me and many others is why the Department of Health and the HSE have not prioritised senior care staff to handle the testing requirements within nursing homes. Testing kits could be made available to nursing staff along with the provision of short training courses to allow for the in-house swabbing of residents and staff as required. These swabs could be sent to local laboratories for analysis. This could deliver a 24-hour test turnaround, the gold standard that we are currently failing to deliver. Beyond this, we have vulnerable patients with dementia, and it is clear that having familiar care attendants conduct swabbing would be far more appropriate to their needs. The Minister has directed HIQA to conduct inspections into Covid-19 activity in residential care settings. Many nursing homes have already drawn up Covid-19 management strategies in collaboration with HIQA and any further reviews should be minimised to a desktop exercise to prevent individuals accessing care homes and potentially introducing infection.

The Department of Health's announcement of funding to the sector was positive but some of the actions of the NTPF, which the Minister appointed to administer the moneys, have been less positive. Many care homes have expended significant resources in the purchase of PPE, increased staff numbers, creating Covid-19 isolation areas and protocols and bonus staff payments to cover enforced absence of colleagues and the increased workload. The NTPF applications to support funding are onerous in the extreme. The decision by the NTPF that significant preparatory purchases and expenditure in the month of March cannot be supported is unjust. Capitation money is payable for fair deal residents only and not those privately funded. Bonus moneys that have been agreed or paid cannot be supported.

For many care workers the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, would return more money than their weekly take home pay. The State is prepared to support this cost but is not prepared to support an incentive to allow staff to work extended hours in these most difficult conditions. The Government is not adequately compensating residential care homes for the financial hardship which Covid-19 management has caused and, at this juncture, neither is it providing the extra personnel resources promised that could be switched from hospital settings.

Significant progress has been made in securing additional test kits through the efforts of Dr. Paddy Mallon, Dr. Paul O'Brien and Dr. Oisín O'Connell. I ask the Minister for a status update

in this regard. A national training scheme for PPE donning and disrobing would be of immense help in reducing Covid-19 cross contamination in hospital and community settings where the virus exists. Does the Minister or his Department have plans to address this issue? Pulse oximeters have been shown to have significant diagnostic value in identifying the early signs of Covid-19 infection and signalling treatment. I applaud the leadership the Department of Health and the HSE have taken in this area which, as profiled in an article in *The New York Times* this week, may significantly assist Covid-19 diagnosis and early treatment.

The cath lab at University Hospital Waterford, UHW, was scheduled for refurbishment this year. It has been closed since 14 February to allow for a refurbishment programme scheduled to take 15 weeks. In Waterford, the main cath lab and the temporary contract diagnostic cath lab are closed to service, while a reduced offering is available at UMPC Whitfield private hospital. Will the Minister commit to authorising works on the existing cath lab at UHW to be expedited as an essential service? The UHW cath lab configuration delivered over 4,000 patient procedures last year. Will the Minister also indicate a final recommissioning date and the recommencement of fixed and modular cath lab activity at UHW? In addition, the construction of a second permanent lab at UHW announced by the Department of Health in September 2018 has still not gone to build-tender-approval. There will be companies interested in this Government contract. Will the Minister confirm that moneys are ring-fenced to support this capital project and that his Department is committed to advancing it as soon as possible to construction-tender-award? I ask that the Minister deal first in his response with the issues of the cardiac service.

Deputy Simon Harris: I acknowledge that the Deputy has done a huge amount of campaigning and work in regard to cardiac services in the south-east. I also congratulate him on his election. On the second cath lab in Waterford, money is ring-fenced for it. I will get a status update for the Deputy. It is not for me to police what is essential or non-essential in regard to construction works, but there is an exemption for essential works to continue. I would have thought that the refurbishment of the existing lab was an essential work. I will raise that issue directly with my Department and the HSE and I will revert to the Deputy in that regard. I know how important and sensitive that issue is for the people of the south east.

On the projects which the Deputy highlighted, it is clear the south east is a very innovative place because the Deputy has highlighted a number of projects under way where Irish companies and Irish industry are eager to help and support our national effort. I would appreciate a note on those projects, which I will then ensure is given to the Office of Government Procurement and that any assistance that can be provided by our State agencies will be provided.

On the issue of testing, the point made by the Deputy regarding in-house swabbing is a valid one and one I know the National Public Health Emergency Team is looking at. Currently, we are largely using the National Ambulance Service, mainly for reasons of speed. What we want to do very quickly is try to find as much of this virus as we can in our residential care settings so that we can quickly move to try to break the chains of transmission, as we seem to have largely done so far in the community. However, the Deputy's point about the fact that many nursing homes have the clinical ability through experienced nurses to carry out in-house swabbing is valid.

Regarding the issue of HIQA and its visits to nursing homes, I assure the Deputy, as I have assured nursing homes and as I have spoken to HIQA, that the purpose of these visits is to be supportive, not to catch anybody out. The purpose is to visit both public and private residential care facilities, voluntary and otherwise, nursing homes and the like, to engage and to see

23 April 2020

whether what is meant to be happening there is happening and whether the supports and the connectivity for supports that are meant to be in place are in place in order that we can have more than anecdotes of what is going on and see very clearly from the regulator areas that are doing well. I hope to be able to report that many nursing homes are doing well because I believe that people are working really hard in them. We must remember that the majority of our nursing homes are still, thankfully, Covid-free, which is some achievement for them. This is a highly infectious virus, and people are doing an awful lot of work. The visits are therefore a supportive tool to provide us with accurate information from the regulator that I think people in this country expect.

The NTPF is the administrator of that scheme. I do not expect or wish the scheme to be bureaucratic. Obviously, certain checks and safeguards need to be in place. I know that meetings were due to take place today and perhaps yesterday in that regard, certainly in recent days. There has been ongoing engagement between officials, the HSE, the NTPF and nursing home representatives, and I am due to meet Nursing Homes Ireland again tomorrow on this issue.

To respond to the Deputy's final two questions, I thank him for his comments on the leadership being shown by Ireland on research and diagnostics and so on. I want us to remain in that space. We have appointed Professor Colm Bergin to head up a research group on Covid-19 in our country. We have also carried out one of the first health technology assessments by HIQA on new testing that may become available in order that Ireland can be ready to avail of any of these in the future.

Finally, regarding the issue of extra staff for our nursing home sector, I know this is a very important and very sensitive matter. All the unions were brilliant in agreeing a voluntary redeployment scheme, but I must concede that it is tough to match appropriate staff to appropriate settings. We have already seen, I think, 61 directly-employed staff moved to the private nursing home sector. I expect that number to increase, and the HSE is due to give a census update on that this evening.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I also ask the Minister to put pressure on for the development of our second cath lab in order that we advance it to a construction tender. It has been lying around for quite a number of months.

Deputy Simon Harris: Obviously, the current restrictions on work and the likes have an impact, but I am very eager for that second cath lab in Waterford to proceed.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to the Rural Independent Group. Again we will hear from Deputies Michael Collins and Richard O'Donoghue.

Deputy Michael Collins: Three minutes for my questions and three minutes for Deputy O'Donoghue.

An Ceann Comhairle: I like the way the Deputies are alternating.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is very smooth.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are trying to keep ourselves fully alert.

I got a letter some time back from the husband of a worker in the private nursing home sec-

tor and another a few days ago. I will refer to an extract from it. It just shows the worry and upset that are out there and the concerns that need to be addressed. The nursing home in question is without masks. It had been promised a supply from the HSE weeks ago but as of yet has received nothing. This was on 4 April. The first letter states that the men and women, mothers and fathers, working in the nursing home are nervous and scared, not only for themselves but also for their patients and families. The staff are resigned to the fact that it is only a matter of time before they are infected. They are still working away and looking after their patients without face masks. This was just a couple of days ago.

Three weeks later, the care centre has three Covid-positive staff members and 19 Covid-positive patients and one dead, with another five staff out sick and at least 18 patients suspected to have Covid-19 and awaiting testing. The staff have still to date received no PPE from the HSE. The home has been in touch with the HSE and we are told it has no PPE for the nursing home. Three other nursing homes where this man's wife used to work and where she still has friends have said they have got no PPE from the HSE. Their children have not left the house in 37 days. It is not that they were afraid they would catch Covid-19 in their community but, rather, that they may have already caught it from their mother and may spread it. The staff in her nursing home are now under tremendous pressure, working in tremendous fear and understaffed. They must hand back used single-use face masks at the end of their shift for them to be cleaned and reused.

I ask the House to remember the scenes we saw from Italy, France and Spain of doctors and nurses struggling each and every day. Those scenes are happening here in Ireland right now, not in our hospitals but in our nursing homes, and it is the same for home help workers. I am getting texts - I presume other Members are - and mobile phone calls from people working as home helps who have not got any protective gear, and it is very upsetting for them. Right up until last night I got texts, and I received another this morning, to the effect that in areas of west Cork they were promised something and nothing arrived.

Nursing home workloads are immense at the moment and we must look at ways where application packs for the NTPF for extra assistance could be simplified. It is much better for directors and nurses to be dealing with residents and implementing advanced infection control procedures rather than projecting figures and spending time on paperwork. The scheme only covers fair deal residents and not private residents. These private residents should not be excluded.

Older people need to be supported to live independently in their own homes as long as they wish to do so. We have been fighting for this for many years. Previous Governments turned their backs on elderly people. The cuts to home care packages and home helps were unforgivable and the embargo on new home help hours has forced many people into nursing homes prematurely. This mistake cannot be repeated by future Governments. Sadly, as a result of Covid-19, we have seen the danger of dormitory-style accommodation for residents in some of our community hospitals in particular. Are HIQA standards being investigated in all community hospitals? Has there been investment to address the issue? What is the Government doing to incentivise Irish healthcare professionals who return from overseas? These are truly tremendous people, some of whom have come from very lucrative jobs, who have given up their whole lives to save lives here and help in the current crisis. What incentives at least exist to persuade them to remain in Ireland for the next five years?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I commend the Minister on his work on this. My ques-

23 April 2020

tion, which I asked of the Minister for Finance, concerns farming. What is considered essential work depends on the contact in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Many farmers are under severe pressure with harvesting due to the growth rate. They are looking to get construction work done on their farms, and if they do not get it done in the next fortnight, there will be a backlog and they will have nowhere to put their silage and round bales to keep things like effluent at bay. There is a knock-on effect. If they do not have their farm buildings finished by the end of the summer, they will have the same problem in the winter when they need to put their cattle indoors. At the moment, contractors will not go on site because they say they are waiting for a directive to say it is essential work. All farming is essential work. All farm buildings constitute essential work. Social distancing can be maintained 100% but all farming work involving the food chain must be considered essential work. Our dairy industry is essential. Farming is essential when it comes to everything on our tables, but it is not just for now. Contractors are willing and will maintain social distancing but it is not happening.

Some home help workers have been reduced to one hour while others have been reduced to half an hour, but while they are on contract to the agencies, they do not qualify for a Covid-19 payment. I am receiving calls telling me that the agencies will not release these workers because they are under contract. Can we address this with the agencies so that if somebody's hours are reduced below a certain number, the top-up can be up to €350 to make sure healthcare workers are protected?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Michael Collins for bringing the issue of PPE to my attention. If he wants to give me the details of the individuals or institutions involved, I will certainly liaise directly with the HSE on his behalf. In respect of the letter dated 4 April, I would hope that we have seen an improvement since then based on the decision taken by NPHE to have parity of access regarding PPE for residential settings and hospital settings, but I will certainly follow up those cases for the Deputy. I must make the point that there is also parity of access with regard to home care, so if the Deputy has come across a blockage, he should email me or write to me about it and I will address it.

The Deputy raises the valid point that we have seen a number of Irish people come back home to work in the health service. We have seen the GP from Toronto who contacted me to say that she had come back, and Irish doctors who had been working in Perth and nurses coming back, all of them coming back to be on call for Ireland and to put their shoulder to the wheel. The Deputy is right. We want to keep them here, which will be the challenge. My Department and the HSE need to do a bit of work on how we ensure that it remains an attractive place for people to work in. I hope that their being back and our being able to sign them up to jobs will help in that regard. The Deputy raises an important and timely point and I will engage with my Department on it.

I am glad the Deputy raised the issue of community nursing units because much of the conversation in the media, the House and elsewhere in recent days has involved a suggestion that all of the challenges are in our private nursing units, which is not the case. We have a blended mix of community nursing units, as well as private and voluntary nursing homes. There have been significant challenges relating to our community hospitals. The HIQA framework published on Tuesday will apply to all residential settings, including those owned by the HSE or the State. As part of that framework, there will be HIQA visits to community nursing units. As Members are aware, there is a significant programme of capital investment to upgrade the facilities. Although excellent care is provided in the facilities, many of them are old buildings in need of refurbishment. The HSE is in the process of implementing its capital programme in

respect of residential services for older people. The programme commenced in 2016 to rebuild or refurbish approximately 90 centres requiring upgrading of infrastructure. There has been significant progression of refurbishment across the country, but there is certainly more work to do in that regard.

Deputy O'Donoghue asked me two questions, both of which merit my getting more information and reverting to him with proper responses. The issues in question are somewhat wider than my remit in the Department of Health. On the issue of farmers, I accept that the farming sector is essential and matters relating to food supply are very important. If there is confusion as to what is appropriate, safe or essential, I will engage with the public health officials in my Department and correspond with the Deputy to provide clarity in that regard.

He raised an issue regarding agency home help workers whose hours have been reduced for a variety of reasons as a result of the pandemic and stated his wish that they would qualify for the differential between what they are earning and the Covid-19 payment. That payment is not administered by my Department but I will discuss the matter with the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection and ask her to revert to the Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Incidentally, next week there will be an engagement with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, and the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, which will provide an opportunity for Deputies to ask questions of them.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My colleagues, Deputies Joan Collins and Pringle, and I have tabled seven questions. I will not reach all of them in the limited time I have. I ask the Minister to confirm that written answers to those questions will be provided. That will ease matters. I will hone in on questions Nos. 3 to 7, three of which are in my name and relate to residential facilities. The Minister may have heard my contribution this morning when I stated that I have no idea why residential facilities were not top of the list from day one. I still do not understand why that was not so. I have tried to come at the matter in a different way. There is a clear obligation on HIQA, the Mental Health Commission and other bodies, including regional medical officers, to report infectious diseases. Question No. 4 that I tabled asks how many Covid-19 outbreaks in residential care facilities were reported to regional medical officers. I ask the Minister to address that question.

On community healthcare organisations, CHOs, Members received a briefing document from the Department of Justice and Equality on 3 April which stated that those organisations were going to look at congregated settings and do a full assessment. Has that been done? If not, why not? When will it be done?

Deputy Joan Collins tabled a question on the reliance on PPE from abroad. What progress has been made in sourcing such equipment in Ireland? There is a significant amount of goodwill and people have come forward from all sectors, from individual women to the arts sector, to say they can and are making such equipment. What progress has been made in that regard?

Deputy Joan Collins also tabled a question regarding Keelings. The Minister partly answered her question while replying to Deputy Shortall. Is it correct that there was no contact between Keelings and NPHE? Is the answer to the long question that Deputy Collins took great time to table "No, there was no contact"? If so, what monitoring, if any, is being carried out by the Government of Keelings or any other company that is behaving in that manner? We

need workers. I have no problem with that but what measures are being taken to ensure the law is being adhered to?

The issue of nursing homes is really upsetting me and upsetting people on the ground. Why were all of the residential facilities, including direct provision centres, not the number one priority? Peter Tyndall's report has been mentioned already and I will quote from it again. The report said that this virus has brought into sharp focus "just how unsuitable and unsustainable it is to have three or more people in the same room" and so on. My time is up but I would like to get answers.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Minister signed off on the regulations that determine what limitations there are on people's liberty. Essentially, we are all subject to house imprisonment, except for being allowed to avail of essential services or to visit essential retail outlets. The essential retail outlets are listed clearly to be fair to the Minister. The list says that hardware stores are essential retail outlets, as are outlets that provide equipment for gardening. Given that, why are other Ministers going on the airwaves saying that garden centres and hardware stores should only open in emergency situations and should not be open? When this Chamber delegates the power to the Minister to make law, and he clearly makes law, surely that should be adhered to and other Ministers should not be giving information that is contrary to that law. I would like the Minister to confirm whether the regulations he has signed off on say in black and white that hardware stores and garden centres are essential retail outlets or whether they do not.

Ursula von der Leyen's criteria for opening up have been mentioned quite a bit. She also spoke about moving away from blanket measures and more towards regional measures. The law which this House passed, which gives the Minister the power to make the orders, talks about areas and regions and the Minister chose to make an order in respect of the whole country. The transmission rates are different across the country and there are particular pockets of infection. Has the Minister given consideration to having different regimes in place for different areas? What is required for a city such as London, where there are 2 million people on the Underground every day is different to what is required for a city such as Dublin and is different again to what is required for rural Clare. However, it seems to me that regardless of that, there is the same infringement on liberty, on people going about their lives, on people seeing their family members and on people earning some money - because ultimately the health service has to be paid for, whether it is paid for through a planned economy or a capitalist economy but either way, we need a functioning economy to provide for the health service. Has the Minister given consideration to that?

One of the tracing measures which will probably be looked at is an app. I heard the Minister answer questions on this point already. Will there be open sourcing in advance? Will the coding be published in advance? If not, why not? If the coding is not published in advance and if there is no open source coding, how will the app get buy-in from the public? People will obviously be distrustful of the app if they are carrying it around while it is collating essential information about where they are at any time and who they meet. People will understandably want to know who that information is being collated for, where it is going and who it is being given to. Will that be open source coding and if not, why not?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputies. There were quite a few questions there and as I have a limited amount of time, I will respond to each of the seven questions that have been tabled in writing. I want to reassure Deputy Connolly because at the heart of her questions is this idea of why long-term residential facilities were not the first priority, presumably because

of the vulnerability of the residents living there. I assure her that from day one, work has been done on this. HIQA, the regulator of nursing homes, has sat on NPHE and has done a good job. Guidance was published in February and meetings took place in February before we even had a case of Covid-19 in Ireland. We know that every year, whether it is with the flu or the vomiting bug, it is very difficult to keep infections and viruses out of residential settings. We know it is difficult to keep infections and viruses out of our homes and we have homes with large numbers of people but that is not to say efforts were not made. However, it is right and proper, from a public health point of view, that when the virus is suppressed within the community, and it is thankfully looking like we are beginning to do that in Ireland at least at this moment in time, that sectors that need more supports are then further honed in on. I said this earlier and I mean it: I would not like to think how much more difficult things would be in our long-term residential facilities today had the virus not been suppressed in the community. Residents are not going out of the facilities, the virus is being brought in. The more that the virus is prevalent in the community, the more it can come into a long-term residential care facility, including by essential staff who are doing a very good job.

I have a detailed note, which might be best to send to the Deputy in the interests of time, on what we can do to work with Irish companies. We are not reliant on anyone else to provide us with PPE - work is ongoing on that - but the short answer is that it is about speed and the time it takes to ramp up production here when we need the PPE yesterday. That is the challenge that we are trying to work our way through.

On Keelings or any other firm, it is not the job of NPHE to consider individual applications. The airports are open and people can come into the country. The issue is for them to give advice on what should happen when any of us comes back to or into our country. The answer I gave to Deputy Shortall earlier indicates the direction of travel in that regard, perhaps tightening the monitoring process so one does not ask people if they would mind self-isolating for 14 days but would ask them where they will self-isolate and that there will also be an ability to check that. That is important as we begin to open up the country more in due course.

On Deputy McNamara's question on hardware shops, it has been much debated. The view of the National Public Health Emergency Team is that they should only be open for emergencies as of now.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The law is a mess. The Minister signed the law.

Deputy Simon Harris: We have cancelled and closed many things including pubs, rugby matches and so on, on the basis of people doing what is good for them, their staff, the public

Deputy Michael McNamara: What does the law that the Minister signed say?

Deputy Simon Harris: The law, I believe, says that they can open but the clear public health advice -----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Minister signed the law.

Deputy Simon Harris: I know that. I am aware of that and if Deputy Byrne wants to ask me a question about that in a moment, I ask that he please do so.

The clear advice from Dr. Tony Holohan, our Chief Medical Officer, is that hardware shops

23 April 2020

should only be open for emergencies. That will be reviewed as will all other things. We have operated a compliance structure based on buy-in and support from the public, not based on the law. The law has been there as a safeguard. The Deputy makes good points on infringement on life but the biggest infringement on life is death. We are trying to save lives here. The Deputy is correct - the Oireachtas has given me the power to look at regional areas. It is something we keep under consideration. The current view is that the size of the country means that would not be practical in terms of the transmission of the virus but it is always kept under review.

I agree with the Deputy that there would need to be significant public buy-in in a voluntary capacity for an app to work. The more information that can be published, the better and I have committed to the House already to provide a detailed update on the mobile app in my opening statement next week.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Minister happy that he has covered everything or does he want five minutes to wrap up?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am happy if Members are.

An Ceann Comhairle: Then we will take a five minute suspension before we move on to education.

Sitting suspended at 5.58 p.m. and resumed at 6.05 p.m.

Covid-19 (Education and Skills): Statements

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We shall now proceed to statements on Covid-19 and questions for the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Gabhaim buíochas le mo chomhghleacaithe uilig as an seans labhairt leo inniu faoi na príomhrudaí a bhaineann leis an oideachas. Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom focal pearsanta a rá leo maidir leis an chaidreamh dhearfach a bhí eadrainn thar na laethanta agus na seachtaine seo a chuaigh thart agus maidir leis an eolas, comhairle agus rudaí mar sin. Táim ag dúil go mór leis an díospóireacht inniu agus leis na moltaí a dtiocfaidh amach as. Níl an léarscáil atá againn soiléir i gcónaí. Is dúshlán agus míbhuntáiste é sin ach tá rudaí dearfacha ar nós comhrá, comhlúadar agus caidreamh iontach tábhachtach.

I extend my condolences to those who have been bereaved as a result of Covid-19 and I spare a thought for those currently battling against the virus. I pay tribute to all those helping in the fight against it and the many front-line staff helping us all to get through it. I thank staff across the education and training sector, including teachers, principals, lecturers, special needs assistants, school secretaries, school caretakers and all those who have made an enormous effort to respond to the unique and unprecedented challenge presented by this crisis. Most importantly, I acknowledge our young people, for whom this is a very challenging time. Their educational interests, safety and well-being will continue to be the heart of my concerns as Minister. This is a view shared across the House.

The message to students is that even when times are good, it is normal to feel stress and worry ahead of examinations. With all the public health measures, there is inevitably more anxiety. The important point is that if you are feeling lost, stressed or unsure, you should reach

out. Your friends, family, teachers, school and community do care about you and want the best for you. You are not alone. All of us struggle to adapt and adjust in times of great change but remember you are playing your part.

We are all in this together and I am grateful to colleagues across the House for their collaborative approach to date. The views of Deputies have been important in informing my approach to critical decisions. I refer in particular to the strong preference shown by Deputies at the briefing on 1 April for holding the leaving certificate examinations. I also thank the education partners, the teacher unions, students, parents, principals and management bodies that are meeting regularly to help us chart the way forward. In particular, I acknowledge a very strong voice in the Irish Second-Level Students Union, Ms Ciara Fanning, who, with her team, has been very competent in leading the way and leading the charge in providing a platform and a voice for young people.

It is exactly six weeks since the Taoiseach announced the closure of schools and educational institutions. The people across the education and training sector have shown an agile and innovative response to this national crisis. There have been phenomenal efforts right across schools, further education centres, higher education institutions to ensure continuity of learning to support students and to seek to mitigate educational disadvantage. Since the beginning of the crisis, my Department has significantly reoriented its structures in order to steer an effective response in the education and training sector. At the core of this has been significant stakeholder engagement to quickly identify emerging issues and shape responses. Each of the new engagement structures is meeting regularly. I thank all the education partners for their strong and constructive engagement.

Ensuring continuity of learning has been a key issue. All schools have been asked to continue to plan lessons and, where possible, provide online resources for students or online lessons where they are equipped to do so. A series of guidance notes to assist schools in how to support and effectively engage with their students has been compiled to address challenges in providing programmes of continued learning in the current context. Contingency plans have been developed by higher education institutions and the further education and training system for shifting to online provision, and assessment of third level programmes has also been implemented across the tertiary education sector comprising higher education and further education and training. RTE has developed a home school hub which is an additional support for parents and primary school pupils and this week TG4 began to broadcast “Cúla4 ar Scoil”. There has been a major focus on supporting the needs of vulnerable groups, including those with special educational needs, those from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom a loss of school time can be most harmful, homeless children and children in temporary accommodation and refugee centres or asylum seekers’ accommodation.

I announced yesterday a major €50 million funding package as part of our suite of measures to support all students particularly those at risk of disadvantage due to Covid-19 school closures. This includes a special €10 million fund to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students. A total of €7 million additional funding will be provided in the post-primary sector and €3 million in the primary sector. This is part of an overall response which has included guidance being issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage; collaboration with Cisco to support schools with training in Webex video; conference software for use by teachers with their classes; guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education for supporting children with special educational needs; continuation of

23 April 2020

the school meals programme funded through the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to provide food parcels to children who are at risk of food poverty; continued funding of home tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year; and resources to support good mental health and well-being among students, produced by the National Educational Psychological Service.

I also acknowledge the contribution of the education and training sector to the wider national effort from the phenomenal response of the special needs assistants, SNAs, to the call for redeployment of the critical contribution which our higher educational institutions are making to the clinical and research response to this crisis. All this tells a tale of the ongoing commitment across the sector to continuing to provide education and support services in the most unprecedented situation that society has found itself in.

I will do my best to answer as many questions as possible this evening from Deputies as we continue to work to support our education and training system in responding to this crisis.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I understand Deputy Thomas Byrne is sharing time with Deputy Lawless, six minutes and four minutes.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Yes, and maybe the Minister would reply individually to us within the six for me and four for Deputy Lawless. Would that be acceptable?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Yes, as long as we stay within the time.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Minister will finish then and leave four minutes for Deputy Lawless, and if he does not have time, he does not have time.

Deputy Joe McHugh: That is all right.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): That sounds like a good deal.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is fair to say that while I have been accepting of the decisions of the Department of Education and Skills in this crisis I am not best pleased by its approach over recent weeks. The Minister mentioned a briefing for Deputies on 1 April. When he spoke in Irish he mentioned the good relations among parties in the House and, yes, we have spoken on several occasions. I asked for a briefing two weeks ago and was promised it by telephone but it never happened. The Department of Health runs regular briefings for Deputies but the Department of Education and Skills has not done that. A lot of what has happened and the mistakes that have been made could have been avoided with more political engagement.

The one thing that students need is clarity. The reason they do not have that is the constant stream of leaks from the Department of Education and Skills which are adding to great uncertainty. I believe the Minister was forced into his Good Friday decision by the fact that there was an unauthorised leak to *The Irish Times*. I wish no disrespect to the journalists, who are doing their jobs, and indeed the Taoiseach referred on Instagram to postponing the leaving certificate before anybody knew about it. Since then the Minister for Health has been musing about schools possibly returning for a day a week and the Minister for Education and Skills made an announcement on Good Friday about the junior certificate, which seems to have been supplanted by what the Department is saying unofficially to RTÉ that there will be no State-certified exams. That is not what he said when he gave his decision on Good Friday. This uncertainty has to end. I have been pleading with the Minister to end it for some time but it has

not ended yet. It is lethal and very discouraging to students.

The voids are real. Not many families have multiple laptops for students to use. In our house the kids are fighting over laptops. They are only in primary school. I do not know what it would be like for a family with a kid doing the leaving certificate or one with a kid doing the leaving certificate and another doing the junior certificate, and other kids trying to study too. I know of teachers living at home with their parents, as many young teachers do, where there is hardly any broadband. They do not have the access necessary to enable them to teach their students. It is difficult and the kids are losing out.

While the Minister's plan for the junior certificate seems to have unravelled to some extent, I hope that he has a good, solid plan B in place for the leaving certificate. The goalposts keep changing. When he made his decision on Good Friday and announced it, I assumed that he was acting on the basis of public health advice. I asked for that advice but have not received it. The public health advice received by the Department asserting that the exams could go ahead in the late summer and early autumn, or the manner in which they would take place, has never been publicised. Since then, there have been briefings to education partners trying to work all of that out.

I accept that we are in an emergency and I have been accepting of the decisions made, but the Department of Education and Skills has not handled this to the best extent possible. It was slow to recognise the reality of broadband, socioeconomic and other divides. Some kids simply do worse outside a classroom setting. All Deputies raised these issues on 1 April, particularly that of broadband and devices. An announcement was made yesterday, which was three weeks later, on this matter, but that will take some time to implement.

What is the Minister's plan for the leaving certificate? Is it happening? Has the Minister worked out a plan B? Has he considered that the ultimate purpose of the leaving certificate is to show that students have finished school and allow them to enter college on a fair and transparent basis? There are other ways of doing it and we have supported what the Department has been doing, but it has been frustrating to see the constant stream of leaks in newspapers. If that has been frustrating for me, as a Deputy, then the frustration felt by the students doing the exams is multiple times that which I have experienced.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Is it okay if the Minister answers now?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): If the Deputies want him to. It is up to them.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Does Deputy Lawless wish to come in now?

Deputy James Lawless: I will commence at the four-minute mark if the Minister wishes to respond between now and then.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Yes. I will be as brief as possible.

I apologise for Deputy Byrne not getting the briefing. I will ensure that it happens.

The clarity that was asked of me at the briefing on 1 April when we were all on a web conference was about whether the leaving certificate would be going ahead in June. The demand

23 April 2020

made of me that day was that clarity was needed ASAP, be that the next day or within a couple of days. I responded by giving that clarity and stating that the exams would not go ahead in June and would be postponed until late July and early August. I did that in order to provide clarity to students, who had been asking whether the exams could go ahead in June.

The Deputy asked about the public health advice. The decision to postpone the exams was based on the fact that schools would be closed until 5 May. That meant that we could not ensure a six-week lead-in period for schools to build students up, inform them and give them enough time. It took away the six-week minimum period and we would have had to prepare for two weeks back at school. That informed the Department's recommendations and my decision to postpone the leaving certificate until late July and early August. It is still my intention and belief that leaving certificate students need to be in their classes for a minimum of six weeks. At the heart of all these deliberations is the public health advice. That is because the health and well-being of our students are at the heart of any decision that I make.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am sorry, but we need to give Deputy Lawless two minutes.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Minister. I will be as brief as I can because time is of the essence. I will ask two short questions on the leaving certificate. I will then concentrate the rest of my contribution on the third level sector.

It has been put to me that fees for sitting the leaving certificate are payable at the end of this month. Given the constraints and economic conditions, some parents and families are under pressure with those fees. Perhaps the deadline could be extended in light of the fact that the exams are being postponed. A reasonable suggestion has been put to me. Given the fact that the curriculum has advanced to a particular appoint - it probably fell off in February just before schools were suspended - perhaps a reduced curriculum for exam purposes could be considered. For example, if there are normally 20 poets on the literature paper, perhaps 15 of those could be confirmed and that could be communicated. It might give a little bit of a confidence boost to students and help them focus their studies and reflect the fact that, despite their best efforts to learn remotely, they may not catch up with the studies they have missed in school.

I will spend the remainder of my contribution focusing on the third level sector. It is fair to state that science is recognised as core in the fight back against the virus here and globally and that experts, despite the ebb and flow in how they were regarded politically in recent years, are again respected. Science is back in the spotlight, and rightly so. It is also fair to say that those countries which invest heavily in research and development and science, such as South Korea and New Zealand, which punch above their weight and which spend at least 2.5% and more of GDP spent on research and development, have done well in the fight against Covid-19. This is not a coincidence. Of course, I commend our domestic efforts but a lesson we can learn is that the value of science can never be underestimated.

The plight of fixed-term researchers has not received attention to date. There are 14,500 such individuals in this country.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): One and a half minutes remain for the reply.

Deputy James Lawless: They are the workhorses of the research sector. These people are caught between two stools because they cannot perform their experiments, work in their labo-

ratories or attend their universities and they also are not eligible for the wage subsidy scheme. The laboratories and higher education institutions are running down their grant money to pay their wages as a humanitarian response in the context of the welfare of their researchers. This grant money will be exhausted and we will potentially lose three years' worth of work instead of three months' worth because programmes that were time-boxed and grant-funded will run out of time, steam and money before the work is finished.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy James Lawless: I suggest to the Minister that the wage subsidy scheme be made available to these fixed-term researchers, which seems an obvious solution, or that a commitment be given that no research institute will fall short of funding to continue its work when researchers can return to the laboratories.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Half a minute remains for the reply.

Deputy James Lawless: More generally, with regard to the plight of the universities, their income from international students, accommodation and private sector collaboration has gone through floor. There will need to be massive support for the universities when this is over.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am afraid that there are only 22 seconds remaining.

Deputy Joe McHugh: The Deputy raised the issue of fees to be paid at the end of the month. We will extend that date until after the exams. This is only fair and I thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

With regard to the structure and timetabling of exams, I have set up an advisory group to work on this. The advisory group has already met and will meet again tomorrow. It will meet twice a week. It comprises parent representation, students and unions. They are all around the table and they will work through how we do it. This will be very important because they will work with the various instructions coming from the health officials. It will be a very important group with regard to the determination on where we move in July and August.

The Deputy made some very interesting suggestions regarding third level education. We have the higher education authority group led by Mr. William Beausang. All of the members are listening to this debate and we will take what the Deputy has said on board.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have been contacted by students throughout the State who are under severe pressure. To do the leaving certificate any year is extremely testing, much more so against the background of a pandemic and much more so again against a background of such complete uncertainty. They are worried and anxious and, what is more, they are frustrated and angry at the lack of detail and the fact that many ideas are first floated half-formed in the media rather than concrete full plans being proposed.

I am also frustrated. I appreciate that the Department is busy. I have had some good conversations with many of the officials and I am grateful for the discussions I have had with the Minister, but I have submitted dozens of questions in writing to the Minister and many of them have not received an adequate response. Students need certainty and clarity. Níl sé maith go leor agus tá sé ag cur leis an mbrú agus leis an strus atá ar scoláirí. It is provoking absolutely massive mental health issues for many students. There are huge, unanswered questions about

23 April 2020

how the Department will deliver the leaving certificate. What will the timetable be? How will it work with social distancing? Can it work? How will we tackle the chasm that has opened up between students in terms of disadvantage and digitally? We need clarity.

I want to use the rest of my time to get answers to questions. I will give way and ask for a brief response and I hope the Minister will be efficient. I was contacted today by the father of a student who has two conditional offers to study medicine in Britain. Both universities are insisting that those offers will be lost unless leaving certificate results are issued before 31 August 2020. Can the Minister tell Irish students that the results they need will be ready in time for Irish universities and, more urgently, under the UCAS system and internationally?

Deputy Joe McHugh: On the first issue, that individual is one of 4,000 people who have applied to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is a major issue and that is why I picked up the phone to the Secretary of State for Education in London, Gavin Williamson. My Department's Secretary General is in contact with his counterpart in London as well, and I have written formally to the Northern Ireland Education Minister, Peter Weir, in regard to this issue. We need to find a solution because we are talking about 4,000 applicants. It is an issue that is on the radar. While I do not have an answer for the Deputy today, it is certainly an issue we are taking seriously.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Will the Minister ensure that additional dedicated mental health supports are provided to students via a helpline or online, or however it is needed?

Deputy Joe McHugh: This is an incredibly important issue. Like the Deputy, I am getting a lot of direct contact, primarily from students but from some parents as well. There is much stress and anxiety. There is the shock that people are dealing with but there is also the shock of not knowing where we will be in September, October or November, never mind where we will be next week. There is uncertainty in terms of the overall pandemic but for students, and specifically leaving certificate students, we are going to announce formally in the next couple of days a whole outreach and interactive support system. It will be a combined announcement between the Department of Health and the Department of Education and Skills, and well-being will be at its heart. For students who are under stress and pressure, and suffering from anxiety, we are going to have that dedicated helpline. We will make the announcement in a couple of days.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I am glad to hear that and I look forward to seeing the detail. On what date will the Minister outline the full details of the timetable, including the procedure for exam halls and papers? Will he publish the detail of any plan B he is preparing?

Deputy Joe McHugh: The significant dates are that the leaving certificate is to start on 29 July. We are working on the timetable, which is important. As outlined earlier, that is going to be tested through the advisory group in the context of how we work within the public health advice. The Deputy asked when that will be ready, and it will be in the first week of June. Tomorrow week is 1 May, so, four weeks after that there will be information on timetabling and the structure of the exams. The reason we are leaving it until the first week of June is that we want to have as much available advice as possible on where we stand with the curve and with the pandemic. The reason we are leaving it until 1 June is to have as much information as possible available in order to hold the exams later in July.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Will that be published?

Deputy Joe McHugh: All the conversations we are having are through the dedicated advisory group. As recently as last Friday, the Irish Second-Level Students Union raised issues such as plan B and what are the contingencies, such as contingencies for sickness or bereavement. All of these pertinent questions are being asked. We are going to work on the contingencies and we will not go into this in a blinkered way because we are living in a real world of uncertainty.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I appreciate that is very important. Plan B needs to be as nailed down as plan A because things could move quickly.

I have been lobbied by many students who are either living with somebody who might be vulnerable or who are worried that they might be displaying symptoms. If that was to happen at the time of the exams, what provision would be made?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Again, that is one of the questions to be explored by the working group. The group will be very busy. It will be meeting formally twice a week but there will be a constant conversation in between. Again, we are not - and, as Minister for Education and Skills, I certainly am not - going to put any student in jeopardy in terms of his or her health or healthcare needs. While the group works through the logistics of the exams, part of that mapping out will be the public health stipulations and criteria, which will be central to any decision. As the Deputy outlined, things change very fast but we are working within those parameters. The next major announcement on 5 May by the National Public Health Emergency Team and the Government will be another step towards being in a more informed position as to what will happen after that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I will not take up any more time by seeking answers but I appreciate that. We need clarity on that very soon. I would also say, and I do not want the Minister to respond now because it would be taking from my colleague's time, that people doing construction studies and project work need certainty also.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I raise the issue of children with additional needs who might rely on special needs assistants, SNAs, or even resource hours. I refer to children with autism. What supports are currently in place for them as it is a very difficult time for them and their families? Routine is very important, particularly around autism, but these children's lives have been turned upside down. What supports are currently available? My experience is that, unfortunately, there is very little support available. Crucially, what supports will be available in September? I refer to the length of time children have been out of school, particularly if they already struggle and need resource hours. Schools usually have to battle for those hours and for special needs assistants. I would like a guarantee or reassurance that these children will get extra supports in September or will we see many children being forced to repeat various classes, which would be very unfair?

I should have said at the outset that I am combining my two questions to the Minister. My other question relates to school readiness. Something that all of this has shown us is how much we rely on the two years of early childhood care and education, ECCE. I know that does not fall directly into the Minister's brief but in terms of children's first experience of education, the ECCE year, or two years as it is now, is very valuable. Many facilities do not believe they will be able to reopen because the supports that have been announced do not go far enough. One measure we suggested was a sustainability fund for this sector. That is important because we need to know that, come September, these pre-schools will be able to open again and offer that service to children. In that regard, will there be any extension of the ECCE year for children

23 April 2020

who might benefit from that given that they had to finish up on 12 March? It goes back to the first question about children who might be struggling and who might benefit from extra time or supports. Will any consideration be given to that?

I would make the point that it is crazy for those of us who are elected to this House to be limited to two and three minutes to ask questions on what is a crisis.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): I agree. Unfortunately, the rules are in front of me. I would like to change them-----

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I just wanted to put that on the record.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): -----even retrospectively, but I do not think it would be well received.

Deputy Joe McHugh: The first point the Deputy raised was about additional needs and resource hours. We issued guidelines yesterday to all schools and principals to ensure that we connect with our most vulnerable students. That attention to detail will continue. Second, many of our SNAs have already been engaged in ensuring that continuity of connection between their students within schools. The feedback we are getting formally and also anecdotally is that that relationship is very strong but anything we can do to ensure there are additional resources or to protect the existing resource hours will be kept to the forefront.

The Deputy raised the issue of childcare, the ECCE years and what will happen in September. We are in the space where we are working within public health advice but I am happy to raise that issue with my colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): The next speakers are Deputies Feighan and Carey who are sharing ten minutes, evenly or otherwise.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: And Deputy Peter Burke as well.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): One third each for the questions and answers.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Acting Chairman for his generosity. I ask the Minister about large-scale capital infrastructure projects such as the new building extension at Summerhill College, Sligo, and other classroom infrastructure projects in my constituency such as the ASD unit at Abbey Community College, Boyle. The projects were announced by the Department last year. Will they be able to commence construction next year? Will the funding be in place to ensure that these types of projects nationwide can be developed despite the financial realities for the State due to Covid-19? Another issue is food parcels for DEIS schools. Due to the Covid-19 crisis there is great difficulty in delivering these to vulnerable families. There was a very worthwhile initiative with An Post, but there appears to be a problem. What will the Minister be able to do to ensure that some schools will be able to deliver these food parcels to vulnerable households?

Deputy Joe McHugh: On the continuation of work, whether it is tendering within the Department, the building unit in Tullamore or land procurement, that work is ongoing. Any work we can do while complying with social distancing continues. Regarding the specific issues the Deputy raised, once construction is allowed again we will be in a position to move on a number

of projects, but I will refer back to the Deputy directly on those two matters.

As regards the food parcels, I acknowledge the work of An Post coming on board with this and the goodwill it showed from the beginning and continues to show, but it is a massive logistical exercise. There are over 1,600 schools in the DEIS programme and An Post is working with some schools. With other schools voluntary groups such as the GAA, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and other organisations are working on the distribution of food. It is an enormous logistical exercise and I acknowledge everybody who is doing anything to ensure the delivery of food to disadvantaged students.

Deputy Joe Carey: I am seeking an update on school transport with regard to refunds for pupils and their parents and regarding the school bus operators. The bus operators were paid the normal rate after the initial announcement of the schools closing, but when the closures were extended during the Easter holidays their pay was cut by 50%. Can the Minister clarify the situation regarding refunds for pupils and their parents and the arrangement for bus contractors? Second, applications for the school transport scheme for new applicants must be made by tomorrow. Does that still remain the position?

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank the Deputy for raising this question and for his ongoing engagement on these issues. He is correct that when the first announcement was made the school bus operators were paid 100% and after the extension of the closure they were paid 50%. I have had discussions with officials about this and it is only right that bus operators be paid up to the end of term, irrespective of schools opening or not. That is only right and I wish to put that on record. Regarding refunds, many parents have paid for school transport. Like my previous point, I believe it is only right that they get refunds. We are in the process of working out what is the best and fairest way of doing that, but it will have to be *pro rata* for the time they did not use the bus transport. We are examining that issue. Will the Deputy remind me of the last question?

Deputy Joe Carey: Applications have to be made by 24 April, which is tomorrow.

Deputy Joe McHugh: That is still the case. If there is a further update on that I will refer back directly to the Deputy.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Minister for his ongoing engagement and transparency on the leaving certificate. It is very complex and he is operating in a fast moving situation regarding the pandemic. It is important that he engaged in the way he has with the peers and leaving certificate students through the various fora. I have a question about the €116 payment for the first-time leaving certificate in view of the uncertainty surrounding the leaving certificate and parents and families being under significant pressure due to loss of income. If one has a medical card one is exempt from the fee. Is there anything more the Minister can do in connection with reducing the burden and hardship of these fees for each family and household?

I know the Minister is very familiar with the Holy Family National School in Mullingar. I have raised the issue bi-weekly and have been in the Minister's office on a number of occasions on it. The Minister has been to Mullingar discussing it also. It is very important that the school is on the cusp of completion. I was there during the week before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and it was very heartening to see furniture in most of the classrooms and the paint-work almost finished. The mechanical and engineering works were at 97% at that juncture. An extremely inordinate amount of pressure was put onto the project in the last months and weeks

23 April 2020

to bring it to that stage. I thank the Minister and the Department for their engagement in doing that. I also acknowledge the staff of Holy Family National School. The teachers gave a lot of their time in looking after students while they were situated in St. Loman's during what was a very difficult and stressful period. Students also had to travel to St. Etchen's in Kinnegad, which was very stressful for those families. I acknowledge Mr. Michael Molloy, all the staff at the school and the parents for bearing with it to date.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank Deputy Burke for the issues he has raised and also the point about the leaving certificate fee. I am announcing today the extension of the late payment for the leaving certificate fee until after the leaving certificate exams. I take the Deputy's point on the difficulties some families will experience and are experiencing with financial pressures. This has been an item at nearly every one of our management board meetings in the last couple of weeks and we will continue to have that discussion.

If there is an example in the State of patience it is the Holy Family National School and its community. They have had so many false dawns. The last time I spoke on this I believe I used the line that I did not want to "tempt fate" by putting another date on the project. This time, because of the uncertainty, we do not know what the public health guidance will be around construction. I do know, however, from the information I received from the people directly involved with the Holy Family National School project, that once construction workers come back in there - the Deputy has pointed out correctly that the majority of classrooms are furnished at this stage - then we are talking of a period of perhaps three weeks or a month to get it finished. Hopefully things will move and progress after that.

I thank Deputy Burke for all of his engagement on that issue. It was very important that we went to Mullingar to see exactly and to hear and get a good feel for the dilemma the community was going through at the time. Hopefully there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): There is one minute remaining in the slot.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The past few weeks have been like nothing any of us has ever seen. Yet, in the face of crisis this country has shown the good grace for which we are known through an incredible example of unity, sacrifice, kindness, compassion, discipline and good humour.

Thank you has been said many times in this House and by many across the country but it bears repeating to the front-line staff across the island who are working heroically to keep us safe. These are the front-line healthcare workers who deal with the dangers of Covid-19 daily, the retail workers and all those who ensure that the chain of food and vital services is kept open, our Garda and our firefighters.

Our thoughts are with all those who have died and with their families, friends and communities who have been deprived of being able to mourn properly the tragedy of their passing.

In the same way the country has come together, we in Dáil Éireann have co-operated and worked together to an unprecedented level to enact emergency legislation. It is a shame, however, that this unity of focus and purpose did not go further at this time through forming an inclusive, national Government, not just to play the vital role of managing the daunting and prolonged crisis by bringing as many people as possible on that journey, but by also ensuring that people of all walks of life, as many as possible, buy into and play a constructive role in the

incredibly difficult Covid-19 recovery phase that lies ahead. It is regretful that some continue to practise exclusion and selectivity in politics, even at this time when we all need to come together. It may yet prove that the idea of a unity government is only temporarily parked rather than permanently shelved and may re-emerge for consideration. That may become more apparent in the near future if other options, after being exhausted, do not produce white smoke.

This has been a particularly trying time for all of those in the education sector, including students, teachers, parents and all staff who work in our educational institutions. I have a number of questions. I will ask all of them, and if the Minister does not have enough time to answer, perhaps he will furnish me with a written reply if he has time.

One of the primary issues facing the sector relates to the postponement of the leaving certificate. The unprecedented situation in which we find ourselves is already having an immense impact on students' mental health. On 10 April it was announced that exams would be postponed until later in the summer. Very little was clear and this announcement left students with more questions than answers and added further to their stress and confusion about the situation. On Tuesday evening this week I, like thousands of others, found out through social media that the Minister had announced the provisional date of 29 July during an informal questions and answers Instagram video. This casual delivery of vital and important information is simply unacceptable and shows a lack of regard for students and their welfare at this time.

Many students were calling for a predicted grades system as an alternative to the leaving certificate exam. Has the Minister investigated the possibility of this alternative? Does he have a contingency plan prepared and ready to go if the crisis continues in such a way that it is impossible to hold the exams in July and August? When will we get sight of that plan? What extra provisions will be put in place to ensure that the mental well-being of students will be supported as they continue through their extended school year?

At third level, our students are facing a wide variety of issues but housing and academic uncertainty around assessment are two of the most pressing. The Minister indicated to me in a Covid query response last week that he would like to see private providers of student accommodation provide *pro rata* refunds. This issue has arisen for many students not just in respect of refunds but also the retention of deposits by landlords. Has the Minister taken any concrete steps to tackle this issue or prepared any real measures to do so? While six of our seven universities are offering *pro rata* refunds to students who have to vacate their accommodation, it is my understanding that the University of Limerick is still refusing to do so. The Department has been engaging with the university with regard to this issue. Will the Minister outline what progress has been made?

When it comes to deferrals or alternative arrangements for assessment, it is not just about timing and delay. The issue of support for students is also involved. Many students' ability to support themselves through higher and further education is dependent on the availability of work during the summer. Such work is unlikely to be available to many this year. It is also dependent on SUSI supports, which are based on income levels from 2019 which does not take into account the enormous changes in circumstances faced by many students and their families in 2020. What measures is the Minister putting in place to protect not just students' academic futures but their ability to support themselves for the next academic year? Will there be any alternative assessment of financial circumstances given the current context?

Cad iad na hacmhainní a bheidh ar fáil do dhaltaí le Gaeilge mar chéad teanga - daltaí

23 April 2020

Gaeltachta agus daltaí na nGaelscoileanna uile sa tír? Molaim an obair atá á dhéanamh ag TG4 chun freastal ar na páistí seo ach cad a dhéanfaidh Roinn an Aire chun a leasa? Cén cúiteamh a bheidh ar fáil do phobail Ghaeltachta agus cúrsaí samhraidh na gcoláistí ar ceal? Braitheann na Gaeltachtaí go mór ar na daltaí agus múinteoirí a thagann gach bliain. Nílím ag tagairt do na coláistí agus na mná tí amháin ach do na gnóthaí timpeall orthu. Tá níos lú airgid ag dul go dtí Gaeltachtaí na tíre ná aon áit eile. Gan cúnaimh ón Rialtas, beidh na pobail seo agus an teanga Ghaeilge thíos go mór leis an ngéarchéim seo.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. I concur with her introductory comments regarding front-line workers. If I do not get through all of this, I will ask for a direct response to be organised for her. The postponement of the leaving certificate was the first issue raised. One of the things we attempted to do was to bring clarity around whether it was happening in June or not. The postponing of the leaving certificate until the end of July was both an indication and a commitment that we were going to work towards making that happen. The Deputy is correct in saying that during a conversation with approximately 18,000 students online on Instagram - they were not necessarily all leaving certificate students although a lot of them were - I said we were looking at a provisional date of 29 July. One of the things I was accused of was not communicating directly with the young people themselves and I thought that engagement was a good opportunity to do so.

On the issue of predicted grades, plan B and contingency, we are working on all contingencies because we do not anticipate that things will be normal any time soon. We do not anticipate that we will be any more or less informed next week or the following week. We just do not know, and with that level of uncertainty, we have a moral obligation and duty to work on all contingencies and we are doing that. The vehicle for doing that is the stakeholders themselves. The students' voice is critical which is why the Irish Second-Level Students Union, ISSU, is at the heart of this, as is the parents' voice, that of the teacher unions and the different patron bodies. That group is critical in determining how we move forward and answer the question as to how we do this at the end of July or the beginning of August.

With regard to mental well-being, there will be an announcement in a couple of days. There has been a lot of engagement between officials from the Departments of Education and Skills; and Health. There must be a reach-out service for young people and I would encourage them, when that is announced, to use it. I know that young people live in the real world and have a lot of interaction with teachers. There is a lot of teacher to student support, whether that be from a guidance counsellor or a physics teacher. That type of support is usually available in schools and I appreciate that the teacher to student, shoulder to shoulder help is not there at the moment. It is a gap that we have identified and we want to add more support in that regard.

The Deputy mentioned the University of Limerick, UL, with which there is an issue at the moment. I have asked my officials to engage with officials from UL. I have asked them to continue with that engagement because we are not getting the answers sought by the people who are directly affected. We will continue with that engagement. I know that is not the answer the Deputy is seeking today but in general, in terms of the private providers, I have asked publicly that they consider *pro rata* refunds and will continue to do so. I would argue that they have a moral duty or obligation to refund those students who are not in their private rental accommodation today, who were not there last week or the week before and who will not be there next week. There is a duty to look at some form of *pro rata* reimbursement.

Maidir leis an gceist faoin Gaeilge táim ag breathnú ar rudaí a bhaint amach sna cheantair

Ghaeltachta cosúil leis na coláistí samhraidh agus rudaí mar sin agus chomh maith leis sin na bunscoileanna agus na meánscoileanna sna Gaeltachtaí agus ag amharc go dtí an t-am go mbeidh siad ag obair le chéile na scoileanna lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht maidir leis an nGaeilge. Maidir leis na mná tí, tá obair ag dul ar aghaidh idir Roinn Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus na Gaeltachta agus Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na gColáistí Samhraidh CONCOS agus fuair an Roinn moltaí ó CONCOS agus táimid ag fanacht ar an toradh sin.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I thank the Minister for being here. Like others, I have not been impressed by the level of communication on the part of his Department and of sections of this Oireachtas. I wrote to the Minister on 12 March suggesting a collegiate, collaborative partnership approach across the Chamber. We have had one meeting in the past six weeks, on 1 April. The Minister has said much about the advisory group. He has put a lot of stock in it but my understanding is that he has not attended any of the group's meetings. The Minister got support across the Chamber in respect of the oral examinations and political backing regarding the postponement of the leaving certificate, but every issue relating to the Department of Education and Skills has been mishandled. It was once said to me by a leading trade union official that the Department of Education and Skills understands two things, teachers and buildings. If an issue does not relate to a teacher or a building, the Department does not know how to deal with it.

The Minister stated that the leaving certificate will start on 29 July. I ask him to confirm that date because what he says, how he says it and what the Department says has a massive impact on the mental health of the young people who are due to sit these examinations. It is a thumbscrew. It is not good enough for somebody in the Minister's position to state that the examinations might take place in July or in August and for it to be reported in *The Irish Times* that they might not take place until September. The Taoiseach stated in the House last week that the universities might not reopen until November. Every young person who is due to sit the leaving certificate is hearing all of this and wondering when somebody is going to make a decision. Also, the Government proposes to charge them €116 for the privilege. I am stunned at the Minister's statement that the best he can do is postpone the date for payment of the fee. It should be waived. Students should not be asked to pay €116 for the privilege of sitting the leaving certificate this year, particularly in light of what the majority of families are going through. The Minister would get cross-party support and plaudits were he to stand up right now and announce that for this year the fee will be waived. There is an argument that it should not be charged in a country that values the concept of free education.

On SNAs, the Minister mentioned that he is thankful for their contribution to the national effort. I am of the view that SNAs are owed an apology by the Department of Education and Skills for the manner in which their redeployment was mishandled. Yet again, there was a communication to our SNAs, not from the Minister or his Department but from the HSE, to the effect that some of the redeployment work in which they may be engaging will be carried out at HSE premises. There is also a suggestion of a 12-week contract that will continue throughout the summer. What SNAs are wondering and worried about is if they are going to stay in the educational sphere and why it is taking so long for this to be clarified. Hand on heart, I believe the Department would not deal with the teaching body in that way or with any other public servants in that manner. I am quite sure hospital consultants are not being dealt with in that manner.

I appreciate that the Minister referred to rent refunds and the University of Limerick. On speculation regarding primary schools, I accept that what happened is not the fault of the Minister present. However, it is not good enough for another Minister to wonder in a *Sunday Independent* interview about schools reopening in June because every teacher then begins to wonder

23 April 2020

what will happen in June. They think that if a Minister is saying this in an interview, there must be something in it. Every teacher then starts to worry about childcare and every parent begins to wonder if he or she can justifiably send his or her child back to school in June. They wonder if this is really happening or if it is just something a Minister said off the top of his or her head. I appreciate these are trying times. Nobody here is trying to score points. We have been doing our best for the last six weeks to back the Minister but we are receiving huge numbers of emails from exasperated parents and students around the country. It is not good enough for a Minister to suggest that the schools will open for one day or for a half a day per week in June.

I want to ask the Minister a direct question about students who received SUSI, VTOS and back to education initiative grants and who are not able to complete their courses.

Could the Minister address that?

7 o'clock Finally, is there a plan B for the leaving certificate? None of us in this House looks at the Minister's situation and feels that any of this is his fault. He was handling the situation and the pandemic arrived. In fairness, as far as the oral examinations and the postponement of the leaving certificate are concerned, he has chosen the best worst option and has got political support on that. No one in the political system has pulled him up on that or scored a point against him on it. There must, however, be much more transparency on this issue because everything that comes out of his mouth is listened to by, as I said, every student and every teacher in the country. It is justifiable criticism that it was on an online forum on Tuesday that he decided to give us the date of 29 July. That date should have been announced in this forum, this House, or in a forum with which everyone in the country is familiar or in which everyone feels able to have some over and back with him on the matter.

I have raised a lot of issues with the Minister but I want him to address the timetable. I want him to refer in his answer to the fee, special needs assistants and the other issues I raised.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank the Deputy for raising a number of issues. Let us be very clear on the date. He is correct in what he says about a public forum on Tuesday night. What I said exactly was that the provisional date we were looking at was 29 July and I said I would confirm that in a couple of days. It has been a couple of days, so I confirm in the House tonight that 29 July is the start date. The Deputy asked a really important question about the timetabling and the sequence of timetabling now to try to work through the wider uncertainties which will continue to be there. The first week in June will be the time after the work of the advisory group is completed. Working with the State Examinations Commission, that will be the date on which to let students know in advance of 29 July how the format and the timetable will look then. That is the sequence of events. I take the Deputy's point about the uncertainty and lack of clarity, but that is the world within which we are working and there are so many unknowns as to where we will be. If there are better ways of communicating messages - certainly if there is a better and more efficient way for my Department to communicate to Members of this House - I will ask my officials to do that. However, we must have a complete understanding of how this disruption has affected not only wider society at a general level and the movement of people. Some 1,300 departmental staff members, between Marlborough Street, Athlone and Tullamore, had to change completely their way of working. They are working remotely. They are complying with the social distancing rules and so on. There is a bombardment of issues, whether school meals or SNA redeployment. The world continues to go on within the Department. This is a disruption, but I will certainly take back to the Department the issue the Deputy raised about communicating messages back in a more efficient manner.

The Deputy also talked about the SNAs. I wish to acknowledge the Fórsa trade union. It sat down with officials and worked hard in advance of coming up with this formalised redeployment plan. Within that plan was an aim to ensure that SNAs could formally continue with the work they were already doing. Many SNAs from day one of the school closures continued to engage with their students, be it at primary school or leaving certificate level. Yes, the Deputy is correct that there has been confusion on this matter. As of now, however, there has been engagement and Fórsa and the Department officials have agreed that there will be a training element to this which will involve the HSE. That is just the training element and it may involve some of the training taking place for some of the SNAs in particular HSE buildings or community care settings. This will be remote work for the SNAs, not work in any other capacity that is not within the agreement between Fórsa and my officials. Schools will not open unless it is safe for them to do so. I said here this evening that I am engaging with my officials on the issue of school fees. We have changed the date for payment to after the examinations but I will continue that conversation. I know the Deputy has raised it publicly with me previously and I am certainly listening here this evening.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am becoming increasingly worried that the pursuance of the leaving certificate almost at all costs is becoming something akin to the great Dunkirk moment in our response regarding how we demonstrate our resilience or overcome adversity in the face of this pandemic, that we will do it regardless and get through it. With every day and week that passes, that window where we can present a viable alternative seems to be closing. One of the reasons I am growing more concerned about this is that with every phone call I get from a young person in my constituency telling me about his or her anxiety or distress, it seems like it is not going to be possible.

As I understand it and based on how I engaged with it through my previous role working in DEIS schools, the leaving certificate has always been something that illuminates the privileges that exist within society. It has always been a way for people to lock in privilege and ensure that their sons or daughters were able to get the best places in our universities and those who experienced disadvantage had less opportunity to do so. In the current environment, that gap of inequality that already existed is becoming a chasm. We have talked about this in the context of the digital divide, which is very important and to which I will return, but it is not just a digital divide that makes our system and how we judge our young people in terms of whether they are worthy of university. There are a multitude of other divides. I am dealing with students in inner-city Dublin who do not have access to a school table upon which they can do their homework or where they can study. Some of the parents of these children are working in front-line services and supermarkets. It is these same young people who are supposed to be doing their leaving certificate this year who have been asked to step in and provide care work. This is something being faced by these children. That gap of inequality will be exacerbated if we continue as we are.

I want to talk about how it is widening inequality and placing further pressure on students who are already dealing with it. The vast bulk of the two weeks about which we are talking when we bring students back before they do the leaving certificate will be taken up by teachers dealing with mental health support for students. They will be taken up by teachers sitting down with students and having students burst out of their classrooms and expressing the fact that they are not prepared for this. That happens every year and will happen to an even greater degree this year.

I will touch on the digital divide and the announcements made on the last day because I

23 April 2020

have some questions about them. I am particularly fascinated for a couple of reasons by the €7 million that was announced for secondary schools. Will the Minister confirm whether the €7 million for secondary schools to invest in digital technology was taken from the ICT budget that usually goes to top-ups from the Department to reward schools with good digital strategies? If so, technically, that is not an investment. If it is taken from the previous ICT budget, will that be available to the same extent next year or later on in the year?

Regarding what the €7 million actually looks like on the ground for schools, I am on the board of management of an inner-city school with 160 students. For my school, that works out at about €2,900 in total from the Department. For a similar school up the road that has 750 students, it works out at about €17,000 in total from the Department - €2,900 for my school of 160 students and €17,000 for the school with 750 students. That is fair enough. It is about €20 per student in the school or if schools are to take the advice of the Department and focus on the leaving certificate students, it is about €120 per sixth year student for devices. A circular from the Department stated that schools are left to purchase and distribute their own devices themselves, which I am sure will bring an added cost. In a circular issued yesterday, the Department suggested that schools buy a HP Mini Tower with a 4k monitor for €979 or a Dell laptop for €1,178. The school of which I am a board member has 160 students and could buy three devices from its allocated funding. The school with 750 students could buy 17 devices. How will that be effective? Reference was made to the digital divide. How will the sum being provided be effective in bridging the digital divide when the need is far greater than the amount being allocated?

I do not wish to highlight only problems. There are solutions. Has the Department considered collaborating on proven initiatives? I previously brought to the attention of the Department a very effective initiative under way between the ESB, Camara Education Ireland and Trinity Access. It has the capacity to deliver devices directly to students on a national network and has sourced devices at one fifth of the cost of the devices suggested by the Department in its circular yesterday. I ask the Minister to address those questions, particularly that relating to leaving certificate students.

Given the level of inequality that exists and the fact that, unfortunately, many international students will not be taking up places in Irish universities this year, has the Minister considered increasing the number of access programme places in universities? If I have time remaining after the Minister replies, I will address the junior certificate. I ask the Minister to deal with the issues I have raised.

Deputy Joe McHugh: The Deputy expanded on a couple of major points, particularly the leaving certificate. He may have entered into dealing with where we need to go with the leaving certificate in the future in terms of the leaving certificate review. I have no doubt he will add to that debate when it arises. There is no doubt that future leaving certificates will have to be different from those in the past because this debate is about the class of 2021 as well as the class of 2020. Those students are losing out on class time with their teachers this year and dealing with uncertainty around the starting time for the new school year in September and how it will impact on them. The current situation has opened up the conversation on alternatives to a two-year leaving certificate course where everything goes down to the wire, such as through more continuous assessment. Unfortunately, we are not at that juncture. Given the current challenges for the leaving certificate, we do not have a standardised system that would lend itself to considering different ways of progressing it. However, we have a system that allows for objectivity, transparency and fairness by virtue of the papers being corrected anonymously.

That fairness is central to the leaving certificate. The Deputy raised several issues and I take his point. I have been contacted by many individual students who highlighted the stress they are under and the difficulties they are experiencing. There is a big push from young people for predicted grades, but there are inherent challenges in ensuring that fairness would remain at the heart of the leaving certificate under such a system. For example, what recourse would be available to a student who receives a predicted grade and is left a few points short of achieving a place on a college course?

That brings me to the third element of the Deputy's questions. I will return to the issue of the digital divide. There may be extra places available on third level courses as a result of having fewer international students. As to whether we are looking at providing more access programme places, we are looking at everything. We are considering every scenario, which is why we set up the higher education group within the Department to look at the transition to third level.

On the digital divide, one of the challenges in politics is that the announcements one makes do not always cover everything. As the Deputy correctly pointed out, the €10 million allocation was originally intended for the back-end of the year and was to go to schools of excellence. I made the decision, therefore, to look at that money, and rather than taking it all from the primary schools, we left €3 million for them. That €7 million is to go specifically to targeted intervention. I know the Deputy's board of management and principal will know exactly where the gaps potentially are and who needs the devices. Many of our students have smartphones and so they have that capacity, but as another Deputy mentioned as well, there is a competition going on in households for usage of devices, with parents working from home as well. There is extra funding for DEIS schools as well. We are also looking at bulk buying and we are looking at companies to see how we can get extra devices such as laptops at a more reasonable price.

Deputy Gary Gannon: A DEIS school of 160 pupils can only buy three devices. That does not seem like it will be enough, does it? More than 90% of students in such a school will need a device. It is just not enough.

Deputy Joe McHugh: It does not appear to be enough but how many of those 160 students are leaving certificate students?

Deputy Gary Gannon: There are 25.

Deputy Joe McHugh: That school will have to work on the basis that some students will have access to the technology but there could be unique situations whereby none of the students have access to it.

Deputy Gary Gannon: That is not ideal.

Deputy Joe McHugh: The Deputy knows the details so maybe the best thing would be for him to send me on the specific details of that school and I would be happy to respond.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I am sharing time with Deputy Barry. My main question centres on the rescheduling of the leaving certificate. As we all understand, that decision will be taken in early June, which is five weeks away. There is a huge amount of uncertainty and a lack of clarity on this issue and there is a huge amount of anxiety among all parties, including teachers, parents and students. The general trend across Europe is quite mixed. In Britain, they have completely cancelled all exams this year. In France, they have cancelled all exams and they

have done the same in the Netherlands. Some countries are waiting on the best medical advice. Those approaches should be kept in consideration over the next while. People Before Profit's view is that the leaving certificate should be cancelled and students should be admitted to a college certification scheme where grades would be allocated based on their work throughout the year. Any student that is not satisfied with his or her results should be allowed to sit the exam. The current situation is disadvantageous to students from underprivileged backgrounds because of a lack of access to laptops, Wi-Fi and educational space because most students are at home. That is a key factor. If the situation on 1 June is the same in relation to the recommendations on public health and gatherings of any size, is it the Minister's intention to cancel the leaving certificate and to give clarity on this issue?

Deputy Mick Barry: I will leave the Minister plenty of time to answer that question. The Minister said earlier in the debate that there has been a collaborative approach but he also said there has been a consensus in the House on the issue of the leaving certificate. That is not correct. There is no consensus in this House on the issue of the leaving certificate. Solidarity, along with People Before Profit, does not agree with the Government's position on the leaving certificate. We think the leaving certificate should be cancelled. I will give the Minister ten reasons the leaving certificate should be cancelled this year. First, the students have not had classes in their schools for weeks upon weeks. What kind of preparation is that? Second, many students are in homes with no devices and others are in homes with a shortage of devices. Third, many students trying to prepare away from their school are in areas that do not have broadband or its quality is poor. Fourth, students have been denied access to their schools and libraries and have been forced to study at home. Many of those homes are overcrowded, some seriously so, leaving aside the people who are living in direct provision, young Travellers or those who are homeless. Fifth, students prepared for an exam with an idea of where the finish line would be and now it is being extended, not by a couple of days or weeks but by the best part of two months. The sixth reason is anxiety. Exam halls will not be empty or nearly empty. The Minister and the teachers will ensure they are made as safe as is possible but a student who is anxious, sitting on a chair at a desk with a paper in front of them, will feel anxiety about the Covid-19 situation, regardless of how safe the exam hall is made with social distancing.

The next reason is the number of children living in homes where there is the additional stress of a parent or parents being front-line workers. The next is the number of students who will be studying for exams who have gone through the trauma of a family member being hospitalised by Covid-19 in the run-up to the exams. How many will sit the exams who had a family member die as a result of the disease in the run-up to the exams? All these lead to the key, overarching reason which is mental health. Something that I have picked up during this debate is that students and teachers tell us that stress levels are not just increasing a little but are in many cases going through the roof. The Minister told us earlier that the health and well-being of students would be at the heart of any decision he makes. I do not see how he can say that when the vast majority of students are in favour of the cancellation of this year's leaving certificate. That is what we see all around us. I am sure that most years, some students would say they would like the leaving certificate to be cancelled but this time around it is not a small few but a large majority, including many of the most conscientious students who see the mental health pressure on their friends.

I do not see how the Minister can give me or anyone else a real guarantee that the mental health pressures this is putting on young people will not have very serious consequences. We should not take risks with things like this. Since entering this House, I have heard many

speeches on the importance of mental health, including for young people. I think it is pious hypocrisy if the Minister drives on regardless with this leaving certificate. I am asked in return what is my alternative. That is often a good question but not always; sometimes something is so much of a mistake in itself it is not necessary to fully answer that question. Where there is a will there is a way. We can learn from other countries. We can give every student the leaving certificate and increase State investment in such a way that there is a place in third level next year for every student who wants it and find various mechanisms to allocate places, whether it is students' first, second or third preference.

Finally, this is about respect.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): There may not be time for a reply.

Deputy Mick Barry: I understand. The greatest way to disrespect any person is to force him or her to do something he or she really does not want to do. That is what the Minister is doing to the majority of the students facing the leaving certificate examinations in the period ahead. Will the Minister cancel them?

Deputy Joe McHugh: The plan we are working on is to have the leaving certificate examinations this year. They have been postponed. I take the points on pressure and anxiety. That is why I stated earlier that central to any decision will be the well-being and health, including mental health, of every single one of the 61,000 young people in this year's leaving certificate class. That is why we are putting the support systems in place.

There is, however, international evidence of different countries doing different things. We are monitoring the different practices. Central to every decision we have made since the pandemic became a massive issue is ensuring we will be guided by public health officials. I am informing myself, be it through direct contact with Dr. Tony Holohan or any other health expert, including, as recently as today, Dr. Mike Ryan from the World Health Organization. I had a 15-minute conversation with Dr. Ryan because I am taking this seriously. I am getting the same emails as the Deputy in respect of the pressure young people are under. However, I am also getting emails and messages from young people who are studying hard, doing the online courses and using technology with innovative teachers who are staying in touch with them. This is different. I do not have time to deal with every point the Deputy made and I do not believe it would be fair to negate every single one of them. Let me deal with the first, however. The Deputy is saying that because leaving certificate students have lost a number of weeks of classroom teaching, we should cancel the leaving certificate examinations. That same argument could be made for the 2021 class. They are also losing out on class time. These are the scenarios we are working on, but central to any decision will be the health and well-being of the students. We will work with the advisory group. It is the advisory group that has to examine the practicalities and health advice and determine whether what is proposed can work. That is what we will work through over the next couple of weeks.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Could the Minister convey his reply to Deputy Gino Kenny, perhaps in writing?

Deputy Joe McHugh: I referred to anxiety. The Deputy raised the issue of cancellations in some countries. He mentioned France and Great Britain. We are also looking at examples of where countries are going ahead with exams, including Germany and South Korea. We are looking at international evidence. We are not in the same position as Britain in the context of

23 April 2020

how it deals with its GCSEs or A levels. It operates over a longer period. That is resulting in difficulties for it also, as I have learned from my contact with some of my British colleagues.

In a couple of days, we will be making the announcement on the supports, bearing in mind the anxiety, pressure and stress. There is help for every young person who feels under pressure. They should reach out. There is somebody at the other end of the line.

Deputy Verona Murphy: In recent weeks I have been contacted by numerous students and parents about non-reimbursement of fees paid for unused student accommodation. This has been mentioned previously. Universities and large private accommodation operators differ greatly in their approaches to handling student accommodation refunds. It is interesting to note that UCC students are in the fortunate position to have received confirmation that they will receive a *pro rata* refund of their accommodation fees while students at the University of Limerick and the accommodation of other large providers are, on the other hand, offered no reimbursement. Likewise, some large accommodation providers have also refused to offer a partial refund of fees paid.

Student accommodation providers must refund students who have had to return home because of Covid-19. Students are following the HSE guidelines by returning home. Many of them have lost their jobs. There are families who are temporarily out of work and they cannot be expected to pay for student accommodation that cannot be used. Many students are helping vulnerable family and community members while trying to keep up with their college work online. This is a very stressful period for everybody. While there are numerous reasons given for refusing to provide the refunds, the fact is that student accommodation is shared and possibly overcrowded with as few as three or as many as seven students sharing making it impossible to be at a social distance and comply with Government advice. Some providers are arguing that students may or were free to stay in the accommodation. Why would they cocoon themselves in student accommodation with six other people and be expected not to return home between March and May when the colleges were shut down? It is also the case that many of these accommodation providers received public supports through tax incentives for sites and other supports and may now be availing of a mortgage break. Many of these providers are not in many instances incurring the running costs associated with the students' presence. The Government needs to call again on all private and public accommodation providers to make refunds to students and return deposits. It needs to give a clear direction to these accommodation providers. Will the Minister tell the forlorn students and their families what actions he and the Government have taken to assist those, in particular those who receive no State grants, to be given a refund?

I am also inundated with queries about future deposits being requested by the end of May 2020 to secure accommodation in advance of the 2020-2021 college year. Parents are very anxious that Covid-19 may result in the leaving certificate not going ahead or that Covid-19 related problems may prevent their student child attending their desired college and the deposit will be non-refundable, causing a great deal of anxiety and stress to parents, many of whom are now unemployed, and to their children. Will the Minister outline what actions, if any, he intends to take to ensure that students' deposits will be refunded.

Year on year Irish students travel to America on the J1 programme. It is a cultural exchange and a unique experience for those who avail of it, making lifelong acquaintances and memories. On 12 March the US State Department announced the temporary suspension of the J1 visa programme until 11 May due to Covid-19, with a review to be conducted every 30 days thereafter. This is compounded by the closure of the US embassy in Dublin. There will be no visa inter-

views until further notice due to Covid-19. Since this announcement there have been further significant measures taken by the US federal and respective state governments on work and travel restrictions with potential implications for the J1 students obtaining obligatory summer work. Given that thousands of Irish students have secured places and made payments on behalf of their Irish agents also, some of whom are small and medium enterprises seeking to continue in business throughout the pandemic, will the Minister seek clarification from the US embassy on a proposed reopening date and seek clarity from the State Department on the status of the J1 programme? The unfortunate prospect for some is that due to the appointment of a liquidator to the largest J1 agent in Ireland, USIT, which in thousands of cases has acted as travel agent for flights and other services for students, they and their families who have paid for a visa, flights, insurance and other expenses now face the prospect of losing thousands of euros. What actions do the Minister and the Government intend to take to ensure that students are not at any loss as a result of USIT's insolvency?

The Minister has stated that the leaving certificate will go ahead. While the bulk of those concerned are happy for it to go ahead, there are many students and their families who have been affected to varying degrees by the crisis, whether because of poor or no Internet access, a difficult family situation or, worst of all, a bereavement in the family either due to Covid-19 or during Covid-19. All of the aforementioned cause a magnitude of pressure and stress, coupled with the worry for parents that the chosen college, if any, may not be on the cards in the coming autumn mainly because of financial strife. With this in mind I ask the Minister to reconsider the leaving certificate fee and college fees for next year. Student grants are decided on the basis of the previous year's income. This will in no way reflect the reality of 2020, the Covid-19 year. I am aware of great anxiety among students who have to change CAO applications because of unexpected family financial strife, with parents now unemployed and students unlikely to earn any money to assist them through college. Therefore, providing 2019 financial statements will in many cases preclude access to the SUSI grant. Will the Minister set out what actions the Government intends to take to ensure that students will be able to access college education in the 2020-21 year?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister has three minutes to reply.

Deputy Verona Murphy: If the Minister runs out of time, some of my questions may require written replies, which I would appreciate.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Yes, there were about seven or eight questions asked. We will ensure the Deputy gets a note on each of those important issues.

I will reiterate a message that I have already stated publicly to private operators and accommodation providers - they should consider the difficulties that families are experiencing. If families have paid deposits or advances up to the end of the term, I would ask the providers to do the right thing and pay back that money, to which the students are rightfully entitled. In the first instance, I advise students to engage with their providers. There is a legal mechanism available through the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019, but the first port of call - the providers paying back the money - would cut out much of the hardship involved. I would ask them to do so.

The University of Limerick is not a private body, but a public one. Our officials are engaging with its officials, who I am publicly asking to reconsider their approach. That should be done.

23 April 2020

There is considerable uncertainty and nervousness around the J1 programme. I understand the difficulties that the liquidation of the company that administers the J1 USA visa system will cause for Irish students wishing to go to the United States. I would ask that they register with the liquidator if they have paid deposits. As I understand the matter, that is what should be done to pursue any refund that might be available. Students might also have private insurance that covers this scenario.

On the wider point about travel to the US, its entry requirements are a matter for the US Government. I am aware that my colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and our ambassador in the US are monitoring changes in those requirements. I would also remind students of the public health advice at home in terms of travel and ask that they bear that in mind when making arrangements to travel.

As to the difficulties with the leaving certificate, I would be repeating what I have already said in the Chamber, as we have gone through the matters raised. However, the Deputy also mentioned the leaving certificate fee. I asked my officials to consider the issue and will do so again. I have changed the payment date requirement to after the exams, but I hear the message coming from the Chamber relating to the fee.

A number of other Deputies also raised the question of the SUSI grant and the 2019 assessment. Things are different now - Covid-19 has changed everything, and we are reviewing how to move forward with the SUSI grant.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Next are Deputies Michael Collins and O'Donoghue, who are sharing ten minutes. I ask the Deputies to stick close to their time. I want to try to get every speaker to contribute.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will raise an issue that has been raised a great deal. Leaving certificate students are concerned by the way in which the exam is being handled. In their opinion, the recent announcement gave little to no clarity. It gave them no date to work towards and told them that practical exams would have to be completed two weeks before their actual exams even while they tried to catch up with what they had missed. It created more questions than it answered. What about subjects like art, where work can only be done in school? What about leaving certification vocational programme, LCVP, exams? The postponement of the leaving certificate extends pressure on everyone and maintains the great anxiety people feel.

Students had planned to get jobs in the summer to earn money to support themselves in college and try to secure accommodation. Now all of that has been thrown out because the leaving certificate is hanging over them. Even if we take away the fact they will lose the summer and will have to try to teach themselves remotely for the foreseeable future, another major problem will remain, namely, that if the virus has not fully dissipated by July or August, what will they do then? If the exams are run it will increase the risk of infection. In many families there are parents and siblings with underlying conditions and others working on the front line. This means students will have two choices. They can risk infecting their families or risk losing their future. For the sake of the mental and physical health of students, as well as the health of everyone as a whole, the leaving certificate should be cancelled and replaced with a predicted grade system.

Hundreds of students and parents have sent me emails. Will the Minister please indicate where all of the incoming first year university students will find accommodation when they

finally receive their college places, given that all of the other year groups will be back before them? There are not enough on-campus accommodation places for everyone. This is another unintended but extremely problematic consequence of the Minister's decision.

One student who emailed me stated that the Minister's decision is not the fairest, while the decisions made in the UK and most other countries are fair to all. The writer states that students should not be the ones to suffer because of the Minister's lack of an alternative. The writer also states that the Minister was presented with a favourable alternative, as voted for by students and teachers. This is to implement a predicted grade system, taking into account the work done over the past two years. If students are unhappy with their grades, they can sit the exam. Everybody would win. The writer sees no reason the Minister has chosen to ignore this option. From the information I have received since the most recent announcements were made, it is obvious that the students of Ireland are looking for the leaving certificate to be cancelled and a predicted grade system to be implemented. Perhaps we could also offer them the alternative whereby if they do not want to take part in a predicted grade system, they could sit the exam, as is proposed now. This would give everyone a fair chance.

Colleges are not offering refunds to students for on-campus accommodation. All colleges have a duty of care to all students during this time. Many students and families have lost their jobs and are under extreme financial pressure. Students should be refunded for accommodation that is not in use. Does the Government intend to make changes to SUSI grant applications for college students who will be commencing their studies in September? Will the Government increase the income threshold for families and thereby enable them to get the full grant?

Will the Minister seriously consider implementing a no detriment policy in third level institutions in order to ensure that no student's academic achievements will be negatively impacted? Will the Minister consider a predicted grade system for the leaving certificate class of 2020, similar to those implemented in many other countries?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I concur with all of the sentiments we have heard from across the House. It is all about the leaving certificate, and rightly so. The point has been raised that not everyone has connectivity through good broadband and Wi-Fi, particularly in rural areas where people are lucky to have phone reception. The children there cannot even participate on Skype or Zoom calls. It has been rightly said that secondary school is not all about the leaving certificate and that it is also about fifth year. Fifth year is as important as sixth year. In the context of practical subjects, most of the work is done in fifth year and the final six months of sixth year involve revision. For many classes, such as art, the students need to be in the school.

Parents who are now off work might be back in work - if it is available to them - when the exams take place. Depending on their job situation, they may have to work. This will cause a problem for them. There has to be a happy medium when it comes to the leaving certificate. As Deputy Michael Collins stated, if people want to sit the leaving certificate, let them do so. If they do not, let them, as has been stated, obtain grades *pro rata*.

As important as the leaving certificate is when moving from second level to third level, sixth class in national school also marks a massive changeover. Primary school pupils are in one classroom from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. When they go to second level education, their classes are broken up with different teachers. It is huge for sixth class children, who have lost out on the integration before starting first year of second level education. We also have to look at what we want to introduce for them in the aftermath of this to allow them to integrate in first year. The

23 April 2020

move from sixth class to first year will be overwhelming for many, including in regard to mental health, and they will need support. We also need support for fifth year and sixth year students and this need will go into 2021.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank both Deputies for raising these important matters. On Deputy Collins's point on clarity around practicals and the leaving certificate vocational programme, LCVP, those issues are being prioritised at the advisory group forum. They were discussed on Friday, there is another meeting tomorrow, and there will be biweekly meetings in the weeks ahead. We need to get more clarity on the practicals. The Deputy is correct that some artwork is still in the schools and there are issues around construction studies, woodwork and on-site practicals. There is a lot of working out to be done but we will get clarity as soon as possible in that regard.

The Deputy asked where we will be in July and August in regard to the risk of infection and the answer is that we do not know. With everything we do in the next period until we find a vaccine, there is going to be a risk. We are going to go into another winter period potentially with no vaccine and we are going to face further risk in terms of this flu potentially still being there. I will leave nothing undone with respect to ensuring we do not put students at risk and we will be working within the public health advice. I am reaching out to everybody involved. I am reaching out to Professor Philip Nolan on NPHE, and as I said earlier, I am reaching out to those like Dr. Mike Ryan. These are the experts in the field in terms of ensuring the health, safety and well-being, not just of students but of staff, support staff, supervisors and all the teams that will be in the school at the end of July and beginning of August.

The Deputy asked about the potential to have predicted grades and to sit exams at the same time. We looked at all the scenarios. Deputies raised the question of whether we are looking at a plan B or at contingencies. We are looking at all contingencies. I am confident that with the people and voices we have around the table, such as parent representative groups, student representative groups, union representative groups, teacher representative groups and all the patron bodies, we will ensure we do not put any student at risk.

The Deputy also mentioned the no-detriment policy for third level. It was announced by the Minister of State with responsibility for higher education on 8 April that further and higher education institutions will not be holding written, oral or practical assessments in examination centres during the Covid-19 emergency. Universities and colleges have finalised alternative assessment arrangements, with options including online exams, written assignments or rescheduling. New assessment arrangements have been communicated to all their students. An important point is that students who are not able to participate in alternative assessment arrangements will not be penalised.

I thank Deputy O'Donoghue for raising various issues and I note his concerns around the postponement of the leaving certificate. It is not an ideal scenario, nor is it the ideal world we would like to find ourselves in. We are working and making decisions with sometimes very limited information in terms of predicting where we will be at in a number of weeks. The most important timeframe is that there will be a further announcement from NPHE in regard to schools on 5 May, and that week from 1 June will be very important in determining how we implement the leaving certificate in July and August.

I take note of the Deputy's point that this is not just impacting on sixth year students and that fifth years are being impacted in terms of their own practical and course work as well as

their class time. I note his point that it is a big step up from sixth class of primary school. It is a big transition that can have a big impact. That is something we will be cognisant of in terms of wrapping that support system around students who need it. I am glad the Deputy raised that point because it has not been raised to date.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): At last, I call Deputy Connolly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Agus an clog ag teannadh linn, déanfaidh mé mo dhícheall a bheith chomh sciobtha agus is féidir. I understand that some issues are complex, such as the leaving certificate, and that there are pluses and minuses involved. In that context, the specific questions in my name and in those of my colleagues, Deputy Pringle and Deputy Joan Collins, are not complex. They are straightforward, practical solutions, and justice comes into it. They have been raised by other Deputies so I will not dwell on them. One relates to the private providers of accommodation to do the right thing and give back the money. Could the Minister give me something stronger than telling them to do the right thing? What actions has he taken? What actions does he intend to take?

Along with that, we have the University of Limerick as an outlier. As I understand it, the latter distinguishes itself by being the only public institution that has not returned the funding. What exactly has the Minister and his Department done in regard to that matter? What contact has the Minister had with the University of Limerick? I understand that a sizeable number of students are affected - 2,800 - but there are also the multiplier effects of that on their families who have lost jobs, lost loved ones and so on. What exactly has happened? What has been the engagement? I note the Minister mentioned engagement but we need firmer action than that, particularly in the context of students going home to families that are suffering. Those questions have been tabled in my name and those of my colleagues.

I have another specific question which I will deal with very quickly and perhaps the Minister can answer it. I welcome the €50 million the Minister referred to in his contribution, although it is difficult to gauge how effective that will be or how it will be used without details. He might return to that in due course.

In the context of a national school in Galway which has come forward, and it is a DEIS school, it pointed out to me the extra expense incurred. It is one thing providing money for technology, which I welcome, but one must also realise that technology is only part of the help that is needed. We need human help. We need practical help on the ground. The school in question is incurring expense every week as a result of posting out packages, which has to be done for children who are participating in particular programmes and children with special needs. It has asked specifically if an arrangement can be made with An Post. Presumably, the question is also whether the money the Department is making available can be used for that extra expense that schools are incurring.

In the last couple of minutes available, because I want to leave time for the Minister to answer, I wish to raise the other main concern which is the foreign language students who have been left stranded, primarily in Dublin but also throughout the country. I believe the Minister is in receipt of correspondence. If he is not, various Ministers are in receipt of such correspondence in respect of this matter. Dublin has the highest percentage of these students but they are also in Galway, Cork and Limerick. I understand that at least 1,000 students are left stranded and living in dangerously overcrowded accommodation. They have lost whatever part-time jobs they had. There are major risks to their health and to the health of other people.

23 April 2020

Our former colleague, Clare Daly, who was a Deputy but who is now an MEP, has written to many Departments over a number of weeks trying to draw attention to this issue and get some response. The teacher who has gone to the trouble of pointing out the extent of the problem in Dublin and in other countries has been very helpful. They have highlighted that there is a problem with accommodation, financial security, PPS numbers and other documentation but the biggest problem is that these students have been left stranded without anybody mentioning them. It is unfortunate that nobody mentioned them today in the Dáil either. I will leave the Minister time to answer the questions and I might get a chance to come back in depending on how quickly he responds.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Regarding private providers, all I will do today is appeal to them to use their judgment and do the right thing in regard to paying back money that is owed to these third level students. In the first instance, I ask the students to engage with the provider. The Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 provides for recourse as well. It is difficult, and there is no excuse for that not happening. I make that appeal once again.

The Deputy asked about engagement with the University of Limerick. The Secretary General of the Department has been engaging directly with the president of the University of Limerick. I and the Department appeal to the university to join with the other third level colleges regarding the decisions they made.

As regards the €50 million ICT announcement, primary and secondary schools were expecting the €40 million announcement for this time of year. In fact, it should have been a number of weeks earlier but with all that is going on in the Department it has been announced at a later date. I have decided with regard to the €10 million, which was usually announced at the end of the year for school excellence funding for the use of technology, that €7 million of that is to be used by post-primary schools that have specific data and information on hard-to-reach students or students who might need a laptop or to use it in an autonomous way as they see fit. It is a fund of €7 million and they have complete autonomy with it. Deputy Gannon is a member of a board of management and was raising this earlier in terms of whether it would go far enough. It may not go far enough in some schools but the schools have the autonomy to use the money as they see fit. The Deputy also raised the matter of human health. We are working closely with our colleagues in the Department of Health to ensure that we continue to use the mental health supports to deal with the stress and anxiety of students. There will be an announcement on that in a couple of days.

The fund, unfortunately, will not be used for a contribution towards funding for postage. Schools are using resources in different ways now, with much communication to families and potentially harder to reach families who may not have proper broadband facilities. They are sending material out. There is capitation funding that can be used at the schools' discretion in that regard.

International English language students is an issue that has been raised a number of times. Fiachra Ó Luain in Carndonagh has contacted me indirectly through a colleague of mine in Culdaff and raised this issue. We have been engaging with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Health to provide whatever support we can in this regard. It is a difficult one because some international students who were in temporary employment or had a temporary employment contract get the payment, but the students who did not have an employment contract or were being paid in cash are not included in the Covid-19 payment. As English is not the first language of students in this sector and as a number would

not consume the same media as domestic students, we must ensure the information and messaging on the latest health advice reaches these students. The Department of Justice and Equality has undertaken a range of measures to ensure the students do not have to worry about their immigration status during this crisis and through engagement with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection students have been informed that where they have lost their job as a result of the pandemic, they are eligible for payment. They have also been informed that their employers can avail of the temporary Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme which enables employees whose employers are affected by the pandemic to receive significant supports directly from their employer.

8 o'clock

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Will a task force be set up in respect of this substantial number of people so somebody will direct the actions in that regard?

Deputy Joe McHugh: The public gets frightened when we mention a task force, and sometimes it is set up to not do work. There has been very strong engagement between the Departments. For example, the Department is also engaging with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. The HSE is putting facilities in place to allow for the isolation of individuals if they are required to self-isolate.

Nobody will be left out. I assure Deputy Connolly that I will have one of my officials make direct contact with the Deputy to update her on the work that is being done and if there are any gaps we will get back to the Deputy.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I thank the Minister.

A provision was made earlier to applaud the front-line workers and all involved in the struggle against the virus.

Members rose and applauded.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I thank Members. It was a well-deserved round of applause for those whom it was intended and for all those involved in the struggle against the virus.

Members can continue with questions and the Minister has the option of a five minute reply.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I have said to the Deputy that I will have one of the officials contact her directly to link in and to update on what has been done. There has been quite a considerable amount of work done at an interdepartmental level. If there are other gaps that we can help to work on then we would be happy to do that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Does the Minister require a further five minute reply?

Deputy Joe McHugh: No. It was just as I have said. I thank Deputy Connolly.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): That concludes statements and questions and answers on Covid-19.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.02 p.m. until 12 noon on Thursday, 30 April 2020.