



**DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

DÁIL ÉIREANN

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	607
Covid-19 (Taoiseach): Statements	608
Membership of Committee on Procedure: Motion	633
Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Authorisation to instruct Legal Representatives: Motion	633
Standing Orders 21 and 22: Motion	634
Covid-19 (Business, Enterprise and Innovation): Statements	637
Covid-19 (Health): Statements	666
Covid-19 (Agriculture, Food and the Marine): Statements	701

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 30 Aibreán 2020

Thursday, 30 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 Duncan Smith to announce the Order of Business for today.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The business today shall be as set out in the third revised Report of the Business Committee dated 30 April 2020. 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 third revised Report of the Business Committee, 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, and the Taoiseach may make a concluding statement which shall not exceed five minutes; No. 3a, motion re membership of the Committee on Procedure, No. 3b, motion re proposed authorisation by Dáil Éireann for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to instruct legal representatives, and No. 3c, motion re quorum, shall be taken without debate and any division demanded thereon shall be taken immediately; No. 5, statement by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and questions and answers on business supports for Covid-19, shall consist of an opening statement by a Minister or Minister of State of ten minutes, followed by questions and answers not exceeding 110 minutes, with questions and answers from Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin not exceeding 15 minutes each, and all other parties or groups not exceeding ten minutes each; No. 6, statement by the Minister for Health and questions and answers on Covid-19 shall consist of an opening statement by a Minister or Minister of State of ten minutes, followed by questions and answers not exceeding 110 minutes, with questions and answers from Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin not exceeding 15 minutes each and all other parties or groups not exceeding ten minutes each; No. 7, statement by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and questions and answers on Covid-19 shall consist of an opening statement by a Minister or Minister of State of ten minutes, followed by questions and answers not exceeding 110 minutes, with questions and answers from Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin Members not exceeding 15 minutes each and all other parties or groups not exceeding ten minutes each; and No. 8, the Dáil shall adjourn on the

concluding statement by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and questions and answers on Covid-19 until 12 noon on Wednesday, 6 May 2020.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal set out by the Deputy for today's business agreed? Agreed.

Covid-19 (Taoiseach): Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: Let us be clear - we have asked each party and group to indicate whether it is making statements, asking questions or making statements and asking questions. They have all indicated. The Fianna Fáil leader is first. Deputy Micheál Martin has ten minutes for his statement.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach is first.

An Ceann Comhairle: *Mea maxima culpa.*

Deputy Micheál Martin: Thanks for clarifying that I am making a statement.

The Taoiseach: Not just yet, a Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Alan Kelly: A sign of things to come.

The Taoiseach: Mar a tharlaíonn ar laethanta eile, smaoinímid inniu ar dóibh siúd a fuair bás, daoine a raibh saol agus scéalta acu agus ar bhain tábhacht agus brí lena saolta. Cuimhneofar orthu. Tá an Rialtas buíoch de chuile dhuine atá ag obair go dian chun dul i ngleic leis an gcoróinvíreas. Tá siad ag glacadh a bpáirt sa ghéarchéim seo. Má tá daoine ag glacadh páirt tríd a gcuid oibre nó má tá siad ag fanacht sa bhaile, tá torthaí ar ár gcomhiarracht agus táimid ag cur an aicid faoi chois. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil na teorainneacha deacair agus go bhfuil sé bearránach ach caithfimid leanúint ar aghaidh. Tá muid faoi chomaoín acu siúd atá ag obair chun dul i ngleic leis an víreas seo gach lá agus ag cuimhne na ndaoine a fuair bás. Tá muid faoi chomaoín ag ár bpobal féin.

I offer my condolences to all of those who have lost loved ones since we last met, to everyone grieving as best they can in most difficult circumstances. As of last night, we had 976 Covid-19 deaths confirmed by laboratory. A further 214 deaths are suspected, giving us a likely overall figure of 1,190. Of laboratory-confirmed cases, 453 died in hospitals, 430 in long-term care settings, including nursing homes, and 93 at home. Of the total deaths, 697 had been residents in long-term care. This is a tapestry of sorrow, suffering and loss for our nation.

As always, we are grateful for the extraordinary work of our nurses, our doctors and our healthcare staff, who are giving their all to save lives and are bringing us through the worst of this emergency. As a country, we owe so much to so many and when this is over we will have the opportunity to thank them properly.

I know the lockdown is difficult and people are feeling frustrated, cooped up, even trapped, but we must keep doing what we are doing because it is working. We owe it to those who are fighting the virus every day and we owe it to the memory of those who have been lost. As a country, we owe it to each other.

People want to know when things are going to go back to new normal. I can inform the Dáil

that a plan is being developed to ease the lockdown, a roadmap to reopen Ireland, a roadmap to what will be a new normal. Unfortunately for those who would like an immediate return to a pre-Covid-19 world, the easement of the current restrictions will be slow and gradual and will be done in a stepwise, tiered manner. It will require continuous effort to suppress and control the virus. Therefore, the lifting of restrictions will not necessarily mirror the manner in which they were escalated.

Public health and safety and our healthcare capacity will continue to be the foundation for decision making. Our five criteria are as follows: the progress of the disease, healthcare capacity and resilience, testing and contact tracing capacity, the ability to shield and care for at-risk groups and the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality due to the restrictions themselves.

As we manage the gradual lifting of restrictions, we will prioritise public health advice and give careful consideration on how best to mitigate and manage the economic and other health and social impacts. Any changes to the restrictions will be made every two to four weeks because we need to leave a period between changes to assess accurately their impact, but we will intervene earlier if things appear to be going off track. Restrictions may have to be reintroduced if it looks as if the virus is going to surge back. We expect to have this plan completed tomorrow for approval by Cabinet. I thank the party leaders for their inputs yesterday and I welcome the views of Deputies here today. I want to find a consensus, if one exists.

It has always been my assessment that we have been fighting Covid-19 on six fronts: by ensuring we have sufficient personal protective equipment, PPE, to make sure our staff are protected; through testing and tracing; by ensuring we have sufficient ICU capacity, hospital beds and ventilators; through the economic and welfare package to protect business incomes and livelihoods; through societal actions, such as social distancing; and by protecting vulnerable groups, including people in care homes, prisoners, Travellers, Roma, the homeless and those in asylum seeker accommodation centres. It never was, nor ever should be, a case of prioritising one of these over another. We must fight the virus on all six fronts every day and deal with the new challenges that arise.

As the World Health Organization states, countries need to have a comprehensive strategy and Ireland's has been comprehensive, far-reaching and inclusive. More than 150,000 tests for Covid-19 have been carried out in Ireland. That places Ireland sixth out of the 27 EU countries on a *per capita* basis and that is now a higher number than in many countries that have led the way on testing, such as Germany, South Korea and Singapore. We will continue to increase capacity and improve turnaround times but there will be bumps in the road. I thank all the staff involved, including the GPs and occupational healthcare staff who are assessing people for tests and counselling them on the results. There is an extraordinary team effort in our testing centres, including people in administration, swab-takers, medical scientists and staff in our laboratories doing the tests and the IT professionals and managers who make sure all of it comes together. I thank them all.

There has been much public focus on nursing homes recently, and rightly so. This is an area in which much work has been going on behind the scenes for a considerable period to protect as many people as possible. Ireland took the lead in deciding to test asymptomatic residents and staff in nursing homes where there has been an outbreak and other countries are now following suit. From the very start, we counted nursing home deaths alongside hospital deaths every day, and I see other countries are now starting to do that as well. In recent weeks, we have provided a funding package for nursing homes and deliveries of PPE are now regular. A

total of 558 deliveries of PPE are now happening daily, three quarters of which go to nursing homes and long-term care homes. There are now 23 community response teams in operation across the country and they are being helped in their work by 16 infection prevention and control staff. Approximately 200 HSE staff have been redeployed to private nursing home facilities and home care workers and home care hours are being redeployed to long-term care. We have an agreement with unions to allow HSE staff to work in nursing homes. It is voluntary, but we are asking people to volunteer to help out and take up posts in nursing homes.

The Government has taken a focused approach towards vulnerable groups, including homeless people, Travellers, Roma, drug users, prisoners and residents in Department of Justice and Equality accommodation centres. This involves testing, treating, isolating and cocooning, as well as tending to other health conditions. I have met and spoken to many people in organisations that are caring for these groups and am satisfied that we have a robust and well-resourced response in place.

There has been much debate about comparisons with cases, deaths and death rates in other countries. On the face of it, we compare well with our neighbourhood in western Europe but not so well with other parts of the world. However, the more I study these figures, the more it seems that the data are not yet comparable. In fact, the data are not even comparable between the North and the South on this island. Countries are at different stages in the pandemic. Some have peaked and others have not. Some parts of the world, including eastern Europe and much of the southern hemisphere, appear to have been barely affected by the virus so far - and I hope that does not change - while western Europe, China and the United States have been the epicentres. The scale of testing also varies greatly. Our policy is to test, test, test, and we are in the top tier of countries in that regard. Countries also vary in their demographic make-up and different countries count data differently. Our policy is to count all cases, including laboratory-confirmed and suspected, and all locations, including hospitals, care homes and private homes. We also count all cases regardless of whether there is an underlying condition that may have been the main cause of death. We are only one of four European countries that does so, to the best of our knowledge. The only truly comparable data will be mortality displacement figures, what are often called excess deaths. We may not have these figures for some months. In any case, it is not a competition. Every country is doing its best in difficult circumstances and different circumstances.

I am increasingly concerned that some people who need medical care are not seeking it. I met a GP in DCU yesterday at one of our community assessment hubs. He said he had not diagnosed anyone in his practice with cancer for a month. He had never experienced that before. We know cancer has not gone away. Perhaps people are afraid of contracting Covid-19. Perhaps they do not want to be a burden on our hard-pressed healthcare staff. My message today to everyone, however, is to seek help if you need it. GP surgeries are open, emergency departments are open, and ambulances are operating. Please seek medical attention if you need it.

It is now seven weeks since I announced the first actions we were taking to slow the virus in its tracks and push it back. I said then that acting together as one nation we could save many lives. By staying apart we have come together as a nation and we have saved many lives but we are not out of danger yet. More lives are at risk and we cannot falter now. In the days to come we will provide a pathway for how we will emerge from this crisis and give hope to people that there is light at the end of the tunnel, but it cannot be false hope. We are still in the tunnel and we have some distance to go. As before, I look forward to hearing Members' observations and suggestions.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, a Thaoisigh, agus gabh mo leithscéal as ucht an dul amú a bhí orm ag an tú. Téimid anois go dtí ceannaire Fhianna Fáil, an Teachta Micheál Martin. Tá deich nóiméad aige chun ráiteas a dhéanamh.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Ar dtús báire, déanaim comhbhrón le teaghlaigh gach aon duine a fuair bás de dheasca an choróinvíris. Is géarchéim uafásach í seo ó thaobh cúrsaí sláinte de agus, gan amhras, ó thaobh geilleagair na tíre chomh maith. Tá an-chuid daoine difhostaithe agus is léir go mbeidh dúshlán ollmhór romhainn amach sa todhchaí. Táimid fiorbhuíoch do gach aon duine atá ag obair sna seirbhísí sláinte agus sna seirbhísí eile a bhfuil tábhacht faoi leith ag baint leo, mar shampla, siopáí agus monarchana éagsúla. An rud is tábhacataí ar fad ná soiléiriú a thabhairt i gcónaí maidir le gach gné den ghéarchéim seo. Mar shampla, cá bhfuil na clusters éagsúla lonnaithe? An bhfuil fadhbanna faoi leith in áiteanna nó ionaid faoi leith? Is ceisteanna tábhachtacha iad sin agus táimid ag lorg níos mó soiléiriú ar cheisteanna den saghas sin.

Our first thoughts today must be with the 1,190 families who have lost a loved one during this pandemic. Their suffering and the struggles of thousands more who have required urgent care are a reminder to us all that this pandemic has been every bit as serious as we feared. This unique and terrible crisis has required an exceptional response, not only here but throughout most of the world. It is another proof of how much we rely on each other locally, nationally and internationally.

Throughout the past two months ever part of our society has played a role in the response to the pandemic and has felt its impact. I believe that the resolve to do everything possible remains strong. No one believes that the threat is gone and no one expects a rapid reversal of every control measure. However, there is a real and growing uncertainty, and for many a deep unease, founded on the lack of clarity about the next steps. The Government should never forget that Dáil Éireann, much of the media and of course the people have been willing to suspend much of the assertive oversight which a free democracy like ours insists on. This should not be taken as permission to limit debate and expect that people will simply wait to be told what they may be allowed to know.

In fact, the only reasonable response to the controls we have collectively accepted on our rights is for Government actually to increase transparency and meaningful consultation. Every significant study ever undertaken on the response to emergencies has shown that trust depends on transparency and that effectiveness depends on allowing different voices into discussions. I have consistently said this from the beginning in terms of the location of clusters, for example. Six or seven weeks ago, I would have identified problems in the healthcare settings, particularly in nursing homes. Likewise, I identified other centres such as meat plants and particular locations. In other countries, the incident rates for district by district are just published. There does not seem to be any negative pushback or fall back as a result of that. That should be done here because it might positively impact on human behaviour. Trust depends on transparency and effectiveness.

As we continue to move away from the initial and the most severe phase of responding to the pandemic, there are many hundreds of decisions to be taken which will impact on the health and livelihood of different sectors and communities. They must be given a proper role in discussions. It is simply not good enough that announcements are made by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs about childcare services without meaningful consultation with the childcare sector. It is not good enough that the nursing home sector is not formally represented

in key discussions.

I must add a point about the pay deals with the nursing unions already agreed. Apparently the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has no problem with this. However, for some reason, there has been a delay in following through on payments. These agreements are from last year but, apparently, have not followed through yet. The nursing unions have made representations to us in this regard. Given the role the nursing profession has played in this crisis, it is difficult to comprehend why those pay deals have not been honoured and delivered upon.

It is not acceptable that, in area after area, there are background briefings about what is expected to be decided but the relevant groups of employers, managers and workers have not been brought into the discussion to help shape decisions. No one is expecting a perfect response and everybody accepts the pressures under which key parts of the public service are working. However, the spirit of common purpose is not being used enough. Critical discussions simply have to be more systematically opened up to inclusive participation.

As matters stand today, there is widespread unease about the lack of clarity on the basis upon which decisions will be taken. This is not the same as a demand for certain decisions. Simply, it is a wish to be told in direct terms what the triggers are for certain key policy decisions. Such clarity has been provided by Governments in many countries. Last week, the Taoiseach said in response to the Dáil asking for clarity that decisions on lifting restrictions will be taken in light of three general considerations, epidemiology, hospital and intensive care unit capacity, as well as the ability to test and trace quickly. Yesterday, party leaders were told in unequivocal terms that testing is now not an issue in terms of the lifting of restrictions. It was in response to a question put by Deputy Kelly. We need a bit more clarity on that, given what has been said to date on this.

The premature announcement of testing capacity in the past was acknowledged. However, we have been told the capacity is in place to carry out more testing and will be in place later in May. We were also told that, while hospitals are operating well within capacity, as well as at a capacity which other countries have seen as providing for possible increases in Covid-19 cases, there is a desire to be careful on this front which I understand.

Where there is no clarity is what the triggers will be regarding epidemiology. The reproduction number has been below one for some weeks. Public information suggests that the main concern is hotspots rather than broader community spread.

We need more information and more answers about the impact of decisions taken regarding the pandemic response on other health issues. In recent days, doctors in many countries, including Ireland, have been drawing attention to the fact that we must understand that delayed diagnostics and treatment in other areas will lead to higher non-Covid-19 mortality. The Taoiseach referred to this in his remarks as well. Most of the diagnostic capacity of our country is lying idle. So too is much of our national public and private capacity to treat other diseases. Doctors across the country are reporting how people are not presenting with diseases, such as cancer, which have not suddenly become less prevalent.

The private hospital issue has still not been resolved. I think a bit of a mess was made on the contractual issues around that which have delayed treatments. Every effort should be made to bring this to a conclusion to ensure we can get more procedures done in the interest of patient

safety and continuity of care.

We need an urgent assessment of what needs to be done to address all of this. A real significant second strand needs to develop a non-Covid-19 strand in terms of our acute hospital system. The continuing spending of many millions of euro on empty wards in private hospitals cannot be justified. I understand the reasons it had to be done initially because we needed the capacity. However, we need to be utilising it to the maximum.

It has been reported that there will be a Cabinet meeting tomorrow and the Taoiseach stated that after it he will announce a strategy for the period ahead. At a minimum, the people need to be given clarity regarding the exact basis on which changes will be triggered. There cannot be more of the “We will tell you when we have decided” approach. The move away from a severe lockdown will only happen in gradual steps. These need to be outlined and sectors need to be given the opportunity to propose actions they can take to operate within health guidelines. While the science is absolutely clear, the shaping of policies to respect the science requires debate. Without a clear proposal from the Government on future steps, Dáil Éireann and the media will not be able to perform their core roles of oversight and debate, and we will be denied the opportunity to represent voices which currently feel marginalised in discussions.

In the coming weeks, a proposed social protection Estimate will be brought before the Dáil. This Estimate is required as a result of the unprecedented scale of the economic impact of the pandemic on policies to respond to it. As we have said to the Government, this requires proper scrutiny and cannot just be presented as a measure to be nodded through. We insist that there be a detailed review of the proposal such as it would receive if normal work arrangements were in place. As part of this, we want a full and open assessment of the economic impact of the pandemic. At present, we have macro-assessments but very little beyond that and we are concerned that there are many issues which have not emerged yet. We want to hear a full assessment of the impact on the finances of public companies. For example, we are currently operating a public transport system, which is receiving almost no revenue, and the National Transport Authority has been less than responsive to its needs. What is to be done to fill this gap?

We can see throughout Europe that governments are preparing bailouts of public companies and nationally critical enterprises. For example, the German Government is preparing an enormous funding package for Lufthansa. When will we be told at least the broad outline of these challenges. What is the current state of local authority finances? What is the assessment of the hit to be taken by higher education institutions? There are many groups of workers who need us to consider their situations. Fixed-term workers in research facilities are critical to the response but they face heightened uncertainty about their status. It is not acceptable that workers abandoned by Debenhams in what looks like an opportunistic timing of store closures are having their names taken by gardaí when they undertake responsible, socially distanced demonstrations. They cannot be deprived of the right to draw attention to the situation.

The NESC report on the just transition regarding climate change emphasised that the digital transition also carries with it major social and economic challenges. If it is true that had this developed during the pandemic, it would lead to an acceleration of the digital transformation, we will need an acceleration of measures to help those adversely affected by it.

There is no credible alternative to adopting the use of face coverings, particularly on public transport. Other countries have assessed their role. I believe advice is due shortly in that regard. The shared national effort has achieved much in the past two months. We all know it is

not over, but we need an inclusive approach to preparing for what we do next.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Ba mhaith liom cheist a chur. I would like to ask a question and I also ask that the Taoiseach does not talk down the clock as I would like to speak again. I hope we will have an exchange.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Deputy asking a question first?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No. I will say a few words, ask the Taoiseach to respond and then I will say another few words – kind of like a tennis match.

An Ceann Comhairle: All right.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to add my voice of sympathy and to extend my condolences to everybody who has buried a loved one in these most heartbreaking of circumstances. It is important to acknowledge that from the start the right model and approach was adopted in response to the public health emergency and credit is due to everybody for that. The approach being test, isolate and trace and to do that in a comprehensive manner. The same is true of the advice given by way of public health notice to the general public on hand hygiene and to remain connected but to stay physically apart. All of that has been an outstanding success. The emergency measures and restrictions that have been introduced have been very difficult for people and families. We should acknowledge that some are struggling but the country and communities have rallied magnificently. Front-line staff, especially those within the health services, are to be congratulated and thanked. The best way we can thank them is to pay them well and to respect their work, not just in the heat of an emergency but always.

We have made extraordinary asks of people and we will continue to ask that precautions are observed. Therefore, it has been most unhelpful that members of Government have engaged in thinking out loud and kite flying, and created nearly an impression that 5 May was a red-letter day when we all would be liberated from these restrictions. That caused confusion. It was doubly unfair, having done that, to then criticise complacency and almost point the finger at the public or sections of the public. I hope we will not have a repeat of that.

I very much welcome, and the Taoiseach might confirm, that tomorrow he will set out the roadmap ahead. Having made extraordinary asks of the people, they are at a minimum due the respect of being given clear comprehensive information and it being done very transparently.

I want to raise a number of issues with the Taoiseach, the first of which is testing and tracing. We now have a target of 100,000 tests per week. I ask the Taoiseach to confirm for the Dáil that target will be met, and he might set out how it will be met. I am mindful that announcements have been made previously, citing very large ambitious targets, and these never matched what was happening on the ground. At what point and at what date will we have the 100,000 tests, will that happen in real time, and will we have the tracing to match and complement that?

I want to raise also with the Taoiseach protection for vulnerable groups, which he cites as the second condition for any easing of measures. Looking at what is happening in the nursing homes, one could not be confident that we have the provisions, resources and protections necessary for that very vulnerable group of people. When will nursing homes have enough staff? When will they have adequate personal protection equipment? When will the testing of nursing home staff and residents be completed?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. There are two questions there, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I counted more than that, a Cheann Comhairle, but I will get straight into answering them. On the question about the roadmap for reopening Ireland and the roadmap to a new normal, I confirm it is our intention to share that with the public tomorrow, but that is subject to the outcome of a National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, meeting in the morning and subject to a Cabinet meeting in the afternoon, so it is not entirely under my control.

The target capacity for testing is 100,000 a week. I emphasise it is the capacity to do 100,000 tests a week. It is not a target to carry out and do 100,000 tests a week. The number of tests that is done per week will depend on the number that is needed, the clinical criteria and other matters. We will not look to test 100,000 people a week. We will want the capacity to test 100,000 people a week. As I mentioned earlier, we are already in the top six in the European Union in terms of testing per head, and well ahead of many other countries, for example, Germany, that are cited as being the models for testing.

On nursing homes, as I mentioned in my contribution, I am informed that PPE deliveries are now regular. We want to know if there are any issues in any particular nursing home that is not getting PPE. Testing is largely complete. I ask the Deputy to bear in mind the plan continues to be to test nursing home staff and residents in all nursing homes, but not necessarily all residents in all nursing homes, because if there is a nursing home that has not had the coronavirus, there is a risk in bringing somebody into it to carry out the tests, so we need to make sure that we get that right clinically. I think those were the questions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thank the Taoiseach. This is a problem now. The announcement was made of 100,000 tests per week and the presumption is that to do that one must have the necessary capacity. I believe the correct approach is for these 100,000 tests to be real tests, not some notion where we say theoretically we have the capacity to do this. The Taoiseach will know as well as I that from the beginning of this pandemic, the best international scientific and medical advice was test, test, test, then isolate, then trace, trace, trace. It is very dangerous to propose unwinding emergency measures in the absence of comprehensive testing. I reiterate that the 100,000 tests have to be real tests. That figure cannot be a target or an aspiration. Some 100,000 tests must go through the laboratories, with the results returned to the persons concerned in a timely fashion. I am very worried that the Government's announcement of its roadmap out of the emergency measures, which we all want to see, will show a reticence and a lack of ambition or intent concerning the level of testing that is needed. I am sure the Taoiseach will not challenge the view of the WHO and others to the effect that governments must test, test, test. How do we keep our population safe in the absence of that very comprehensive testing? I am troubled and concerned to hear the Taoiseach confirm that this is an aspirational target for the building of capacity rather than the carrying out of tests. I put it to him that carrying out 100,000 tests per week is necessary because we need to know where the virus is. That is what all the experts tell us. It is only by knowing where in the population it is that we can actually isolate it and carry out tracing.

There is a contradiction in the position of the Government. We have heard talk of testing people with no symptoms. That strikes me as a wise approach, but it is in total contradiction to what has been set out here. I put it to the Taoiseach that the 100,000 tests should be real tests, not an aspiration or a target, and I ask him to take action to ensure that is the case.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. There is no big reveal here. This has been on the record

for days if not weeks. The target is to have the capacity to carry out 100,000 tests per week and to do so within a good turnaround time. We are not going to carry out random testing just to hit a figure of 100,000. The target is not to carry out 100,000 tests. It is to carry out as many tests as are necessary. We believe that we need a capacity of 100,000 to be able to do that. If we ever carry out random testing, it will be through a seroprevalence survey. We will only do a seroprevalence survey when we have a serological test that is up to scratch and can provide useful results. We are not there yet. The tests have been developed. The antibody tests are not up to standard. The Deputy may have seen the health technology assessment produced by-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: They may be.

The Taoiseach: -----HIQA which goes through that in detail. However, we may have-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Abbot Diagnostics might have produced one, apparently.

The Taoiseach: Roche Diagnostics may have done so as well. However, they have not done so yet. I want to answer Deputy McDonald's question. The Deputy did not leave any time to ask any.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am just trying to be helpful. I apologise.

The Taoiseach: We may get to the point in the next couple of weeks or months where a company produces a serological test which works, in which case we will raise the 100,000 figure to a much higher one. However, that test does not exist yet. The number of tests is based, as always, on the clinical criteria.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I was very interested to hear the Taoiseach set out the six WHO criteria for the management of the crisis. I want to go through each in turn to assess how we are doing. First and foremost, on the critical issue of social isolation my sense is that we have done well as a country. We have shown that a western democratic system, without some of the strict controls seen in other countries, is, by and large able, to self-regulate. The Garda has done a good job but people have largely self-regulated. As shown by the figures from the chief medical officer, CMO, and others, this self-regulation is working. It is bringing the rate of reproduction of the virus right down. It is a great commendation of the Irish people that we have shown that capability. We should not ignore that. I was talking to a colleague, Deputy Stephen Matthews, this morning about PPE. He was telling me anecdotally about a sail-making company. Its business collapsed because there were no orders with the downturn. It has managed to turn that round and started to produce gowns at scale, using some materials it got which were not being used in another industry. It was adaptive and quick. As much as there is still a pressure point with PPE in our nursing homes, with what the State did to organise those 300 Aer Lingus flights I think an assessment comparing us with other countries would show we are also doing well in that regard.

On the positive side, I recall at the start of this process that I talked directly to people involved in intensive care units in hospitals around the country. They had a sense of terror because they saw what had happened in Spain when the health system was overrun. That was a daunting prospect. While the workers in the front line there have had a really difficult time, any assessment would show that we were quick and flexible in scaling up our ICU and other hospital capacity, and that we have avoided that overrun of the system, which was the fundamental fear. Great credit is due to the HSE and people in our hospital system for that flexibility. Even if some of it is now seen as overcapacity, we have that contingency, with minimal numbers in

Citywest so far, thank God. We have contracted many private hospitals and, as Deputy Micheál Martin says, we are underutilising the beds now, but we did not have to build emergency field hospitals. We did it in our flexible way and we did it well, by and large. In those three of the six categories, I think one would have to say that the State has reacted quickly and well.

With regard to how vulnerable groups are protected, on “Prime Time” the other night, a professor from UCD made the point that our nursing home system was not able to adapt as quickly as we saw our hospital system adapt to the changed circumstances. A tragedy has unfolded there, as has happened in other countries, since we are not unique. It is not only for the patients but also the workers, who have a high relative incidence of infection, as I understand from discussions with Dr. Tony Holohan yesterday. If there are lessons to be learned and changes need to be made here and now, it is the need for us to look at our nursing home systems and how they can adapt now and for any potential future waves of this pandemic. It is not just our nursing homes, and is happening with some people in direct provision or elsewhere, such as the examples Deputy Micheál Martin mentioned, including meat factories, where we were not able to make the changes that we were able to make in our hospital system. That is something that we have to address now and also learn lessons about for the future.

With regard to testing, the fifth of the six categories that the Taoiseach set out, we started by making the correct strategic decision, unlike the UK, as one example, in that we did not abandon community testing. We were willing to try to keep up testing even as the wave of the virus hit. It is clear that we have not succeeded in delivering what we promised. Everyone has anecdotes about this, including Deputy McDonald. In our house, our son was tested 35 days ago and we still have not got the result. He is as healthy as anything, thank God, but everyone has those stories and the undermining of public confidence due to those delays is regrettable. Even though a variety of factors may be out of the control of health facilities, such as reagents, we should acknowledge that we were not able to deliver what we promised and we sure as hell have to start delivering what we promise now. In the next phase of managing this crisis, what Paul Reid and the deputy chief medical officer are saying is that the test really becomes critical when one starts to open up the economy, so that clusters can be identified and the people isolated quickly, then contact tracing can be done. I turn now to how this State does in managing this. On testing, while we have problems going back six or seven weeks, the real test will be in the next six months to a year. Ireland is world leading in information technology and many medical health capabilities. We should be best in class and we should ensure our testing system is as fast as anywhere and our contact tracing system is absolutely rock solid and quick.

The sixth and last category the Taoiseach mentioned was economic welfare, and that is also the one we have to face and address now. I again commend the State and the Government. The initial response was quick, which is part of what we needed to do, in providing the pandemic unemployment payments and immediate supports for business. That is only the first phase of what we need to do, however. The unlocking of restrictions cannot come quickly enough, not just for the sense of public morale, but also because our economy is in a shocking state and we need to start lifting it. Anything we do must be commensurate with not allowing the virus to come back. That is a given. It is not one versus the other, but a question of whether we can do both.

We should target our measures at certain key issues. First, it is clear that young people are the ones that suffer disproportionately the most. The statistics I saw this week showed that the level of take-up of the pandemic unemployment payment among young people, aged 18 to 24, was twice that of any other age category. They are the ones who are probably out of work in

greatest numbers and we need to focus on them. Second, I refer to small businesses. Taking the latest figures for the unemployment payments as an indicator of where this is hitting home, in the accommodation and food sector, where there are typically large numbers of small Irish businesses, the level of use of such payments because of the lockdown is seven times the level of lay offs in the industrial and public administrative sectors. I come from the small business sector and perhaps I have a particular interest in it. It is the heart of our economy, the strength of our community and a major employer. It is not just that, however; it is part of our culture. High street and family businesses mean a lot to people. It is only when a person is involved in one that he or she knows what it is like. It is everything for that person and there is often also a family history as well. We are in real danger of losing many of those small family businesses if we do not act quickly to try to help them recover.

How we do that is the real challenge. We are facing a difficult choice this weekend regarding this four or five-stage roll out. I hope we can start doing something this weekend, even if it is something very small. I have a friend being buried this morning at a funeral where the restrictions mean it is only possible to have ten people present. This lovely woman was from a big family. It is also only possible to be in the funeral home for 15 minutes. I think we can do a funeral with social distancing, perhaps not the big funerals of the past but with some slight easing of some of the restrictions. Another example would be allowing people to go for a walk. We can trust our people to do social distancing so that our older people are able to get out, exercise and get fresh air. As I mentioned last week as well, many of the small businesses I referred to work in tourism. I know some of what is planned from reading the newspapers yesterday. The talk is that we will be opening up in the late summer and it might then be possible to go on a holiday in Ireland. We should also look to the prospect of getting our people, particularly our young people, out walking, swimming, meeting carefully and helping our small businesses to recover. That too is part of the test we have as to how we manage this whole crisis.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I commence my contribution by paying my respects to all the people who have lost their lives and their families. May those who have died rest in peace. I also again thank all the workers making such sacrifices for us all. Coming up to May Day, I hope that will be acknowledged in some significant way this year above all years. There are four areas I will speak to today. The first relates to the transparency of the Government's actions and the second relates to testing and Government contributions around that. The third area relates to how we all use language and the fourth area relates to the Taoiseach's proposed roadmap. Last week I asked a number of questions regarding transparency of decision making. I again restate my support for the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE.

Last night the Taoiseach wrote to me in reply to some of my questions except he did not answer them. I will write to him again. I still do not know why minutes are not recorded from the beginning of every meeting and signed off afterwards. I still do not know how people are appointed to NPHE. The letters from the chief executive and chairperson of the Health Service Executive, HSE, to the Minister for Health and his Department regarding concerns around governance have still not been published. Please publish these letters. On behalf of the people of Ireland I ask for this to be done in a transparent way. What is there to hide?

Since last week I have been inundated by people asking about the transparency of decision making. People are concerned about this now more than ever. Transparency is not a luxury in our democracy. There must also be rebalancing in democratic accountability; it is fantastic that so many members of NPHE appear in the media but the odd time they need to appear before some formation of these Houses. We have received unpublished legal advice given to the Busi-

ness Committee on how we can meet but what the Labour Party raised at the beginning of this matter on setting up a committee on Covid-19 must be realised. The laws allow this to happen and it should happen imminently. It happens in New Zealand and it even happens in the United Kingdom, as much as we might deride it.

In a letter to the President of the European Commission, the European Ombudsman, Ms Emily O'Reilly, has stated that maintaining high standards of good administration may seem particularly challenging in these times but it is exactly during such times that high standards across all areas of public life are needed more than ever. She is not wrong. We must be able to speak clearly and honestly with citizens in order to maintain democratic processes and we must show everything transparently.

I believe the Minister for Health and NPHET have overstepped the mark, legally speaking, on decision making related to testing, and this led to those letters being written. Under section 70 of the Health Act 1970, it is the function of the HSE to "make arrangements for carrying out tests on persons without charge, for the purpose of ascertaining the presence of a particular disease, defect or condition that may be prescribed". Under the 2014 Act, the Minister must lay before the Houses any general written directions regarding its statutory functions but in this case, that did not happen. The Minister prescribes the disease for which tests will occur and the HSE is responsible for making the arrangements to test for that disease. The Minister and some members of NPHET have been demanding a quantum of tests beyond the HSE's capacity without first consulting the executive.

I have gone back to log where this requirement to meet 15,000 tests per day appeared first and it seems to have been on 18 March or 19 March, following the visit to the National Virus Reference Laboratory by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris. The Taoiseach referenced this visit a number of times. The Minister, Deputy Harris, said on the following day that the 15,000 tests target would be reached in "the next few days". Following the Chief Medical Officer's appearance on "The Late Late Show" on 17 April, the number suddenly changed to 100,000 tests per week. It was mooted that this target would need to be achieved within ten days, and the following day NPHET indicated this needed to happen urgently. We understood that the lifting of restrictions on 5 May was conditional on this happening but that now seems to have changed. It is not now conditional on that number being reached.

During all this, bizarrely, nobody asked the HSE if it could deliver this level of testing and the answer was clearly "No". It is why those letters were written. The executive did not have control over all the labs or the other levers, and this is why it could not deliver that level of testing. Government actions throughout all this must have a basis in law and the actions with respect to the instructions to the HSE did not have that basis.

I also raise the use of language, which is critical these days. The poet Eavan Boland passed away this week; through her poems she often indicated that the language we use is the making of us. She said that language has the power to redeem the damages that have been made. As we remember and her life that quote is very apt for how we communicate in these days. At times over the past two weeks the kite flying and tone from Government has simply been unacceptable. The Government, including the Taoiseach and in particular the Minister for Health, and indeed some members of the NPHET have been creating a narrative that the citizens of Ireland who are doing their best to stick to the rules that are in place are in some way to blame for these restrictions not being lifted when the real reason is nothing of the sort.

The Taoiseach cannot dangle citizens' freedom in front of them and say, "If you adhere to the rules then we'll give you your freedom." The relationship the people have with the State during this pandemic is not a transactional one. It is one that needs to be built on trust and respect. The CEO of the HSE, Paul Reid tweeted about this on Monday in a very direct and timely way:

One of the best lessons I learned in life is the difference between commitment and compliance. Commitment has to win hearts and minds. This is what we need to do now and not just talk about compliance.

I believe the Taoiseach needs to listen to Paul Reid a lot more.

The people have been very patient since 13 March when schools and crèches closed. We all know that and we thank them. What they need now is honesty and clear communication. People need hope and not to feel shamed.

The whole pandemic, as we all know, is having an extraordinary impact on the well-being of our nation. The over-70s feel that more than most. I think of my own parents. This weekend the Government needs to give them hope more than anyone else. These people in the later years of their lives have been the most disciplined in this crisis and have contributed more than anyone else to creating this great country. Many of them now feel patronised by how they are being treated. I, for one, urge the Government to give them some hope this weekend, however small.

On Friday when the Taoiseach updates people on restrictions and sets out a roadmap, he needs to remember that these need to be his decisions and his Government's roadmap, not the NPHEI's or the CMO's. I do not believe we can continue with the CMO making pronouncements all the time before they are considered by the Taoiseach or the Government. I think the Taoiseach agrees with me on that. The Taoiseach needs to be holistic and assess where we are at and the impact of further restrictions. What will the impact be on the rest of our health services?

The Taoiseach has spoken about secondary morbidity. I know of a consultant in Limerick who diagnoses cancer eight times a week but has not done so for the last four weeks. These people are walking around not knowing they have cancer. We have a lack of screening for bowel and cervical cancer. BreastCheck is not operating. We also know we have elevated mental health risks. On top of that are the socioeconomic impacts of maintaining restrictions. All of this needs to be considered and that is the Government's role.

We need to start a conversation about what society living with Covid-19 looks like to bring citizens with us, not making them feel like they are in the bold corner. Citizens need to see a coherent staged exit strategy from these restrictions. Businesses need to plan for the new world. Their instructions on what they need to do need to happen this weekend - not when they need to do it, but what they need to do to prepare.

Nobody expects the Taoiseach to get everything absolutely right in the coming weeks - I certainly do not. However, we expect to see a vision from him and action from him, actions he will stand over. They are his actions and his Government's actions. We cannot allow perfection to get in the way of progress because we will not be able in any way in these unusual times to perform such an act. We need to remember that collectively we are all here to serve the citizens. This weekend those citizens need to see political direction. They need to see a plan and they deserve to be given hope. I wish the Taoiseach well.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I wish to express appreciation for the outstanding work that is being done on the front line, particularly by health workers, and to offer the condolences of the Social Democrats to the many families who have lost loved ones in this pandemic.

Since the first case of Covid-19 in this country two months ago, we have been told that the strategy was to establish a robust test and trace regime which could rapidly identify each new case, trace the contacts, isolate them and thereby contain the virus. We needed to do that at sufficient scale for it to work. Unfortunately, we have never come close to the scale required.

1 o'clock Testing among healthcare workers has been reasonably satisfactory but, in the main, the curve has been flattened and the virus somewhat contained as a result of the severe restrictions on movement introduced on 27 March. It has been exceptionally difficult to get clear and straight answers from the Government and the health authorities about the reasons for the delays in achieving the strategy originally set out. Members have had to ask questions three, four or five times to get anything close to a reasonable answer. That has particularly been the case in respect of the severe shortages of reagents. Why the Government will not come clean on that issue remains a mystery.

While the public has played its part, increasingly it is being seen that the Government has not delivered on its side of the deal. This is leading to a loss of confidence and growing frustration among many people. The authorities need to level with the people, clearly explain what is happening, including the problems, and provide straight answers to questions. Unfortunately, there has been obfuscation and spin about the entire test and trace strategy. Regrettably, after several weeks of lockdown and sacrifice, the failure to implement the strategy will mean the lifting of the restrictions will be delayed even further. The Taoiseach yesterday disregarded that being the main reason for not lifting the restrictions. It was somewhat disingenuous of him to so comment. Unless we have a clear test and trace strategy as originally proposed, the number in hospitals and ICUs will grow. The Taoiseach is putting forward a circular argument. The problem at the nub of this is that we have not delivered on the original strategy.

Two weeks ago, I asked the Taoiseach to consider establishing an expert task force to plan and oversee the lifting of restrictions. He told me the Cabinet subcommittee is the task force, but it is not. With all due respect to that subcommittee, it does not contain the kind of expertise required for this very challenging and complex task force. Such a task force should be guided by public health experts and must have representation from a range of other sectors including general health - and mental health in particular, which is now a growing issue - as well as education, business, transport, industry and so on. It is critical that it have the necessary risk assessment and logistics skills for the planning and management of such a major and important undertaking. Its work should be done in public, with clear explanations and accountability for each of its decisions. The phases of lifting the restrictions and very clear metrics for triggering each phase should also be published. The price people are paying and that they will continue to pay for a long time demands openness and transparency about decisions which impact on their lives, livelihoods and futures. What we have had is decision making behind closed doors, political spin, kite-flying, media leaks and a very unsettling absence of candour. That will not be tolerated for much longer at political and other levels. The public is getting very frustrated and will not tolerate any further obfuscation in the strategy.

I want to move to the question of the cost of responding to the health crisis and the ensuing economic crisis. The actions to date, including the Covid-19 payment, and the wage substitute scheme have been correct but the next steps, in respect of a phased return to work, supports for SMEs and dealing with personal debt in particular will be crucial. That is why we need an

expert-led task force. The longer it takes to implement the test and trace strategy, the longer this will be delayed and the costlier it will be. Last week's stability programme update, SPU, not surprisingly painted a very stark picture of the challenges ahead and we know that the cost of responding will be substantial. Of particular concern is the fact that the SPU spending projections actually fall below the budget projections for next year. That is inexplicable. The aim of economic strategy must be to provide an economic stimulus rather than retrenchment and austerity. This can only happen if the ECB provides zero funding or negative interest rate funding to member states.

The big question of course is who will pay for all of this. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the last recession where Ireland was saddled with huge debt which resulted in severe austerity the impact of which is still being felt. Within the EU this must be viewed as a Europe-wide problem and we need a Europe-wide solution. It would be entirely unacceptable for the ECB to respond with costly loans. That is why the Government must vigorously pursue a fair and just response to the devastation caused by this deadly pandemic. The Government must be open and transparent about what that strategy is. That is why I am asking the Taoiseach to outline the approach that he took last week to the European Council meeting and which indeed he will take to the follow-up meeting tomorrow. It is important that he tells us what his attitude is to a longer term lifting of the fiscal rules. Does he support the idea of corona bonds? What exactly is his strategy in Europe?

The Taoiseach: I do support the proposal to have corona bonds. That is not a secret. I think I said that a week or two ago. Everyone should know that. It is essentially a mechanism by which we would collectivise European debt solely for the purpose of paying for the cost of the crisis. It could be just health spending or go beyond that to include the money necessary to re-stimulate the economy. As anyone familiar with European issues will know, that would require a change to the European treaties. It is highly unlikely that is going to happen because in order to change the European treaties every country needs to want to do that and some countries need to hold referendums on it. For that reason alternative solutions are being developed. We expect the European Commission to come to us next week with proposals on how we can use the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, the seven-year budget for the EU, and borrowing perhaps by the Commission as a means to do something similar. A proposal has already been developed involving the European Stability Mechanism, ESM, by ECOFIN, the Council of finance ministers. That was approved last week by the European Council.

In terms of the fiscal rules when it comes to the Stability and Growth Pact the break clause, or the get out clause, has been activated. I have always been of the view that the fiscal rules can, or should, be amended, depending on the circumstances that we face. Something that people often miss when we debate the fiscal rules is that the rules are there for a reason. Somebody did not just invent fiscal rules because they thought they would be a great idea. The fundamental idea behind them is that if we are part of a single currency, and of a European Union, sooner or later we have to balance the books. Yes, in times of growth, when the economy is going well, it makes sense to rein in spending, to run a surplus to pay down the debt so that in difficult times, such as the very difficult times we are about to go into, we can borrow, spend and re-stimulate the economy and avoid austerity. Anyone who thinks that the fiscal rules can be got rid of so that countries never have to balance their books, never have to stop borrowing or never have to rein in spending at some point is living in fantasy land and no future Government can operate on that basis. What the next Government can do is increase spending and borrowing to pay for the crisis, stimulate the economy, get people back to work, get businesses open and get the country

going again but at a certain point, when the country returns to growth, one does need to balance the books. No country will survive if it thinks it can base its fiscal policy on always borrowing more, always having a bigger deficit and never balancing the books. That is Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Weimar Germany; it does not work.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have been looking for transparency on the advice on which the Taoiseach is basing his decisions since 20 February, at the first briefing. I have asked on six occasions for the minutes, written advice and position papers of the expert advisory group that advises NPHET and the Government but have never even received the courtesy of an answer. Will the Taoiseach publish the minutes, written advice and any papers the group has produced?

Tomorrow is May day. The Taoiseach heaped praise upon front-line healthcare workers earlier, as everybody rightly has done. Could he then explain why the hundreds of nurses and other healthcare workers who have applied under “Be On Call for Ireland” to work for the health service in this public health emergency have been given the worst possible contracts with CPL, an agency recruitment firm, namely, three-month temporary contracts with no sick leave and no rights under the Unfair Dismissals Act. Is that the way to treat the heroic healthcare workers who have volunteered to work in this public health emergency?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy but I am afraid I do not have the details of that. That is new information to me so I will have to check up on it but as far as I understand it, anyone is entitled to access the provisions of the Unfair Dismissals Act. That is a law that applies to all workers and obviously there are sick pay and sick leave arrangements in place for everyone at the moment who needs to take time off, particularly as a consequence of Covid-19 but I will certainly check that and come back to the Deputy with a written reply. Quite a number of Deputies have asked questions that are for NPHET and the expert advisory group. I am not on NPHET or the expert advisory group. Others have asked questions relating to the HSE and have asked me to publish documents that are not in my possession or the possession of my Department. I am very happy to answer questions that I know the answer to and am very happy to publish documents that I have, but some of the questions that are being asked are really questions for the CMO and the CEO of the HSE. I cannot answer questions on their behalf but I can ask them to answer Members’ questions and will do so.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have read the contract and it is very clear. It is a temporary, special purpose contract for three months. At a time when we need permanent increases in staffing in our health service we are giving the worst contracts possible to people seeking to work in the public health emergency. I ask the Taoiseach to issue an instruction to NPHET to tell the expert advisory group to publish the minutes and advice of the group so that we can hear what the scientists and clinicians are actually saying.

I have a further question on the leaving certificate. Why is the Government continuing with the leaving certificate when we do not know where we are going to be and especially given the stress and uncertainty being suffered by students, a majority of whom are looking for certification that does not require them to go through the stress of sitting the exam? Indeed, many of them may have underlying health conditions and would be very worried about going into an exam environment. Can the Taoiseach answer that question please?

The Taoiseach: Just to go back to what the Deputy mentioned earlier, NPHET has agreed to publish the minutes of its meetings and its advice to Government is already published. In

terms of the expert advisory group, that is not advice that I ever see and it is not in my possession. There may or may not be reasons it can or cannot publish it. The CMO is the best person to answer that question.

There was a good debate on the leaving certificate in the Chamber last week, and the vast majority of Members who spoke from most parties, from what I have been informed, spoke in favour of the decision to continue with the leaving certificate. The plan to do exactly that is being developed at the moment by the Department of Education and Skills, with a view to the exams starting on 29 July. The thinking behind that is that the alternative, that is, predictive marking, raises all sorts of difficulties. Some students are concerned that their teachers might not give them a grade they believe is fair. It was suggested that results could be based on mock exams, but students did not realise those exams would be the basis for working out their results. There are major difficulties with predictive marking. It is not impossible, but if it were done we would be dealing with a raft of issues.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We are now beginning to see the long-term economic impact of this emergency. The question of who will pay is going to loom extremely large. Will we bail out workers or will we, once again, bail out big businesses? Unfortunately, the indication from the Government so far in terms of its attitude to the airline industry is that the same mistakes of the past will be repeated and CEOs and big businesses will be bailed out.

Millions of flights have been cancelled and tens of thousands of people are due and entitled to full cash refunds, but the airlines have dragged their feet, using all manner of obstructions. The Government has now taken the side of the airlines and pushed for the European Commission to scrap normal consumer rights and allow airlines off the hook. Instead of refunds, the Government wants the airlines to be able to keep the cash and issue vouchers instead, which is effectively bailing out the airlines with consumers' money. Why is the Government taking the side of the airline companies instead of passengers?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. If he is fair to us and looks at all the major actions that have been taken by the Government to date, he will find they have been taken in order to bail out people and workers. There has been a massive expansion of the welfare budget in the past couple of weeks in order to provide the pandemic unemployment payment of €350 per week. If one compares that to the payment in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, where it is less than £100 per week, or to what is happening in other countries, that is a very big bailout of people and workers.

We have also introduced sick pay arrangements that we have never had before in this country. Again, that is very much a bailout of people and workers. The temporary wage subsidy scheme is now being availed of by 40,000 or 50,000 companies. That money only goes to companies if they are paying it to their workers. It is not a bailout of the bosses, shareholders or people who own those companies. Money is going to companies for the sole purpose of paying a portion of the salaries of their workers.

On the airline industry, as far as I understand it the law has not changed and people are entitled to a cash refund. I will have to check that, but my knowledge is that the law has not changed. However, we have to be practical about this. I do not want to see airlines fail. Whether they are publicly or privately owned is not my major concern. I want to see Ryanair and Aer Lingus operate some time later in the summer, possibly August, and I would not like to be in a situation whereby we have to bail out airlines because they have failed.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach is correct when he says that is the law, but his Government and 11 others have written to the European Commission calling for the law to be changed. I find it hard to believe that the Taoiseach is not aware that is the position of his Government.

The second more general question concerns the future of airlines because they are, in a sense, the banks of this crisis. IAG is cutting one-third of its jobs in British Airways. It is, unfortunately, likely to move to do the same in Aer Lingus. Is it not time to accept that the privatisation of Aer Lingus has been a failure, resulting in job losses and wage cuts and putting regional airports at risk? We are now paying the wages for Aer Lingus in any case. Instead of bailing out private, big, polluting industries, is it not time to renationalise Aer Lingus under the democratic control of the workers and in that way plan for sustainable transport networks, with a significant reduction in airline travel?

The Taoiseach: The Government has not taken a formal position on the matter of vouchers or refunds. There may be something at Department level. I will have to check, but, even so, I doubt that any law could be changed retrospectively. I may be wrong about that but I have never come across anyone changing a consumer protection law retrospectively. It might be changed prospectively but I do not see how it could be changed retrospectively. I will get a briefing on that issue but there is no Government decision on it.

Objectively, the liberalisation of air travel in the world has been an extraordinary success. The connectivity Ryanair provided was not possible when airlines were owned by national governments. Ryanair totally disrupted air travel, democratised it and made it possible for ordinary people to afford to fly to all parts of Europe. Liberalisation has been a huge success in terms of aviation and socialists have been proved wrong in that regard. Aer Lingus has been a real success too, and has never had more staff or flights than it has now. What has happened to the airline industry-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Some 6,000 staff-----

The Taoiseach: -----is because of a virus. Regardless of whether they are national carriers, public companies or private companies, they have all been downed because of a virus, not because of any ideology.

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move to the Regional Group. Deputy Lowry is taking five minutes for a statement and five for questions.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The entire world is currently transfixed by Covid-19, which is understandable. This virus has impacted on people's lives like nothing else in living memory. However, other significant issues remain to be dealt with. I refer specifically to Brexit. Serious and unresolved matters surrounding Britain's exit from the European Union are more crucial now than ever before the onset of Covid-19. Brexit implications are looming large. We now face a double whammy with the combination of a no-deal Brexit plus the economic battering of Covid-19. The impact of the two together will have massive and far-reaching consequences for Ireland. The EU has wisely advised that Britain extend its transition period to avoid compounding the economic damage caused by the Covid-19 pandemic with a rushed Brexit. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has stated on several occasions that he is adamantly against seeking an extension. This intransigence leaves us with a huge dilemma. The political declaration envisages a no tariff restriction trade regime for agrifood and the manufacture of products on

the island of Ireland. However, the declaration also requires the UK to achieve regulatory and technological alignment with the EU, in order to avoid EU-UK tariffs. This remains a major problem as there is no clarity as to how this will be achieved in the short timeframe between now and the end of December. As of now, the UK will leave the Single Market and the customs union on 1 January next year. This raises the question of how advanced our preparations are for implementing new measures around customs procedures, regulatory checks for goods, foods, animals and bloodstock crossing the Irish Sea. The timeframe for preparations and action is now very limited. The outcome of the EU-UK talks on a future relationship is of critical importance to Ireland and has the potential to have a devastating impact on our economy.

Ireland has always been uniquely exposed to Brexit compared to other EU states. The UK is Ireland's third largest export market with a value of €16 billion. Ireland is also heavily reliant on the UK for food imports. Nearly half of all food imports come from the UK and €1 billion in goods and services is exchanged between Ireland and Britain on a weekly basis. Our exports, agrifood sector and tourism are alarmingly dependent on Britain. In that context, I have a number of questions for the Taoiseach. Will the Government make a commitment to maintain all the existing Brexit funding and support programmes, given the cost of the pandemic? Will the Government provide specific assurances that the agrifood sector, which is the sector most exposed to Brexit, will be sufficiently supported ahead of the transition period on 31 December? What preparations has the Government made to help prepare businesses for the new situation on 1 January? When will businesses know the details regarding checks and controls and when does the Taoiseach anticipate the EU and UK will agree same? Does he accept that these decisions need to be made soon in view of the short lead-in time so that the necessary customs and duties infrastructure is put in place? Business needs certainty about these issues.

What progress is being made on the implementation of the Irish protocol of the withdrawal agreement in respect of controls and checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Will the Taoiseach outline the implications for the Republic? Has the Taoiseach had recent contact with Prime Minister Johnson or does he intend to put our concerns directly to him?

I wish to ask a specific question relating to beef farmers. As the Taoiseach will be aware, markets are curtailed, demand has dropped, prices have slumped and cash flow is now a major issue for beef farmers throughout the country, including Tipperary. Will the Government commit to bringing direct payments to beef farmers forward from October to July? These moneys are due under EU funding and the measure I am proposing would greatly assist the cash flow for this category of farmers.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for reminding us about Brexit because it has not gone away, you know. In many ways, we planned for a potential shock to our economy to occur in early 2020. We thought that might be Brexit and managed to avoid it, and instead we found ourselves dealing with a much sharper shock in the form of Covid-19, which has affected the economy in the way that it has.

The joint committee, which is made up of the EU and the UK, can extend economic Brexit happening, if one likes, for another year but they have not yet taken that decision and the UK Government has expressed its view that it wants to go ahead on 1 January 2021. That ultimately is its decision rather than ours, but the option is there to extend it another year should the UK Government wish to do so.

So far, the Covid-19 crisis has not influenced our Brexit strategy, but it does fundamentally

change the context because it has totally changed how trade works, the state of our economy and our fiscal capacity. I can provide a commitment that we will maintain all existing Brexit funding and support programmes, notwithstanding the Covid-19 pandemic, but some of these are going to be matters for the next Government. I can give an assurance to the agrifood sector, which is the most exposed to Brexit, that it will be sufficiently supported ahead of the transition on 31 December.

I was asked as well about when we would know the details regarding the checks and controls and when I anticipated that the EU and the UK would agree to these issues. I do not know for certain, but it had always been envisaged that it would be done by June or July before the traditional summer breaks, thus giving business a good six months to prepare for any of those changes that were going to take place. They are not agreed as of yet, but I totally agree that business needs as long a lead-in time as possible and not a short lead-in time.

All farmers have been badly affected by Covid-19 - we will have seen how the milk price has fallen - but beef farmers have been suffering for years now, and this situation on top of that has made things really severe for them. I think the Deputy suggested that we bring forward direct payments for beef farmers, and perhaps all farmers, from October to July of this year. They are EU funds that farmers will be getting anyway, so it might make sense to bring them forward. It is not money that they would not be getting anyway, but at the very least it might help with cash flow. I do think that is a good idea, and I have spoken to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine about it to see if it is possible.

In terms of my contacts with the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, just in the last couple of days I contacted him to wish him well on the birth of a baby boy. Previously, I was in contact with him regarding his illness. We have not had a chance to speak about substantive issues such as Covid-19 and Brexit since the middle of March, but now that he has gone back to work this week, I am sure we will.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: First and most important, I and the other members of the Rural Independent Group express how sorry we are for all of those who have been devastated by the loss of loved members of their families. I also want to put on the record of the Dáil that a very special friend of our own, Gene Tangney from the Black Valley, is now on day 26 of being in an induced state, fighting this virus. I hope that Gene will come out on the right side of this battle. He is a great character. The Tangney family have been close friends of mine for many years and my heart and soul are with him in his battle and I want him to get better.

Many compliments are rightly being paid to our nurses and healthcare workers. Tweets are being put out by Government and by people, but I want the Taoiseach to pay those workers. They should be paid the allowances in the deal agreed before Covid-19. I want them to be paid immediately because they are only looking for what is rightfully theirs.

Seasonal workers are losing out very badly on the €350 per week Covid-19 payment. They should also be included in that payment because if this had happened a couple of weeks later, these people would have been employed from 6 March on and would have been paid it.

People who are over 66 are not looking for €350 per week. They are saying to me very clearly that they want the balance between their pension and €350. I spoke to a couple yesterday who were running a public house and have paid taxes for years. They now find that their income is gone and they are left with just their pensions but still have all the bills relating to the

business and keeping the building intact.

I am sure the Taoiseach is aware of the situation, which I spoke about on the phone today with the Minister for Justice and Equality, regarding the direct provision centre in Cahersiveen and the public healthcare concerns we have about that centre, for the people who are in it, for the people who are working there, and for the people in Cahersiveen and south Kerry. Will the Taoiseach please make a statement on that?

With regard to the leaving certificate, I am terribly disappointed that the students were not listened to, because they really feel they were not. A great campaign was organised, which I supported. Those students were not listened to when it came to the sitting of the leaving certificate.

During the week, I met with the Kerry representatives of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, who diligently put together a very important programme of what they need, and what our beef farmers and our family farmers in County Kerry and throughout the country need. For example, there is €25 million that is there from last year which should immediately be made available to our beef farmers. As Deputy Lowry rightly stated, the October payments should be brought forward to July, which would be a massive help to our family farms and their budgets. It would get them over a hump because they are in a desperate way.

I also want to give an example of what local authorities are going through in terms of a funding crisis. In Kerry, our tourism sector is worth more than €600 million alone to the local economy, and it is now expected to take a loss of close to €500 million. That will be detrimental to our local economy. The effect on businesses will be huge. They will not be able to afford their commercial rates, which have now, rightly, been frozen, and I thank the Government and our local authorities for that. Taking Kerry as an example, however, the projected rates income when passing the budget last November was €42 million. It is now, from initial projections, looking like it will be as low as €24 million. That authority has now sought a compensation package from Government so that it can carry on its activities and essential services. This is not just the case for Kerry County Council but also for other local authorities throughout the country, whom I compliment on their work.

I also compliment the people in University Hospital Kerry, Killarney Community Hospital, and hospitals in Kenmare, Cahersiveen and Valentia, the staff in our nursing homes, who are working so diligently in this major fight, gardaí and our local authority workers. Everyone is putting their shoulders to the wheel. I want us all as politicians to work together. I want us to do this in a hard-working fashion to try to ensure that, first of all, we do what is most important, that is, protect the health of our citizens. Second, we need to try to get the economy and the wheels going. I want the Taoiseach to give our people optimism in the coming days. I know he has important announcements to make. I am pleading with the Taoiseach. I know public health concerns are the most important but we must also give people something to look forward to and give them confidence. We must let them see that there is leadership in the country and that we are all going to work our way out of this together. We must let the older people - those who are over 70 years old and who are inside their homes - see that we are fighting on their behalf. We must let them see that we as a country will rise out of this. It is the same as everything we have taken on over the years: we will take this on and we will win, taking into account healthcare, of course, which is of vital importance.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I wish to commiserate with all the families who have lost loved

ones to this deadly disease. I want to thank all the people, each and every one, for the extraordinary sacrifice they have made and undertaken in the past six or seven weeks.

I am calling on the Taoiseach to get as many people back to work as soon as is safely possible. This includes construction work and builders who may be working on one-off houses. I want the Taoiseach to explore the possibility of getting those people back as soon as possible as well as in industries where social distancing is possible. Many companies and businesspeople will be unable to return, sadly.

For farmers, I am asking the Taoiseach to open up the marts and at least allow competition in the market.

We should allow those over 70 years of age out of confinement, even with a mask to go to the local shop. It is not fair on them when we see people coming here off ferries and planes and going in their midst and close to them into holiday homes and local shops. No one is monitoring whether they are isolating when they come in off these ferries.

Like Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, I am asking the Taoiseach to consider those over 66 years of age who were employing people and who gave employment. We should bring their pension up to €350.

What about the seasonal workers? Kerry depends so much on hotel workers, bus drivers and all that. If the lockdown had not come for another week or two, all these people would have been back to work. Now, they are running down their stamps. Some of them do not have any stamps left. They are not entitled to jobseeker's welfare because their partners have other incomes. They are left behind.

Following the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael budget, tonight 2 cent per litre is being added by way of carbon tax to the price of petrol and diesel while the whole of the country is closed down - that is the fact of it. They are doing their best to get the Green Party on board. What will the carbon tax charge be when they have the Green Party with them? They are talking about reducing the national herd. We read today that the US is in serious trouble in providing beef yet we are supposed to reduce the national herd. I am amazed that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are considering blocking the Shannon liquefied natural gas project. North Kerry has been starved of jobs for years. Millions of euro have been put into this project, not to mind the importance of having access to this natural gas.

Why is the Government not calling for an investigation into how and when this virus began in China? Is it the case that the Government does not want to know? I can tell the Taoiseach that all those who have lost loved ones to this deadly disease would like to know and be told the truth. They cannot touch, embrace or talk to their loved ones who are gone forever. This virus was in China long before 20 January. Some of the PPE the Government paid for and went out of its way to thank publicly the Chinese for was given to them by the Italians in early December. I am asking the Government not to buy another bottle from the Chinese to contain this virus until we know the truth. The people are entitled to the truth. I am calling on the United Nations to carry out an international investigation into what happened. We need to know. If the Chinese are culpable, or whoever it is, they will have a job in compensating the world. They will never compensate for the people who have died but they should be made to pay compensation in respect of the money countries around the world have lost, none more so than Ireland.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move finally to the Independent Group and Deputies Pringle

and Harkin. Is the group giving some time to Deputy McNamara? Is it statements and questions?

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Yes. I have two questions to which the Taoiseach can respond. Then it will be Deputy Harkin, who is sharing time with Deputy McNamara.

My first question has been topical for several days. It relates to people travelling from Northern Ireland into the Republic. We have been told that the Garda cannot stop them and tell them to go home. If that is the case, how has it happened? What does the Government intend to do about it? I do not believe that it is prevalent or that there are hordes of people coming across the Border. It is frustrating, however, for those who are trying to manage and live with the restrictions we have in the South.

The issue of the Keelings workers has been aired in the media in recent days. We discovered that Keelings informed the workers that it was advised that 49 could be quarantined at a time. It told them that it was advised by the NPHET, the Government or the Department. When this information was publicised recently, Keelings reduced it to 19 people. Who is advising Keelings on this? From where is the advice coming? What is the proper advice?

The Taoiseach: On the regulations, I asked the Attorney General, the Minister for Health and the Minister for Justice and Equality to examine this issue several days ago, which they have. Having looked at the different options, it is their view that the regulations do not need to be amended. However, what is required is greater co-operation between the PSNI and An Garda Síochána. People coming from Northern Ireland into the Republic are breaching Northern Ireland law and *vice versa*. Unless we prohibit people crossing the Border, which we are just not going to do, what is required is co-operation. Somebody going beyond the 2 km restriction without a very good reason, such as being a cross-Border worker, is breaching the law in one jurisdiction. What is really required is co-operation between the police authorities. We will not make it illegal for people from Northern Ireland to come into the Republic of Ireland for reasons with which the Deputy will agree. Enforcement is going to be the issue which will require co-operation between the PSNI and An Garda Síochána. I am reassured by what the Garda Commissioner said about this in recent days.

I am afraid I cannot answer definitively the Deputy's straight question as to who is advising Keelings. As far as that debacle is concerned, it is probably a case of there being many arms of government and all of those arms not having spoken to each other. I believe that is what went wrong in this case. We do now have a much better procedure in place. Anyone entering the airport has to fill in a form, declare where they are staying, give their mobile number and other such information to ensure they self-isolate and self-restrict for 14 days. We now have a mechanism by which Department of Justice and Equality staff can check with people to ensure they are following those instructions.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Each day as we gather in the Dáil, the numbers of those who have died as a result of Covid-19 increase. It is really important that we remember those people and sympathise with their families, all of whom are grieving in isolation.

It is also important that each time we recognise the great efforts made by those in the health-care sector. While we have made real progress at individual and Government level in containing Covid-19, there is a number of unresolved issues in the healthcare system. First, we hear that nurses have not yet been paid the agreed increases. Some hospitals are paying but others

are not and that needs to be resolved now. Another pressing issue that arises among the people to whom I have spoken is the fact that some nursing homes are still not adequately staffed and do not have adequate levels of PPE, which is a concern if either patients or staff contract the coronavirus. I have heard the panic in the voices of some of the people in this sector. While progress is being made, we were slow off the mark in the first place. Immediate and urgent efforts are needed. I emphasise that point.

Another issue that has not been addressed was mentioned briefly elsewhere this morning. I refer to the contract that has been offered to private consultants and private hospitals. I fully support the actions taken regarding the take-over of private hospitals. We can view it as a success that more than 2,000 beds are currently not being used. However, there is a need for flexibility in the contract being offered to the consultants. They must be insured in order to be able to treat their emergency, non-Covid-19 patients. If they do not sign the contract by next Sunday, they will not have insurance, but if they do sign it they will leave all their other patients in limbo. All patients matter. That should be the bottom line. Whatever ideological struggles are going on, now is not the time for them. We need to focus on Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 patients. As the Taoiseach stated, cancer has not gone away. We need a flexible solution and we can fight our territorial battles later. It is patients who matter now.

I want to briefly mention domestic violence. We had a top-class awareness campaign from the Department of Justice and Equality and some really good inter-agency response. Gardaí, for example, are proactively following up on calls on domestic violence prior to the Covid-19 crisis. That is great reassurance for people. However, some individuals still have to leave their homes. There is no emergency refuge accommodation in my constituency of Sligo-Leitrim so people have to access rental accommodation. We need a timely way of helping those people, and one way is to allow them to avail of short-term rent supplement. I ask the Taoiseach to please reconsider this as an emergency solution.

My final comment relates to an issue that has also been raised previously . I refer to refunds or vouchers from airlines. As the Taoiseach stated, customers are fully entitled to refunds. The Government should stand on the right side of this issue, namely, with the customers. I heard the Taoiseach indicate that airlines may need support – they probably will – but one of the ways we could do that is to look again at fifth freedom rights relating to cargo transport. There should be full refunds for customers.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Tomorrow, it is widely anticipated that the Taoiseach will announce some easing of restrictions. Tomorrow is May Day. It is the start of the mayfly season on Lough Corrib and Lough Derg. Fishing is something that people have done for generations, through the Spanish influenza, which was far more deadly than this disease has proven to date, and before that. By definition, it is a solitary activity by its nature. I ask the Taoiseach to bear that in mind in easing restrictions. The idea that An Garda Síochána's time would be taken up with stopping people going out in boats spaced out across large lakes, such as Lough Derg and Lough Corrib, is ridiculous. It highlights the need to make sure that our restrictions are necessary and proportionate. I would ask the Taoiseach to look at that issue in how mayfly fishing is treated. I am not talking about people on jet skis and dangerous activities. I am talking about something that has happened for generations.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes the questions and statements. Would the Taoiseach like to make a concluding statement?

The Taoiseach: I will certainly seek advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPGET, on mayfly fishing. The issue of solitary fishing in general - people fishing on a local lake or river on their own - has come up on a number of occasions. It is something that I will seek advice on.

Deputy Harkin mentioned the issue of domestic violence. There is a concern at present that the fact that people are at home so much more than they would normally be poses a real risk of an increase in both domestic violence and child abuse. That is something we are most aware of. Everyone can understand the concerns. It is something the Government is attuned to. In terms of domestic violence, there are two new women's refuges that have opened in recent months, in Galway and in Dublin. However, the north west is an obvious and gapping gap in the provision of domestic refuges for women and I hope that is something we can sort out sooner rather than later. In the meantime, hotel accommodation can be used. I do not see why rent supplement could not be used, and I will get that checked out. That is a good suggestion.

In terms of the pay agreement with the nursing unions, I have seen reports in the media about that but I will get that checked out this week. The pay increases that were agreed with the nursing unions are linked to a new contract, reforms and the adoption of more modern work practices in the interests of patients and taxpayers. There is a linkage. However, I believe that public bodies should honour the agreement, as unions should.

On the issue of the capacity in hospitals, our private hospitals are 33% occupied, our public hospitals approximately 80% occupied, our intensive care units, ICUs, approximately half-occupied and Citywest largely unoccupied. That is not necessarily bad. The reason that is the case is because we wanted to be prepared to make sure that our hospitals and ICUs were not overwhelmed the way those in other countries were. It is good that we had such spare capacity. We may need it yet. This could yet go wrong. I would not like us to make the mistake of relinquishing that capacity only to find out in a few months' time or over the winter that we really need it. It is possible over the next couple of weeks to use some of that capacity to bring back online some elective healthcare treatments and other interventions that should be happening but we need to be wise about it. We would all like to see more orthopaedic operations starting again but some of those operations can take up an ICU bed for 12 days and the position can change quickly in 12 days when it comes to this virus. We need to be smart about that. It is not bad that we have spare capacity in the health service. It is an unusual experience in Ireland, not necessarily bad. We should retain some spare capacity for as long as we can.

Deputy Eamon Ryan spoke eloquently on the issue of nursing homes, which have been badly affected. That is extremely sad and tragic. We see across Europe between 40% and 60% of all deaths are occurring to people who had been residents in nursing homes. If one thinks about it, a nursing home is really one big household with many staff coming in and out and it is hard to keep the virus out. Once it gets in, it is easy for it to spread. If we were to cocoon people in nursing homes the way we have at home, one would essentially, as Professor McConkey pointed out, have to put the nursing home into lockdown and have the staff stay overnight and not see their own families. That would be extremely difficult, and possibly impossible, to do. It raises questions for the future as to what our nursing home and elder care models should be. I think we all agree that we need much more investment in homecare so that fewer people must go to nursing homes as early as they do. The Government was able to increase funding for homecare by 40%. I doubt the next Government will have that kind of money and we will have to come up with a new model for funding homecare to make sure that it is an option for more people for longer. What we have been doing for a long time is moving towards much more modern

30 April 2020

nursing homes, replacing nursing homes with 150 or 200 bed, single-room occupancy nursing homes. Maybe that was not the right answer. We have seen some outbreaks happen in some of the most modern nursing homes, places like St. Mary's Hospital in the Phoenix Park, a facility with almost all modern buildings and single or double rooms that is under public control, linked with the Mater Hospital and with consultants on site. Maybe we need to consider a different model, something similar to what we have done in the disability sector, with people placed in houses of three, four or five rather than big nursing homes of 150, even if they are all single rooms. Maybe I am wrong, but that is the kind of thing we are going to have to think about.

The other issue is that of clinical governance. The view until now has been that everyone who is a resident of a nursing home is a resident and should be allowed to have the GP of his or her choice. The effect of this has been that a nursing home of 120 or 130 residents could have 20 or 30 different GPs but no one person who is in charge as a medical director. There is a person in charge but that person is not a medical person. We have a lot to think about across Europe about the future of nursing care and nursing home care as a consequence of this.

Sitting suspended at 1.55 p.m. and resumed at 2 p.m.

Membership of Committee on Procedure: Motion

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move:

That—

(a) notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, and until further notice in the 33rd Dáil, the membership of the Committee on Procedure shall consist of the Ceann Comhairle as *ex officio* chair and not more than 16 other members, appointed by parties and groups as follows:

(i) Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and Sinn Féin three members each; and

(ii) all other parties and groups one member each,

and seven members shall constitute a quorum of the Committee, and

(b) the Ceann Comhairle shall announce the names of the members appointed under paragraph (a) for the information of the Dáil on the first sitting day following their appointment.

Question put and agreed to.

Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Authorisation to instruct Legal Representatives: Motion

Deputy Martin Heydon: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to section 4(2)(f)(iv) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 to 2018, hereby authorises the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission

to instruct legal representatives as regards matters arising solely from the performance of
2 o'clock parliamentary functions by members of the Houses of the Oireachtas, in relation
to legal proceedings where Dáil Éireann is a Notice Party thereto, in the matter of
Gemma O'Doherty and John Waters v Minister for Health, Ireland and the Attorney
General (the Ceann Comhairle, Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann as Notice Parties) (Record
No. 2020/271JR).

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputy Marc MacSharry: What is the purpose of the legal advice?

An Ceann Comhairle: It is to deal with the challenge to the State regarding the legislation
that was passed here some weeks ago. It is a challenge by two journalists.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Okay.

Question put and agreed to.

Standing Orders 21 and 22: Motion

An Ceann Comhairle: No. 3c is a motion regarding the quorum. The proposal is to reduce
the quorum for these special sittings from 20 to ten. I call the Minister for Business, Enterprise
and Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, to move the motion.

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I
move:

That, with effect from 5th May, 2020, where Standing Orders 21 and 22 require a quo-
rum of 20, that quorum shall at all times be reduced to ten, until further notice in the 33rd
Dáil.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: On a point of order-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes?

Deputy Marc MacSharry: The Ceann Comhairle and I have corresponded about this mat-
ter.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sure we will have more correspondence.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Without a doubt.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not going to have to a debate about it now.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: No, but in the interests of the many Members who have not
found their position such that they have been allocated speaking time since the emergency-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Take that up with your party.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: It is not just for my party. I speak on behalf of the 140-odd
Members who are not currently here. I think that those arrangements are a matter that needs to
be discussed, for every Member to have an opportunity to speak on them. I respectfully sug-

30 April 2020

gest that on the basis that all of us have individual offices here, and with the benefit, as with this debate, of allocated speaking times that are specific to Members, there is no reason, with the imagination and will, that we cannot provide each of the 160 Members equal speaking time on such an important matter as, arguably, altering the intention of the Constitution itself.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is right that we have had correspondence and I look forward to us having more correspondence.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I am glad to have some of it on the record.

An Ceann Comhairle: Let me make it very clear that the decisions about reduced attendances here have been agreed by all of the parties. When the proposal was brought to the House, nobody objected to it. It has the support of all the party leaders. I understand that some individual Members are very frustrated at not getting the opportunity to come here regularly. I put it to the Deputy that they should take that up with their party leaders or whoever selects the people who come here. I am well aware that many people share Deputy MacSharry's view that we could in some way reorder and restructure our business here, and we could all come in a reordered fashion and transact our business with 160 Members. Just as the State is taking the advice of the medical experts, we are having regard to the medical experts and to the health and safety experts who have been requested to come in here to look at how the House is operating. I made arrangements this morning for a copy of the report of the health and safety experts to be circulated so that Members can understand the reasons we are operating as we are. We are operating in this way by agreement.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Just to conclude-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, we are not having any further-----

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Just to conclude-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are having no further debate on it. Please resume your seat.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: It is only a point of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will hear the Deputy's point of order.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: It is a point of order because we are seeking to change the Order of Business for the future of the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Order of Business is already agreed.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I ask the Ceann Comhairle to allow a bit of latitude. I sympathise with the situation and have no doubt that individual Members and expert groups are doing their absolute best. Surely it is in the interests of democracy and the upholding of the Constitution itself that all 160 Members might have an opportunity to examine, rather than just accept and comment upon, such experts' advice so that the House as a whole and those who are represented in pre-election party groupings or those who formed post-election technical groups can best----

An Ceann Comhairle: Bring forward a proposal, Deputy.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I do not want to delay the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Bring forward a proposal, Deputy.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I do not want to delay the House. I would most respectfully ask that the Ceann Comhairle might consider my points in the same spirit in which they are being given, which is in the interests of democracy and the functioning of this House. I would never want to undermine whatever is in the best interests of health and safety for Members and staff. I think, however, we have a growing and legitimate point of view, outside of this bubble and indeed from many inside this bubble, those of us lucky enough to be able to crawl inside and say a few words in recent weeks, that the current arrangements, regardless of what expert advice might underpin the decision taken by the few on behalf of the many, are somewhat flawed and require the participation and the debate-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, what is implicit in what the Deputy is saying is that somebody is enforcing a decision on a House. Any decisions arrived at here, in this instance, are arrived at by consensus and otherwise by agreement. Deputies McGuinness and Niall Collins want to come in on the same matter. I call Deputy Niall Collins.

Deputy Niall Collins: I will be brief as I know the Ceann Comhairle does not want to have a debate on this issue. Regarding our business, we are long past the point by which Deputies should be allowed to avail of the option to submit written parliamentary questions. It is an integral part of our work. I respect the restrictions and constraints that the Ceann Comhairle, the staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas and all of us have to adhere to and that are necessary to try to run the Parliament and our democracy. It is, however, a huge issue for me, and I am sure for plenty of other Deputies, and we are long past this point. We are being shut out from tabling written parliamentary questions and that issue needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

An Ceann Comhairle: A decision was made yesterday to begin the process of reintroducing conventional parliamentary questions and a finalised report on that will be available next week. I call Deputy McGuinness.

Deputy John McGuinness: I will be brief. I agree with my colleagues, Deputies MacSharry and Niall Collins. A significant number of us are not being given the opportunity to contribute inside the new rules and regulations of the House to any of the debates. I have sat here for hours in every sitting and have had no opportunity to ask the questions I wished to ask. I believe the people I represent in Carlow-Kilkenny are being deprived of an input into the democratic process. I wrote to the Ceann Comhairle regarding the formation of a Government and I believe we should be having a debate here. I cannot see any reason why the three main parties, if they put the country first, cannot have a Government to take us through this crisis. I am serious. Members have a right to have an input and, with respect, I look to the Ceann Comhairle to protect the rights of Members. Members' rights are being largely trampled upon, not by the Ceann Comhairle or anybody else, and we are not having the opportunity I referred to previously. I ask the Ceann Comhairle please to review the requests made to discuss the issues of the day and to give as much opportunity as possible to those of us who have been locked out.

Question put and agreed to.

Covid-19 (Business, Enterprise and Innovation): Statements

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I welcome the opportunity to address the Chamber and update Deputies on the work under way in my Department to help the enterprise sector meet the business challenges presented by Covid-19. Clearly, Covid-19 has resulted in a profound impact across the economy with unprecedented speed. Figures from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection indicate that it had issued payments to 591,000 people in respect of their applications for the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment and 36,100 payments in receipt of Covid-19 illness benefits up to last Tuesday, 28 April. These payments are in addition to the 212,000 people on the live register on 20 April.

More than 50,000 businesses have now registered for the Government's temporary wage subsidy scheme, with more than 400,000 employees receiving payment under the scheme. These figures reflect the impact of closures across the economy, with those sectors most dependent on public footfall, such as recreation, tourism and hospitality and other service-orientated sectors, being closed. As a result of Covid-19, we have gone from a position where we had full employment just two months ago with more people at work than ever before, to a position where we now have more than 1 million people in receipt of income support of some form.

While large parts of the economy and society have ceased activities, we should remember that significant parts of our economy and business sector have continued to operate and implement the physical distancing guidelines. These sectors that continue to operate safely include the essential retail sector, from supermarkets to pharmacies, filling stations, large parts of manufacturing and financial services, ICT, energy and communications sectors, and other sectors such as transport and freight and waste management. My Department has put a range of business supports in place, including a €450 million Covid-19 working capital scheme from the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, which supports loans from €25,000 to €1.5 million. Almost 2,000 applications have already been received under that scheme, which demonstrates the strong appetite for working capital among businesses. Loans of up to €50,000 are available for small businesses from Microfinance Ireland, with the first six months interest-free and repayment-free. As of 28 April, 321 applications had been received, and 186 of these have been approved, to a value of €5.2 million. A further 71 applications are in progress. An additional €200 million is also being made available to the future growth loan scheme for Covid-19. A €180 million sustaining enterprise fund can be accessed by Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland. This provides financial support of up to €800,000 for manufacturing and internationally traded services firms.

The business continuity grant of €2,500 run by local enterprise offices, LEOs, are for businesses across every sector that employ up to 50 people. There have been almost 3,000 applications for that scheme to date, and it is proving very popular with small businesses. Grant aid of up to €5,000 is now available through LEOs to help businesses get online and continue trading during the Covid-19 emergency. Additionally, a new €2 million online retail scheme is open to retailers employing more than ten people to support companies in the indigenous retail sector. Grants of between €10,000 and €40,000 are available under that scheme. A Covid-19 business financial planning grant of €5,000 is available through Enterprise Ireland to help companies develop a robust financial plan. A new lean business continuity grant of €2,500 is available for training or advisory services supports related to the continued operation of businesses during this pandemic. It is open to small, medium or large client companies of Enterprise Ireland or

Údarás na Gaeltachta.

In addition to these new supports, it is also important to remember the full range of existing Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, LEO and Údarás na Gaeltachta grant and advisory supports that continue to be available to businesses. As I mentioned earlier, the wage subsidy scheme has proven very successful and in excess of 50,000 businesses have registered, with more than 400,000 employees receiving payment under the scheme. That is 400,000 more people staying connected with their employer and who are still in a job. I have engaged with business representative groups on the scheme and I know there were some anomalies at the start. In fairness, the Revenue Commissioners have demonstrated great flexibility in listening, and responding, to those concerns. It does not matter if a business is open or closed. As long as the business can demonstrate a 25% impact in the form of reduction in turnover, the company is eligible to apply for the scheme.

It is important to remember as well that the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment of €350 is also available to the self-employed. That is important, as with some small businesses where the wage subsidy scheme may not have been suitable, the pandemic unemployment payment has been a vital support.

It is sometimes hard to believe that Covid-19 has only been with us for two months. The world has changed and the economic landscape in Ireland has utterly changed. We have put a number of supports in place to help businesses deal with the initial shock of Covid-19; there is no doubt that more will be needed. As a Minister, I want to ensure businesses are supported throughout this crisis. As I have said previously, it is about providing the right supports at the right time. As a Government, we will continue to develop and adapt our suite of supports as the situation develops. I am working with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and colleagues across government on the next stage of our response for businesses.

Turning to the question of relaxing restrictions, the Government has made it clear that the number one imperative is to ensure public health. We are dealing with a deadly virus so the relaxation of restrictions must be carried out in line with public health guidance and be prudently introduced on a phased basis over time. We must ensure safe practices backed up by guidance and, where necessary, enforcement. We have seen businesses quickly change their practices and contactless delivery is an example of this. Businesses can adjust in a safe way provided there is rigorous adherence to public health guidelines. I thank all those in these sectors for the sacrifices they make every day to sustain essential services and for their rigorous adherence to physical distancing guidelines.

That is why I and my Department are focusing specifically on helping businesses to understand what physical distancing in the workplace involves. We have worked with the National Standards Authority of Ireland, NSAI, an agency within my Department, and the HSE to produce two protocols and guides for manufacturing industry and the retail sector on workplace protection and improvement. These guides set out a range of measures, including staggering of start times and shift work. I encourage all businesses, regardless of whether they are open, to familiarise themselves with these protocols.

All employers have obligations to their staff and to the public to ensure that all necessary measures are being taken to adhere to the public health advice and recommendations in their workplaces. The Health and Safety Authority, HSA, under my Department is working closely with the Department of Health and the HSE to set out clear Covid-19 specific guidance for safe

workplaces, which all businesses must adhere to when they are allowed to reopen. I expect these to be available shortly. These will be backed up not only by further advice at sectoral level over time but also through inspections and enforcement using the full suite of resources available across the State. If a company or an employee has a question, the Health and Safety Authority already offers advice and support and can be contacted in this regard.

I know the question of when we can begin to lift the current restrictions and start getting things back to normal is on the minds of many people and to the fore for many business owners and leaders throughout the country. As the Taoiseach has said, the Government continues to consider the broad range of public health, societal and economic impacts and options for lifting the current restrictions. I stress that the unwinding of restrictions will need to be gradual and proceed over a number of months. I assure workers and employers that the Government is committed to ensuring that as the economy reopens, we will do everything we reasonably can to save those businesses that are viable. As we unwind restrictions, we must do so in a way that supports our longer-term economic prospects. Sectoral issues are being worked on at official level across relevant Departments. We must also be mindful of the need to focus on economic recovery, an issue I expect to be to the fore of any new Government's agenda.

These are difficult and unprecedented days for businesses in Ireland. The recovery task ahead of us is monumental, but it is because of the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit we have in Ireland that we have reason to be positive. Absolute Nutrition, a small food company in Rathcoole, has increased its sales by over 200% through online sales since the first case of Covid-19. Gunpowder Gin in Drumshanbo, a household name, is now making hand sanitiser. Yesterday I was at the Combilift facility in my county of Monaghan. That company has come up with a unique device that can split ventilators. That ability of businesses to respond and adapt will be crucial in the weeks and months ahead. I am determined that we will continue to support businesses and ensure that as many people as possible will have jobs to return to with employers who have businesses that will succeed in the future.

We need to remember that we had a strong economy before the pandemic. We must now do everything in our power to ensure we have a strong economy after the pandemic. I look forward to hearing Deputies' views on this.

Deputy Robert Troy: I will be sharing time with Deputies MacSharry and Niall Collins.

Last night on "The Tonight Show", Professor Sam McConkey reaffirmed the importance of a strong economy to maintain a strong public health system. Covid-19 will not go away any time soon. We must examine how the economy can coexist while not compromising the health of our citizens. The attempts by the Government to blame any further extension of the lockdown on non-compliance by the public are deeply unfair. The vast majority of the public understand their responsibilities. We must start to look at how we can reopen sectors where social distance already exists. It is deeply unfair that garden centres are being prevented from opening but Lidl and Aldi continue to sell similar products.

A roadmap needs to be published to give certainty. Some businesses will need time to make necessary changes. They need to know what financial supports will be in place for them to do so. Chambers Ireland stated this morning that one in four businesses will need to spend €8,000 to make the necessary modifications. Any road map must include a task force populated by expert membership which can advise on a sector-by-sector basis. Every further week that the Government fails to act will lead to further subsidies in the long run and make it much more

difficult for businesses to survive.

The Government announcements to date are inadequate in terms of their size and structure. Some 95% of Government supports are based on businesses taking on more debt and the uptake of them to date has been very slow. The figures referred to by the Minister are very low when compared with the number of people availing of the temporary wage subsidy. The Government is telling businesses which have seen their turnover radically reduced or even eliminated to take on further debt at 4.5% but it is currently borrowing at less than 0.25%. It is trying to make a margin of 4.25% on the back of struggling businesses. The Government must look at how other European countries are availing of relaxed State aid rules to ensure they inject liquidity directly into sustainable businesses.

On business interruption insurance policies, at a briefing I attended in the Minister's Department, she indicated she would be meeting the CEOs of insurance companies. Has that happened? If so, what was their response? What actions are she and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, taking to ensure that legitimate policyholders who have business interruption insurance covering infectious diseases will receive a payout? A hairdresser recently outlined on a radio programme that there is no clear path for how she will reopen her business or to show how she can conduct her business while maintaining social distancing requirements. In spite of that, her insurance company expects her to continue to pay public liability insurance.

I refer to a trade credit scheme. A major impediment to the resumption of normal trade is that suppliers will be reluctant to offer credit in the current circumstances. A Government-backed trade credit system will be needed to ensure there is confidence in the system. France and Germany have applied to the European Commission to ensure they can provide a Government-backed trade credit scheme. What are the Government's intentions in that regard?

On commercial leases, large institutional investors are putting the squeeze on businesses. What action will the Government take to ensure that ceases?

When will we have a clear road map and a task force? When will the Government review the penal conditions attached to the liquidity supports available from the Minister's Department? Will there be grants and interest-free loans? I ask the Minister to address her meeting with the CEOs of insurance companies. Will she commit to exploring the introduction of a Government-backed trade credit scheme?

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute on this issue. I am very conscious that I am one of the very few that have had the opportunity to do this. I want to express our thanks as a party to all people on the front line, not just in the health service but those manning supermarkets, filling stations, doing deliveries, manufacturing and so on. It is to their eternal credit and we appreciate their efforts.

Will the Minister tell us what is the situation in Europe? Have there been discussions on a mechanism to be adopted to shelve, park, warehouse, whatever terminology she wishes to use, the entire cost of this process? It will run to many hundreds of billions of euro internationally and in Ireland it will be in the tens of billions of euro. It is essential that a mechanism needs to be identified, whatever it is. This country cannot look ahead to another lost decade of austerity to underpin measures that will need to be taken to underpin our economy. Where are we in terms of agreement in the European context? Where are the Germans and Dutch, in particular, on agreeing a mechanism? We are going to have to embrace mechanisms similar to the Mar-

shall Plan in 1948 and indeed the London agreements of the 1950s in terms of write-downs of debt and considerations in that regard if, either the present outgoing Government or any new Government that may be formed, is going to take the sorts of measures that will support people, business and employment, and to look after the social supports that we will need to continue for those unable to look after themselves, because we will not be able to do it if we are looking at austerity as the only way of achieving it.

I am choosing to use my time to pool several questions and then the Minister can respond rather than going in and out, which will just waste time. We will have to consider the sunken costs that all businesses are facing at the moment, be they utilities, insurance, security, IT or others. In order to stand still there are substantial costs. Those costs will have to be dealt with by way of direct grant aid. We cannot strangle the business community with debt that it cannot manage and feel we have dealt with it. There will have to be an element of helicopter money, direct grant aid or free money, whatever the Minister likes to call it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Deputy has five minutes for questions and answers. We are coming up to half time.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: The Minister can log those questions. I am conscious that I have very limited time. The Minister will have much more speaking time than me in the future so if she cannot answer them during my time, she can do it during her own time, perhaps to the media outside the Chamber.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Order of Business was approved and there is 15 minutes in total.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I know that but I am being creative with the order and we are wasting each other's time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Deputy is eating into his colleague's time.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: No. He will have five minutes too.

In terms of working capital, as my colleague said, interest free loans will be needed. On laundering it through the SBCI with its innovation clause expecting viable businesses to be able to reinvent the wheel in order to get money at 5% because the costs have to be paid to the pillar banks which are going to get it out there, if the rate is less than 0.25% it needs to be that for working capital money for businesses.

How long can people expect to receive the €350 a week payment? Many businesses feel that until they are back up and running it needs to be maintained. There are going to be redundancies. That is a fact. How will they be funded? Can we get back to the 60% that was once given, or closer to 100%, to assist with that? Not all people will be able to get back into full employment immediately. In a Border constituency, as is the Minister's, tourism and agriculture represent a huge part of the economy. Where are we on a plan for those sectors because nothing has been forthcoming and there is huge concern. While I appreciate this is a health issue, the public needs to know what is happening because it might inform us and expert opinion about how to manage the way out. What are the demographics of the people being sick and of those who are deceased and where in the country are these happening? It is very clear anecdotally that there are flash points and we need clear detail and data provided by Government so that people, experts and we as Members can be informed to advise the Minister on what decisions

to take.

Deputy Niall Collins: At the outset of the pandemic the focus was rightly on the medical and health response and on a financial buffer for families and workers. It is fair to say that a lot of the critique and narrative that has followed on from that centres on what we are doing for SMEs. The message I am getting - I am sure others are getting it too - is that SMEs feel not enough is being done for them. Employees have had the opportunity to sign up to the Covid-19 payment and the wage subsidy scheme but employers - the SMEs, the people who hope to take employees back and get their businesses open again - feel that not enough is being done for them and that they are being left behind. This is critically important. In Limerick and the mid-west region where I come from, 55,000 people signed up to the Covid-19 payment, with 22,000 of them coming from Limerick alone. If a single employer in Limerick employing 10,000 or 15,000 people - as was the case in the past with Dell - closed, there would be an immediate response to that employer. More needs to be done. The Department's Covid-19 business tracker support data shows that around 2,300 SMEs have availed of various supports. That is a shockingly low number given that the total number of SMEs in the country is well in excess of 100,000. We must have more focus on employers. The Central Bank tells us that SMEs are going to need €2.4 billion over the next three months. What are they going to need beyond that? We must look at SMEs through two sets of lenses. What do we do for them to get them through the Covid period and what do we do to reboot and kick-start them after the crisis is over and the pandemic has gone away? That is a huge job of work. The point must be made that funding from Europe, whether through the European Investment Bank, EIB, the European Central Bank, ECB, or any other avenue, is available to the State at zero or very low interest but is being passed on or made available to SMEs at rates of 4%, 5% or even 5.5%. Why are the pillar banks and State agencies taking that kind of margin? Why is that cost being imposed on SMEs? We should be allowed to pass the money that we are getting at zero or near to zero cost on to SMEs in grant form, in liquidity form or in loan form at zero cost. That must be a major focus. The State needs to reform the SBCI and the other vehicles that we are using to get the funding through and avoid using the pillar banks which are basically price gouging.

We need to have a State-led business interruption response. We are hearing calls for a zero VAT rate, for rates breaks and various other measures from the representative bodies of small businesses including hoteliers, retailers and those in the hospitality industry. This is particularly important in the absence of such a response from the insurance industry. FBD, in particular, must be called out for its shameful renegeing on valid business interruption policies. I have seen correspondence with some policy holders specifically telling them that they are covered for the coronavirus. I am sure other Deputies have also seen such correspondence. The way that FBD has treated policy holders and businesses is outrageous in the extreme. They have paid their premiums and are now likely to have to resort to legal avenues to pursue the insurance companies who should be stepping up to the plate. The Government should also be stepping up to the plate and ensuring that business interruption payments flow to businesses.

I have a number of questions I want to put to the Minister. Is she aware of the SME recovery plan that has been drafted by the various representative organisations in conjunction with the former Secretary General of the Department of Finance, Mr. John Moran? Under the four headings of crisis management, financing, taxation and cost-flexing, it outlines a suite of measures to help businesses to get through the period, to kick-start and reopen. Will the Minister engage with them on this plan? I refer here to real and meaningful engagement. Can the Minister pursue the option of getting finance, grants and liquidity to business at zero cost? If we are getting

money at 0%, can we not pass it on thus? Will the Minister consider giving businesses grants rather than loading them with more debt? Finally, will she work on behalf of the many policy holders who have been reneged on shamefully by FBD, in the main, as well as by some other insurance companies?

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Deputy might avoid naming individual companies. The time has expired for those questions. The Minister might agree to provide written responses to Members. We will move on to the Sinn Féin Members.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We find ourselves in a time of unprecedented crisis. People have been on lockdown for weeks. Most businesses have closed their doors and continue to endure enormous financial losses. They do not know when they can get back to normal or even if they will survive. Hundreds of thousands of people are out of work and there are many uncertainties. Despite those uncertainties, a few things are very clear. This crisis is not going away any time soon and SMEs are going to be the major losers if we do not act immediately to save them.

The response from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation to this reality has been poor. It is shocking that, other than a few initial announcements made in the first couple of weeks of this crisis, no real solutions have been offered to SMEs almost two months later. The three main schemes that were announced are not fit for purpose. The credit guarantee scheme and the Microfinance Ireland loan scheme have interest rates that are too high for most SMEs to consider. The credit guarantee scheme allows for lending using criteria and interest rates set by the banks before this crisis hit. Microfinance Ireland loans have interest rates of between 4.5% and 5.5%. The future growth loans are designed for planning for eight to ten years into the future. None of these options reflects the reality facing thousands upon thousands of SMEs in the State at present.

If the Government needs proof of that, it does not need to look further than the Department's website which is tracking the take-up of Covid-19 schemes. According to the uptake tracker, as of 23 April only 209 loans had been approved. The uptake of the credit guarantee scheme is unclear because the figures provided for approvals go back to 2012, which is bizarre. Does the Minister have the figures for the number of approvals since the scheme was repackaged for Covid-19? Has she made inquiries as to what those figures are?

The sustaining enterprise fund has had one application according to the tracker. The SBCI Covid-19 working capital scheme has had 56 approvals. Microfinance Ireland loans have had only 153 approvals. The number of applications is higher than the number of approvals, but not by a very high margin. Just over 2,000 businesses have availed of these schemes. These are remarkable figures at a time when tens of thousands of businesses are in major difficulty.

Businesses are accumulating debt, have no cash flow and will fail unless something radical is done right now. The figures for uptakes should tell the Minister all she needs to know and should be a wake-up call. Other countries have managed to introduce interest-free lending options for small businesses within a week. The process was streamlined to ensure that businesses could have money in their accounts within days of making their applications. That is what we need to do. Some 80% of small businesses cannot make their quarterly rents during this period. That should send another alarming message to the Minister.

My questions are straightforward. Businesses need access to interest-free loans and grants, relief on overheads and bills and a debt write-down for those who have accumulated debt. What

plans does the Minister have to ensure that interest-free loans or loans with very low interest rates are available to SMEs for the rest of this crisis and thereafter? What plans does she have to introduce a grant system for businesses which need access to cash now? Has she considered that the costs of reopening businesses should be grant aided? Will she introduce a moratorium on overheads, rates, rent and insurance to minimise the accumulation of debt by SMEs during this crisis? What plans does she have to allow for a debt write-down to ensure that businesses will not fail during this crisis?

I do not want any more spin, waffle or half-baked solutions. The figures for the uptake of the schemes announced clearly show that the proposals and solutions that have been put forward are not acceptable to businesses in the current climate. They are not what they need. We have all spoken to people about this, and those with small businesses are sick with worry over it. They have been contacting me daily, including owners of gyms, hairdressers, transport companies and hospitality businesses. They are all terrified that their businesses are going to fail and their staff will lose their jobs. They need help now. The consequences for small businesses of not providing the solutions I have outlined are enormous. We have to avoid mass closures of businesses or the economy will not recover, at least for the foreseeable future. We cannot allow hundreds of thousands of people to remain unemployed. The knock-on effects on the economy and on people's lives will be dire. The Minister said that she wants to implement the right supports at the right time. This is now the time.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: We live in strange times. I was re-elected in February, and this is the first opportunity I have had to speak in the new Dáil. I thank those who trusted me with their vote in the election in Limerick city and the parts of Tipperary I represent. I thank them very much and I will do my best to represent them as best I can.

As I said, we live in strange and difficult times. I thank all the people at home who have observed the advice we have given them, and done their best to flatten the curve and make sure people are safe and lives are saved. As the Minister will be well aware, I am constantly fighting for better conditions in working facilities, and for the staff in University Hospital Limerick in particular. The staff do incredible work there, including doctors, nurses and porters and support staff who are vital during these hard times. I thank all those people in particular. In addition, I also thank those who work in our supply companies, food shops, transport and delivery services, pharmacies and others keeping the show on the road. Their work often goes unnoticed and undervalued but it is essential work and should be treated as such by the Government going forward.

As my party's spokesperson on workers' rights, I want to raise three key issues. As time is limited I will keep it short so she will have time to answer. First, can the Minister outline her plans to ensure workers will be safe when they return to work? For instance, will businesses be legally obliged to provide hand sanitiser, Perspex glass and other protective equipment? What legal protections will workers have if employers do not provide these items?

My second question relates to protections for those working from home. It is estimated that approximately 90% of employees are now working from home, based on a recent survey by *irishjobs.ie*. Some 44% of those surveyed said they were now working longer hours than previously, while many have an additional workload and others said they were finding it hard to turn off. We need legislation to govern this area, and not just in the context of this crisis. This will lead to a change in the way people work and many will find themselves working from home in the future. This is not just about the crisis we are going through at the moment. The

30 April 2020

country and the world have changed and we need to legislate to make sure we are protecting those workers. For instance, we need to make sure they have a law on the right to disconnect. Can the Minister update me on the Government's position on protecting those workers who will end up working from home?

Finally, can the Minister update the House on plans to introduce a living wage, as set out in Fine Gael's joint document with Fianna Fáil? I have been raising this issue with her for a number of years, as well as with her predecessors. The Thirty-second Dáil passed a motion supporting a living wage last October and I am delighted that the Government has seen the light and followed Sinn Féin's lead on this. We have published our own plan on how we would implement it while protecting financially vulnerable businesses. Can the Minister put some meat on the bones of the Government's plan to introduce a living wage, about which we have read a lot in the media? Is it just an aspiration on paper which the Government has no intention of reaching? The Minister might answer my questions now, or if not, she might send me a written response.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputies for raising these various matters. Many issues have been raised so I will try to get through them as quickly as I can.

Regarding worker protection, the HSA plays a key role alongside the HSE. We are preparing a document, which we will publish shortly. It will include specific guidance around how to implement physical distancing in the workplace, respiratory hygiene and hand hygiene. We are working closely with the HSE and the HSA to ensure we have those guidelines, as it is important for employees and employers to know whether they have the right conditions in place for those who are continuing to work or hope to return to work. We are also engaging with the unions and employers so as to have their input in ensuring a safe and protective workplace.

A number of issues were raised with-----

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Minister can reply to me with a written response, but another Deputy-----

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I am sorry.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Deputy Clarke was signalling but I did not have her name. I call Deputy Clarke. My apologies.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Before I begin, as this is my first speech in the Chamber, I would like to thank the people of Longford and Westmeath for putting their faith in me to represent them here. It is a great privilege. When I walked through the doors across the way for the first time, though, never did I imagine that my maiden speech would be in the middle of a pandemic, yet here we are.

We are all aware that we are living in very uncertain and worrying times, and judging by the stability impact report that the Minister delivered last week, none more so than our small businesses, which are facing a bleak future. With GDP set to fall by 10.5% and modified domestic demand by 15%, and an unemployment rate of 22%, the document states that, although there will be a difficult journey ahead, Ireland faces it from a position of strength. However, that belief is not shared or agreed with by many small businesses in my constituency. In fact, it is vastly at odds with our position. Thousands of families are out of work. Granted, most of them have availed of the relevant supports that have been put in place, but those who run a

small business employing up to ten people are anxious that the lack of supports for them will force them to keep their doors closed when the economy starts moving again. Business owners across Longford and Westmeath have contacted me stating that they have run out of personal savings and disposable cash to cover rent, rates, insurance and other fixed overheads as well as a loss of stock that will make it unviable for them to reopen, whenever that might be. These small and medium-sized businesses have always been the backbone of towns, villages and local communities the length and breadth of my constituency. They are a vital part of the fabric of everyday life.

The impact of Covid-19 on SMEs over the coming months and years is not yet known, but we have an opportunity to face it from a position that supports smaller businesses, which have proven themselves in the past and put their shoulder to the wheel. They are willing and able to do it again, but it would be dependent on a comprehensive Government response that included viable and sustainable supports that were sufficient in scale and ease of access to assist them in recommencing trade.

These issues are particularly prevalent in the retail, hospitality, salon, childcare, tourism and manufacturing sectors. The businesses in question cannot be chastised by banks that we own, banks that we bailed out yet apply unfeasible interest rates that make it impossible for businesses to gain access to working capital when needed. Make no mistake - it is needed now more than ever.

As my colleague, Deputy Doherty, outlined to the House last week, far more payments are made through the pandemic unemployment payment than through the temporary wage subsidy scheme. This issue needs to be addressed if we are to prevent the relationship between employer and employee from being permanently severed.

Businesses in my constituency have made it clear to me that the SME credit guarantee scheme and the Covid-19 working capital scheme need to be reformed immediately in a manner that will allow them to reopen their doors, continue providing employment and provide services in the communities in which they are ingrained.

AIB held its AGM yesterday. What issues did the Minister raise? Did any of them concern accessing liquidity credit for small business owners that are not in a position to take on additional debt and feed into a banking system that seeks to profiteer from a time of crisis?

The Government has been big on announcements but short on delivery. What has been announced does not match what is being delivered on the ground. Mistakes are being made and must be rectified. Many business owners put their lives and souls into creating and maintaining employment through the most recent economic crash and if those businesses close, it will sound the death knell for many already vulnerable towns and villages as people are forced to seek employment elsewhere.

This crisis is an unprecedented event. We have never before faced or recovered from anything like it. It is certain that without sufficient supports that are easy to access, this pause in trading will become a loss of business and will result in permanent job losses. We must support our SME sector as much as we can with zero-interest-applied loans and, where necessary, 100% State guarantees.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I congratulate Deputy Clarke on her maiden contribution.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: There will be contributions from four Fine Gael Deputies, so I only have approximately two minutes. I will ask a quick question and request a response from the Minister.

I will speak about the small business sector in Limerick and north Tipperary, constituencies which I represent. The Government has put in place measures to ensure businesses in those areas can come through the Covid-19 crisis but the biggest challenge that we face is to get businesses reopened. We must ensure that the liquidity crisis does not become a solvency crisis for those small businesses. That is the big challenge we face. It was also the big challenge during the most recent crisis and is the biggest one we now face. Has the Minister looked at doing sectoral plans? I believe that is the key. There must be proper preparation and examination of how various industries are impacted by social distancing and above all, to ensure that those businesses can be viable. Businesses want a sight line. They are not looking for things to be opened up overnight but want to see, over the coming months, measures put in place to ensure that a liquidity crisis does not become a solvency crisis for the SME sector. The Minister might just respond on that point.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising that issue. The Taoiseach announced earlier that a comprehensive plan is being developed for how restrictions will be eased and what that will look like. Unfortunately, it will not be like flicking on a switch that means everything can go back to normal. However, we will have the roadmap and supports in place. We are engaging with businesses on protocols. We are working with the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, the HSA, IBEC, and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU. I have had conference calls with every representative body and have listened to all of their concerns, as I am listening to the concerns Deputies have expressed today on behalf of people from all parts of the country. I am putting together a package of supports with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe. We must target the right places at the right time because this is taxpayers' money and it is not infinite. We want to get the best value for the investment that we put in.

Deputy Martin Heydon: From our previous conversations, the Minister knows the stories I have relayed to her from businesses in Kildare and Laois, as well as my dealings with the Irish SME Association, Chambers Ireland, County Kildare Chamber and others regarding the challenges that businesses face right now. The Minister has talked about a reboot phase during which we get business back up and running, and the roadmap for businesses will be critical. A next stage of supports for businesses is required.

What can businesses do now? Many businesses need to reopen and want to prepare for that. Business owners are contacting each Member of this House to ask what can they do at this time to prepare for reopening. I think in particular about lessons that might be learned from the retail sector that has stayed open, and I have due regard to all the staff who have allowed that to happen and provided a vital service for our country. What lessons can be learned by businesses that are now closed? What can business owners do while their businesses are closed to ensure they are best prepared for being able to be open with social distancing and all the measures that are required?

Small businesses are having to change and adapt. Online sales have sky-rocketed during the crisis. What supports are available for the online activities of small businesses? What level of interest has there been in the applications for loans of up to €50,000 from Microfinance Ireland in recent times?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for his question. There are lots of things that businesses can do now, while they remain closed, to prepare to go back to work. Any businesses on the wage subsidy scheme can bring in their staff and start to talk to them and look at how they can plan to go back to work. The NSAI guidelines on retail protection and improvement are available online. I recommend that businesses should look at that document. Another document gives guidelines for manufacturing and how firms can best comply with the new norm. We are in a new world now where we must have social distancing.

There are several other issues that we need to look at. Business operators should talk to their local enterprise offices and get the €2,500 business continuity support. This scheme gives businesses a voucher to enable them to bring in experts and look at financial planning. Do they need to make an application to the bank? The experts will give businesses the advice they are seeking. I would also recommend trading online. I gave an example earlier of one company that has increased its turnover by 200% because it went online. A trading online voucher of €2,500 is available from the local enterprise offices. When companies spend that they can go back and get another one. A total of €5,000 is available. There are far more online transactions now in retail etc.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Minister for the work that her, her team and her Department are doing. A huge amount of support has been provided to the business community and employees from the State. What people want to know next is how can their business get going again and how can they start. Obviously, we know it will not be a matter of flicking on a switch and that it will be gradual and that businesses will not be operating at full capacity when they do start. We need to take a number of issues into consideration. I know some of these areas do not come under the Minister's remit but in terms of the viability of businesses we need to look at rates and charges flexibility as well as continued supports and flexibility from our banks. We need to look at the issue of VAT, in particular for our hospitality and tourism sectors. There is also the issue of commercial rents. We need to continue to try to transform and address the issue of insurance.

I have heard several proposals, many of which have been raised already by Deputies, that aim to provide support to businesses directly from the Department. Such supports could be in the form of a re-start grant, working capital loan or re-employment incentives. Perhaps these could be linked with our employment scheme currently in operation as well as supports for seasonal workers. Can the Minister assure me that in putting forward a roadmap and making sure we are providing as much financial and other supports to businesses that she will take all of these into consideration?

While the Minister might not be able to give an answer in detail, can she confirm that the Department is still working on the potential consequences of Brexit? While we hope that there will be an agreement to extend the transition period, it has not happened yet. While the current crisis is Covid-19, Brexit is still on the horizon.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Minister of State. I will take the last question first. All of the preparation that we did for Brexit has been extremely useful in how we are responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many structures were in place and we had many different supports. We have been able to expand and improve on them. We certainly have not forgotten about Brexit. Although, I will be honest: all our focus currently is on supporting businesses and helping them to deal with the impact of this pandemic. It is clear what we have to do. First, as Deputy Heydon said, we had the initial shock. Now we are in the sustainment phase. The third

phase is the reboot phase. That is when we need to put in place additional supports. We have already put in place the wage subsidy scheme and the enhanced pandemic unemployment payment. These have cost over €4 billion. This was the right thing to do. I know many companies have taken on board the wage subsidy scheme and they have been able to use it very effectively. It has proved very popular.

The one thing that people and businesses ask for is cashflow. Their first port of call is the banks. I spoke with the heads of the three major banks yesterday. All said that two thirds of the requests made to them were for payment breaks. There is a three-month moratorium arrangement on loans. I understand the period has been extended to six months. The banks have said they are working with businesses. A business operator should go to her bank first. The next port of call is the different supports that are available. The local enterprise offices, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland are available to work with clients and businesses to help them through this difficult period.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I thank the Minister on behalf of the many businesses and employees for her swift action in introducing a number of supports, along with the Department of Finance. These supports will help businesses to keep open and keep their staff employed, thereby maintaining that link with their employees which is important. Much swift action has been taken in this regard, as well as supports through the wage subsidy and other payments for employees who are out of work at the moment but who hope to get back to work.

That is phase one. In phase two, there will be a need for more supports as one develops the next stage of the response. I urge the Minister to bear in mind the other sectors and SMEs which might not always fall into her Department's category. While IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and LEO clients come under her Department's remit, many other SMEs do not and these are the lifeblood of our local economies. These could be shops, play centres, restaurants and so forth which normally do not get the Department's support. Will she keep in mind they may need cash supports to reopen? Some may need support to stay closed during the next couple of weeks while they wait their turn as restrictions are lifted.

I welcome the Minister's plans to announce more supports and a step-by-step plan for restrictions to be removed.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Damien English: I know the Minister got correspondence from Play Activity and Leisure Ireland, PALI, the body which represents play centres, bowling alleys, pet farms and activity centres. Will she bear in mind that this sector needs much help too?

Deputy Steven Matthews: The Minister may have had the opportunity to read the recent National Economic and Social Council report on employment vulnerability as part of a just transition. It reports on the challenges of moving to a low-carbon and eventually to a zero-carbon economy, as well as the opportunities for innovation, employment retraining and investment.

Just transition is described in that document as a bridge from where we are now to a future where all jobs are green and decent, where poverty is eradicated and our communities are thriving and resilient. It is a systemic and whole-of-economy approach to sustainability. It is a driver of job creation. It embeds social justice and climate justice into economic policy. We

have an obligation to address our global climate chaos. Adhering to the principles of a just transition is how we bring everybody along on that challenge of long-term carbon emission reductions and ensures the impacts of climate policy are fair on the individual.

The next decade will be a green decade. We are in a moment of complete change. The green new deal, the EU financial supports, will be transformative in creating the future economy that works for all of us. It is up to us to grasp that opportunity. In this context, will the Minister consider creating an office of just transition in her Department?

There has been much speculation about the easing of health restrictions and which businesses may be permitted to open on a phased basis, obviously in line with best medical and health advice. A significant challenge to business owners across the retail sector, professional services, the hospitality and tourism industry, as well as others, will be the requirement to manage their workplaces in line with social distancing, limiting numbers of staff and customers in attendance and strict adherence to that guidance.

Along with the valid concerns that other Deputies have raised this afternoon about requests for support around cash flow, liquidity, rates, rents, insurance and other pressures, there is also a need for clear guidance on what social distance structural changes will be required in order to trade again. This relates to alterations to the shop floor, offices, customer and staff areas and, in general, the normal work practices which will have to be changed. All of these issues will have to be addressed.

I have raised previously with the Minister for Finance increasing the amount and the application of the business continuity voucher system to cover this. In response it was indicated other measures were being considered. Will the Minister outline her Department's progress on these other measures and support measures available to business to actually implement structural alterations to the workplace, guidance as to what those alterations may look like, changes in work practice and health requirements that might be required? The Minister covered many of the supports in her opening statement. I am referring to the practical measures that might be taken. While the doors to those businesses are closed, they could be carrying out practical measures. I have read the two National Standards Authority of Ireland, NSAI, documents to which the Minister referred. While they cover many of the areas of concern, they do not fully cover my concerns about the practical structural changes that could be made now while the doors of those businesses are actually closed. The Minister will be aware that women returning from maternity leave are experiencing difficulty and being denied acceptance onto the temporary wage subsidy scheme. To qualify, an employee must have been on the payroll through January and February. However, in the case of maternity leave, that may not have been the case. Trade unions have raised this problem and I have been contacted by those affected. Could the Minister clarify whether this is an anomaly in the scheme and whether it will be addressed and rectified quickly in order to grant women returning to work after maternity leave the same rights and supports as other workers?

Could she provide clarity on the position of commercial renters during this crisis and whether they are included in the eviction moratorium as set out in the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act? Could she provide clear information to commercial tenants and landlords on how these tenancy protections are to be implemented?

Finally, I ask her to liaise with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to confirm when the Waterford to Limerick Junction rail line will be reopened. I believe it has been closed

by Irish Rail due to Covid-19. This rail line provides a vital link between the south-east and the west for passengers and needs to be restored as soon as possible. Regarding Brexit and exports, the Limerick Junction to Rosslare Port and the Dublin to Rosslare lines should be assessed for investment to provide an improved commuter service and also to maintain a business and trade transport link directly to the rest of Europe.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising those issues. I welcome the publication of the NESC report on vulnerable employment. My Department is already engaged in a number of activities outlined in the report as key drivers of the response to the just transition. The Department has been engaged in the process and we are committed to it.

The regional enterprise plans are all focused on climate change. There are specific initiatives for the midlands where Bord na Móna announced job losses. A just transition facilitator was appointed by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which comes under the remit of the Minister, Deputy Bruton. Support is available to firms for energy efficiency from the LEO, through Enterprise Ireland. A dedicated team in my Department is working with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment's team. There is a specific pillar in the Future Jobs Ireland initiative on how we transition to a low-carbon economy. A lot of work is going on in that particular space.

The Deputy also asked about supports for businesses that need to change to comply with new guidelines, for example, in manufacturing plants. Enterprise Ireland is available to advise on structural changes. In addition, business continuity vouchers are available through LEOs. Those who need to change could take that into account because it is another issue they will have to address in terms of opening up their businesses. For example, they may need to put up Perspex screens or take a number of other such measures. They can use the business continuity grant for that purpose. Anybody can apply for it through the LEOs and plan how best they can do that. We will see how we can help them in the future with the obvious changes they will have to make.

Regarding the access of those on maternity leave to the wage subsidy scheme, the operation of the scheme is a matter for the Minister for Finance but I will raise this with him. I understand women who are due to finish statutory maternity leave, paid or unpaid, but who cannot return to their employment due to Covid-19, are entitled to the pandemic unemployment payment from when they are due to return to work. They should engage with their employer to see whether they can avail of the wage subsidy scheme. I will raise the matter with the Minister for Finance.

I will also raise the matter of the rail line between Limerick Junction and Waterford with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Another issue raised concerned commercial rents and tenants. Commercial rents are a real concern for many businesses. A recent survey from Retail Excellence estimated that only 18% of retail businesses paid their rent due at the start of April for quarter 2. Despite that, we are not hearing widespread reports of businesses being threatened with eviction. That tells me that the vast majority of landlords are taking a practical and commonsense approach to this. I encourage them to do that. Landlords are businesses too and they should recognise that this is a unique situation. If one has a good reliable tenant, one will not want to lose him or her because maybe not everybody will need rented property when we get to the other side of this. Unfortunately, there will be businesses which may not be able to return. That is the reality. Landlords who have good tenants should be looking after them. If landlords got flexibility from the banks, we

would ask them to pass that on to their tenants. Of course, in saying all this, there will always be exceptions. We are examining what can be done in those cases. I have raised the matter around protections for businesses with the Attorney General. I have asked him to look at what has been done in other countries and to see whether it is possible to put similar protections in place here.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I thank the Acting Chairman for the opportunity to address the House in these surreal times. In my long sojourn here I never envisaged the day I would come in to see seats in Dáil Éireann roped off from Members but that is the reality we face now.

Clearly, from everything we know, businesses in Ireland have never faced the unique pressures that they are facing and that exist right now. Government supports will remain vital if we are to achieve our collective responsibility, which is to keep businesses and jobs afloat. I want to use the few minutes I have to make a number of points that have been made directly to me by businesses. I could raise any number of points but I will raise nine particular issues.

Let me start with issue number one, which is the point raised by Deputy Matthews, and that is security of tenure and lease security. We acted decisively and clearly, and rightly, to protect private tenants from eviction in this time. I am afraid we have to act with the same degree of certainty and getting advices is not what is required. People are now worried. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, rightly says that the bulk of landlords are decent but some are not. Some leases are being terminated. We need to legislate in that regard. I would like to hear the Minister's view on that.

In terms of business rates, there has been talks about leeway and forbearance on business rates. Let us be quite clear. We should have a clear understandable pattern right across the country in every local authority that there will be a forbearance in the same way as, for example, businesses are affected by 25% to access the Minister's wage subsidy schemes. They should have forbearance on rates but that cannot be carried by local authorities. Thirty per cent plus of the revenue of local authorities is rates. Therefore, it must be a national scheme supported by central government.

The third point I want to raise is in relation to a point raised forcibly to me by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, RMT, the maritime union that represents seafarers. They have raised real concerns with me that shipping companies are utilising this crisis to force compulsory redundancy or alteration of work patterns that had been hard fought and won over decades. The pay and conditions of both deck workers and port workers have to be protected. I would like the Minister to take particular interest in this. Obviously, it will be primarily an issue too for her colleague, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

The fourth issue I want to raise is in respect of businesses and companies getting State support. It is vital, as I say, that they get that support but it must be a condition of ongoing State support that such businesses engage with the industrial relations machinery of the State. This unparalleled crisis simply cannot be used by a minority of companies and businesses as a cover to undermine workers' pay and conditions. That has to be implicit in the rules and regulations governing any drawdown of support. Many of my colleagues have already talked about the supports that are actually available. I will not recite them again because they have been effectively recited by previous speakers. I refer to the actual degree of drawdown of some of the supports the Minister listed when we asked what is available, particularly to small and medium-sized enterprises. The actual drawdown has been pitifully small. When cash flow is short and

liquidity is difficult one does not want to add significantly to one's debt. The most recent rate at which the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, has said the State can borrow is 0.25%. Why is that banks are lending on at 4% or 5%? When I contacted her about various companies that require supports, the Minister wrote to me saying that the first thing a business should do is go to its bank. She said it again today. I had a conversation with the director of banking and the head of SME lending of the second largest bank in the country. If one talks to the banks, one realises that they really are taking a business-as-usual approach whereby they determine who might be viable in this crisis. If they give a borrower an overdraft, it is at an interest rate of more than 8%. That is no help at all to people and companies who are stuck in this situation.

The extent of the crisis requires not a business-as-usual approach, but rather an understanding that money must be available in the same way as when the banks were faced with a crisis in 2008 and 2009. They did not adopt a business-as-usual approach then. They marched hotfoot down to Merrion Street and made it crystal clear that they wanted a complete and total bailout. What happened? The banks' debts were socialised and put on the backs of the people. It is time the banks were forced to realise that they need to pay back the debt they owe to the SME sector. It cannot be up to them to determine whether a business is viable in the middle of an unprecedented storm, and if it is determined to be viable, to lend it money at a punitive rate.

By the way, if a bank gives a borrower a three-month or six-month moratorium on his or her payments, that will be added up at the end, with the interest rate clocking up all the time. The banks' great forbearance will actually make them more money. That is not an acceptable approach. That is not what is required of the banking sector. I ask the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation to pass that message on to her Cabinet colleagues.

A critical issue that has been raised with me is the issue of insurance. I want to underscore this because I had a difficult conversation today with a very significant businessman in my own constituency. From a different perspective, it is the issue of liability or the duty of care. It will now be impossible for companies and businesses to get Covid-19 insurance. Any renewal of insurance will not cover that. It will be impossible for businesses to open without that insurance. That is what they are telling me directly. They cannot take the risk of being liable for their employees or their customers becoming victims of Covid-19 if they are not insured against it. We must have a solution to that, some sort of indemnity or insurability. One cannot sue if one gets the flu when visiting the local supermarket. We need to address that issue or businesses will not re-open when this phase passes. I ask the Minister to look at the issue of insurance liability as a matter of urgency.

There are a couple of other points I want to raise quickly. My colleague, Deputy Nash, has already raised the importance of monitoring when businesses start to slowly open up again. The Minister stated that this is a matter for the Health and Safety Authority. We are all getting calls from individual workers who are sometimes petrified. Who do they reach out to? Who will go into the workplaces to speak? I spoke to an individual who was working in a call centre during the early stages of this. The centre has since closed. That individual was terrified to complain, even though the employees were working cheek by jowl. Who will monitor the position in order to insist and ensure that guidelines are observed? Do we have the capacity and scope to do that? The regional impact will not be uniform. The various authorities in the south east are telling us that half of all jobs are already affected. Will the Government carry out a regional impact analysis so that we can have a regional differentiated response?

My final point relates to seasonal businesses. I have tried to outline for the Minister the nine important issues. I come from a county that relies on tourism. Some very successful businesses do not operate in January and February and are now excluded from the schemes the Minister has put in place. What will I say to those who would normally have looked forward to a very successful summer season but who cannot get the wage subsidy scheme supports because they did not operate in January or February?

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I welcome this debate. I am of the view that we should just be following the normal format for oral questions because not having the responses to other questions is problematic.

In the first instance, health must be the reference point. The return to a safe working environment whereby there will not be an resurgence of the virus is what we all aspire to. Over a number of weeks, the Social Democrats have sought the establishment of an expert task force. What we do from here needs to be done sector by sector and a sequence needs to be laid out in the context of which industries should return and in what order. Some details in that regard may be announced in the context of the roadmap, either tomorrow or the day after. We have all been contacted by business people. They often state that they cannot take on further loans because they do not have any income. It does not matter if the interest rate that applies is 0%, 5% or 10% if these people do not have the money to pay back such loans. Obviously, the interest rate matters but there is still an issue. If we look at the cost of creating jobs for IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, we know about the tax forgone and the social welfare rates. There is a cost-benefit analysis when retaining jobs. That is critically important.

I have looked at points made about timelines for reopening. Chambers Ireland referred to most businesses needing two weeks. That lead-in period has to be taken into consideration and people have to be given notice so that they can use the time well. Depending on the sectors in which they operate, there will be an outlay for most businesses as a result of physical distancing and other measures. There should be some grant funding for that. I can foresee a situation where we will have a row in months to come about VAT. That is distinctive.

I will skip over a number of matters and hopefully leave the Minister time to reply. I want to refer to the Health and Safety Authority. A number of people have contacted me about something which is open but which should not be open. When one looks for the enforcement mechanism, one discovers that there is no such mechanism. One is told to ring the Garda. Will the Minister address what will change in the context of the Health and Safety Authority and enforcement as it applies to non-compliant businesses? There will be such businesses. What scaling up will there be and will additional legislation be needed for enforcement? We all know, for example, the construction sector is varied in terms of compliance. Many building workers are located in Northern Ireland and routinely come up and down. That is something that must be specifically considered. Workers do not come exclusively from Northern Ireland but also come from other parts of the UK and Europe. That has to be considered in the context of the return of the construction sector with regard to ports, airports and the movement of employees.

I will skip through these points quickly. I asked a question regarding the hairdressing sector and I got a response. That sector includes many other areas such as beauticians, nail bars, probably play centres and many other areas. The Minister directed me towards the National Standards Authority of Ireland, NSAI, document. It is a very good document but is too general. It is not specific to some areas and work will need to be done with particular sectors because they are not all the same. I ask the Minister to address that issue. I got a response from the Minister

regarding Retail Excellence Ireland, REI. I ask her to address the issue regarding the rent freeze on the commercial side. There is a real problem in that area, with people being asked for rent quarterly in advance. I am hearing from some people of being under threat where there is not a direct relationship with the landlord but where they are renting in a building from a pension fund, a vulture fund or some landlord more anonymous than an individual. I will leave time for the Minister to answer those questions.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank Deputy Catherine Murphy for the questions and will start with the last question first. Regarding commercial rents and landlords, I outlined where many of them are giving that latitude and are working with their tenants, and rightly so. There always will be, however, a cohort that does not do that. I spoke to the Minister for Justice and Equality about this issue and I requested the Attorney General to look at this issue and at how models in other countries have worked. The difficulty is there could be constitutional issues involved because commercial tenants and landlords are subject to commercial and contract law. There could be issues in that respect because many such contracts are complex and that is why this is taking a bit longer. The Deputy should believe that there is a willingness to try to address the issue but we have to do it in a way that will work. That is the update on that matter.

Regarding the exit plan or strategy, we hope and expect to be in a position to share that with the public in the next couple of days. The plan will set out different steps we need to take in order that we can reopen the country and our society based on different levels at different intervals. We need to get the advice from the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, on Friday as to when we should start the process of reopening the country and the economy. In doing so, we really have to look at things such as the number of patients in the ICUs and the position in respect of Covid-19. Those numbers are just not good enough yet, as we know.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I accept that but I would like the Minister to address some of the questions I asked on hairdressing, for example, and other areas like that.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I will do that. The HSA is available today and anybody with concerns about a workplace should contact it. The NSAI guidelines the Deputy referred to are also available. The HSA and the HSE are working together-----

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Essentially, I am asking the Minister a very specific question. Is it going to be scaled up? There will be non-compliant industries and we need to know if there will be a means of enforcement.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The HSA is working with the HSE on this. It is detailed and complex work. I hope to have that work completed and published shortly. It will set out clearly what is expected of both employers and employees. We have other protocols in place now and these guidelines set out a range of measures. I hope to have the next set of guidelines shortly for publication. We are working with unions and employers to ensure we get it right. I absolutely understand, as I know the Deputy does, that people must be sure they are safe in their workplace. Employers also want to make sure they are putting in the right protections. Nobody wants to cause difficulty for workers so we need to give both parties confidence that the right processes are in place and employees should have the confidence to go to work and feel safe. That will happen.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What about the movement of construction workers across boundaries?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As I stated, the HSA and the HSE are working together with different employers and unions to bring about a document that everybody can work with. That should be ready shortly.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Solidarity-People Before Profit group now has ten minutes. I take it they will use a question and answer format.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Yes, and I am sharing time with Deputy Paul Murphy. We should acknowledge that tomorrow is May Day, International Workers' Day, and to that end we have taken an initiative in our group to have this building, Dublin City Hall and several other town halls across the country lit up in red in honour of our front-line workers and all other workers. Never has it been more unequivocally obvious the role that workers everywhere play in making the wheels turn around in society. We need to honour all front-line and other workers tomorrow, on May Day.

I welcome the written confirmation from the Minister for Health to Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett that the Health Protection Surveillance Centre will investigate an alleged outbreak of Covid-19 in Liffey Meats, which is located in the constituency of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. That is welcome and it must be done urgently.

I cannot believe my ears listening to the answers being given to questions put by other Deputies and which I will put again. We are seven weeks into this crisis and she stated that people are working hard on a document, writing guidelines and working with the HSE to instruct employers how to implement Covid-19 regulations. That is not good enough. No agency in the State has power of enforcement and we are asking about it today. Will the Minister extend the remit of the HSA in order that its inspectors can step on a Bus Éireann bus to ensure a driver is protected, walk on to a building site and close it down if it is non-compliant or go into a non-essential workplace and close it if it is non-compliant? Will she answer that simple question about extending the remit?

My second question concerns the restrictions, if any, that have been placed on companies that seek to liquidate during this period. We are all aware of what happened with Debenhams and we saw the protests yesterday. I am sure we will see more of them. This morning, another company called Instant UpRight in Citywest attempted to move all its equipment and stock from that centre in order to transport it to Latvia. It wants to close the premises here in order to do that. Many companies are using this crisis as an opportunity to do things they would not normally get away with. Light-touch regulation in times of normal business is dangerous but in a pandemic, it could be fatal. The effects will be felt by workers who are about to lose their livelihoods. Will the Minister impose restrictions on companies so they will not be allowed to liquidate during the period of crisis? That can be done through extension of emergency powers or a statutory instrument?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: With respect to companies not complying with regulations, environmental health officers already have the power to close companies not complying with rules. That power exists.

Deputy Bríd Smith: They have not done it.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Is that the HSE?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Yes, the HSE environmental health officers currently have

30 April 2020

the power, but I have said clearly that we will have the guidelines as a matter of urgency. A good deal of work has gone into them.

Deputy Bríd Smith: We are seven weeks into the crisis now.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to respond.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Okay. As I said to the Deputy, I will have them as a matter of urgency. It is a comprehensive document which takes on board many issues that employers and employees are rightly concerned about. We will have that document as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Bríd Smith: What about my second question?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy's second question was about the Debenhams workers. I am sorry to hear about what happened to the Debenhams workers. It is obviously a very difficult time for them. As far as we are concerned, Debenhams should be engaging with its workers and with the unions. The Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, is available for the workers to give assistance.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I asked if the Minister would restrict companies from liquidating during the period of the crisis?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: That is obviously being looked at in terms of the examinership. The Company Law Review Group is looking at all those issues and will bring recommendations to us.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will ask a question, get a response and then ask another question, if that is okay. The buck must stop with the Minister and the Government is scandalously disregarding the health and safety of workers. It is an utter disgrace that there is nowhere for workers to go to seek an on-site inspection.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister says the HSE. I have an email from the HSE.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The HSA.

Deputy Paul Murphy: A minute ago the Minister said the HSE. On 23 April the HSE responded to an email from me about Keelings which stated, "Further to your email of the 20/4/20 below, please be advised that the HSE environmental health service has no statutory role in the inspection of employee living accommodation or workplace health and safety."

Two weeks ago the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister for Finance told me in the Dáil and in a written answer to a parliamentary question to contact the HSE. The HSE has now clearly stated it has no role in that. We send workers repeatedly to the HSA and the HSA has stated clearly and publicly that it does not have the powers to enforce the public health guidelines. We have raised this repeatedly over the course of a month and we have laid out the answer, which is for the Minister to sign a ministerial order or a statutory instrument to expand the powers of the HSA. I ask the Minister to answer a question clearly. How many on-site inspections of workplaces have taken place regarding coronavirus guidelines? How many on-site inspections have been carried out by the HSA, the HSE or the WRC? We need to stop workers

being passed from Billy to Jack. They need somewhere to go when they have a problem and feel unsafe at work.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy. The NSAI protocols dealing with what should happen in the workplace are in place. The HSA is available to go to any company or to any employee who is concerned. It will phone up, go on site, see the issue and talk. The best solution here is between employers and employees working together to get the right solution. That is the first thing.

Second, if there is a case where the rules are being blatantly ignored and the guidelines are not being adhered to, the environmental health officers in the HSE have the power to go in and take action. As I have said before, the HSA is working with the HSE to develop a more detailed set of guidelines that will cover many eventualities on which workers and employers need to have guidance. That is taking place. As a matter of urgency, those will be published.

Deputy Paul Murphy: How many on-site inspections have taken place?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I do not have that figure to hand but I will provide the Deputy with that information.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If the HSE has the role the Minister stated it does, why does the confusion persist? The email I originally received from the HSE stated it was looking into the matter, etc. I then received a considered response, which stated that it does not have any role in this area.

To bring this to reality rather than making an abstract point, I refer to Keelings. I wrote to the Minister to draw her attention to an internal document, which makes it obvious that Keelings is operating on the basis of supposed family units of more than 50 people and that the workers may be required to change family unit. It is a disaster waiting to happen in terms of workers' health and safety. What are those workers meant to be doing? Does the Minister agree that there needs to be an on-site inspection of that premises? I have written to the HSE and the HSA. How will an on-site inspection take place?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Several different issues were raised in the letter my Department received from the Deputy. To be clear, the HSE and the environmental health officers it employs currently have the power to close a site if that is necessary.

I will revert to the Deputy on the issue of workers' living accommodation. I am not sure who is responsible for inspecting it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The HSE also stated that it has no role in the inspection of workplace health and safety. That is clear in its response.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The HSA has the authority to inspect any workplace. There have been many cases involving such inspections. When the pandemic started, a food company was very concerned about whether it could continue to operate. The HSA and the National Standards Authority of Ireland, NSAI, went to its premises and worked with the employers and employees. It has not had a day's bother since the pandemic started. It makes bread every day without any problems. Employers and employees should be aware that there are solutions. The HSA will make itself available to any company that wishes for it to visit a premises. It will work with the company and outline the steps that need to be taken. Some companies are

doing the right thing. They may be worried they are not doing enough. Some employees are concerned. I have heard their concerns and I understand them. Some are worried that their employers are not taking the right actions. I have told such employees to contact the HSA. It will visit any premises and is happy to work with employers and employees to ensure a premises is safe, which is what we all want.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. She has made that matter clear.

Deputy Denis Naughten: In reopening the economy, all steps must be taken to ensure we remain conscious of the need to minimise the spread of Covid-19. We must all accept that we will have to live with Covid-19 for the foreseeable future.

On the guidance that has been worked on for the past seven weeks by the HSA and the HSE, businesses need to know by this weekend what they need to do to prepare to open. As the Minister rightly stated, the HSA is advising and inspecting businesses on physical distancing. What advice was given to companies such as meat processing facilities? The Dáil has been told that there is a significant problem in several such plants.

Companies do not have the resources to fund the measures that need to be taken with respect to sterilisation, physical distancing within the workforce, staff training, health and safety and PPE. They need financial assistance. That has to come in the form of grant aid, not loans. Will the Minister give a commitment on that?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The NSAI has guidelines on how companies should operate. They are available and companies should be adhering to them. There is no doubt about that. If there are issues and concerns, they should contact the Health and Safety Authority, HSA. We are developing a much more detailed set of guidelines to cover many more issues that are going to arise, and we will publish them as soon as we can. The NSAI guidelines are there currently for the manufacturing and processing plants that the Deputy refers to. I urge companies to get a copy of those and make sure they are complying with them because none of us wants to see people going into plants where they are not protected or safe because that is only adding to the spread of this virus. If they have worries, they should go to the HSA, which will visit any of those. The employees can call the HSA and explain they are not happy and it will come to see exactly what is happening. It is to everybody's benefit that they work together and put the right protections in place.

Deputy Denis Naughten: As the Minister knows, there has been a problem with nursing homes and we do not see one in processing facilities around the country. Will the Minister come back to me on the issue of grant aid for getting businesses up and running in terms of the cost of training staff and equipping premises?

The wage subsidy scheme must be prioritised as the primary support for workers and provide for a continuity between workers and their employers. Will the Minister clarify whether the wage subsidy will be continued beyond June, as I think it will, and will be tapered off in line with a recovery in the economy to maintain that linkage where at all possible? Will the Minister comment on actions by some companies such as Bord na Móna which are being allowed to avail of the wage subsidy scheme and lay off staff and put them on welfare payments through the pandemic unemployment payment? Should it not be the case that employers that are availing of the wage subsidy scheme should keep all of their staff on the books rather than lay off the majority and keep a small proportion on the books?

Will there be provision made for forgiveness for debt during the lockdown for businesses? Will Government increase the funding to local authorities in order for rates bills during the lockdown to be written off?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As the Deputy will be aware, the wage subsidy scheme is very successful and many more companies are taking it up. It is still available to companies that did not take it up. There are no barriers to entry into it. They can have a mix. Some companies found themselves in a position of being able to hold on to some staff and maybe lay others off. It is permitted within the scheme to have a mix of the wage subsidy scheme and to let some staff go, unfortunately, to go on unemployment benefit.

Rates have been deferred, as the Deputy knows, and that is welcome. I am working very closely with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, to prepare a suite of supports to reboot and assist companies in getting back to work. We all want to see as many companies getting back to full operation and as many people as possible returning to work. We are working on a suite of supports, and we will certainly take on board all the suggestions we have heard here today as we design that package.

Deputy Denis Naughten: We need to continue a tapered wage subsidy scheme beyond June of this year, and deferring rates will not be sufficient. Rates need to be written off. Much work will need to be done on the provision of liquidity, particularly working capital for businesses. To deal with risk, there will need to be a State-backed bond scheme. Banks should also be instructed to apply forbearance and to reset the covenant criteria to take into account the extraordinary circumstances that businesses are facing. This covenant issue will become far bigger during the year unless it is addressed now. The Government also needs to introduce direct reliefs in particular sectors, including for instance the restoration of the lower VAT rate scheme for the hospitality and tourism sector. There must be continued forbearance by Revenue in terms of allowing businesses sufficient time to repay parked VAT, PRSI and PAYE bills from earlier in the year. Will the Minister give an assurance that this will be provided?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: In terms of liquidity, we have the €450 million working capital facility, which provides loans from €25,000 up to €3 million at a reduced rate of 4%. Some Deputies believe that rate should be even lower but the normal price for overdraft facilities in the market is 8%, so it is a considerably reduced price. As part of that, businesses can avail of loans of up to €500,000 that are unsecured, which is important. Businesses that do not have security can still apply for the Covid-19 working capital facility. The loans are for up to three years.

In terms of the banks, I spoke to the heads of the three main banks yesterday and the day before and they have assured me that they have given forbearance. Two thirds of the requests coming in are for payment breaks and the other one third are for an increase in overdraft facilities. They tell me that they are working with their customers and have extended their forbearance from three to six months, which will be of comfort to some people. They also tell me that people are averse to borrowing and I understand that. I absolutely understand that because people got scalded before and lost their shirts and everything else, with huge debts. Every lender has a duty of care to its customers as well, which I also understand.

Deputy Naughten raised a number of different issues. We are working on a suite of supports. We are working very hard and have consulted all of the different representative groups. I have had conference calls with them all. I have spoken to all of the LEO representatives, to 22

representatives from chambers of commerce throughout the country and to the board of ISME. I have spoken to many different stakeholders and the issues the Deputy has raised are coming through. As part of the suite of supports, we will examine all of those suggestions. As the Deputy will appreciate, we are trying to get the best supports targeted at the right place and at the right time. We all want the same thing at the end of the day, which is to get these businesses back up and running.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I wish to address a number of issues. First, with regard to loans, supports and grants, the one thing I am being told by hoteliers, publicans and small business people is that they do not want loans. Quite simply, loans have to be paid back and they are already burdened with loans. If assistance is going to be given out, it will have to be in the form of grants. In other words, it will have to be money that they do not have to pay back because quite simply, they will not be able to pay it back.

I also want to raise the very serious situation with regard to the Debenhams workers. I have met some of those workers who were working very diligently in a retail outlet in Tralee. One thing they said to me very strongly, and I am delighted it is the case, is that Debenhams is going strong online and its sales are strong. If its sales are strong, why is it leaving the important people, those worked for the company, served its customers every day, sold its goods and operated in County Kerry, in the great town of Tralee behind? What is this Government going to do to intervene on behalf of and in support of the Debenhams workers? They have been protesting for the past number of days. They were out again yesterday and I want to hear the Minister say what she will be able to do to support them.

I want to come back to hoteliers. I am very glad that Kerry is the tourism capital not just of Ireland but of the western world. Having said that, the success we have had in tourism over the years has now resulted in the fact that we have been impacted more than any other part of the country because we have so many hoteliers, public houses, restaurants and good people working in those businesses.

I raised with the Taoiseach the very important issue of seasonal workers. When the virus first began to spread and criteria were set for the Covid-19 payment of €350 per week it meant that many seasonal workers who would have been working during March and April had not started work on 6 March or subsequent to that. Those people are losing out on the €350 payment. I am very upset about that.

When we are talking about the recovery and getting back to work, I want to give the Minister an example of what we are talking about. There are currently 83 Clúid Housing units under construction on a 6 acre site in Killarney. What would be wrong with people on that site going back to work next week? There would be absolutely nothing wrong with it. I am not being smart about social distancing, but a man working on one side of the site would have to walk a long way to meet another person if the site was reopened. It is perfectly reasonable, sensible and practical for such workers to return to sites. If people want social isolation, they should go out and work on a digger. Who would get near such a person?

I refer to coach companies. I wish to raise an important matter with the Minister. I am aware of coach operators in Kerry who bought new coaches in February and March. They are registered but have not yet been driven on the roads. They are brand new and have never done a mile on a road. They will be devalued by €30,000 this year because of the registration plates on them. The owners want to know if the coaches can be deregistered and instead of being a

coach registered in 2020 start next January as a 2021 coach. It is a practical proposal. If the Department could agree to that, it would save those companies a lot of money and would mean a lot to them.

I ask for specific answers to my specific questions because they are important. It is nice to compliment people when they are doing work. I want to compliment the Minister and those in her Department on the work they are doing. I am asking on my bended knees that the Minister be practical about things like this. There are sensible proposals that the Department can implement to help small business.

There are plenty of other cases similar to the 83 units being built in Killarney. This is about social and affordable housing, putting people into homes and getting men and women out on the road and back into work again in a safe way. No one is saying that anything should happen that does not ensure safe distancing from other people. Those who operate small companies, such as haulage businesses which would put lorries on the roads, will work in the best and safest way.

An Ceann Comhairle: Unless there is time, the Minister will not be able to answer any of the questions.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Many companies will not recover. We need to assist every employer who is going to attempt to carry on in any way we can because every job is valuable. As I said in my questions to the Taoiseach, I ask the Minister to explore every avenue *4 o'clock* when it comes to construction work, building companies and the construction of one-off houses. Every situation is different. I am sure that each person in the State realises the importance of social distancing and will be doing everything they can to ensure that they follow the guidelines.

However, they need advice in respect of vans and work vehicles. They need help regarding the cost of insurance, rates and electricity bills. They need assistance with those matters. My understanding of rates is that if people are not making any money, they would not have to pay the rates at all, or a reduced rate if on a lower income. We need to assist the local authorities because the amount of revenue they are going to lose will be massive. Clarity is needed in the context of hardware stores. Are they exempted at present? What about machinery stores?

I come now to Kerry and the importance of the tourism industry, hotels, restaurants, guest houses, bed-and-breakfast establishments and pubs. These businesses are asking that the Government apply a zero rate of VAT for the rest of this year, as well as providing assistance with their buildings and the way they present their premises for people coming in if they are given the green light to open. We realise that we will not have any foreign visitors and we will be depending on people from around the country when things open up to get these businesses going and making a turnover again.

I refer to bus companies that provide transport for schoolchildren. The Government states that the schools are going to reopen in June for those sitting the leaving certificate, but there is a serious problem regarding transporting children. Maybe the Government is talking about reopening schools in urban areas but children in rural areas are entitled to get to school as well and there will be a problem in the context of the size of the buses needed to facilitate the social distancing that is required. I know that no interaction has taken place up until now, but it is very important that the Government interacts with the bus companies and Bus Éireann on how the children are going to be brought to school for the remaining term of this year. In view of the fact

30 April 2020

that the Government will not relent and forget about the leaving certificate for this year, it must realise now that there is a serious problem with transporting children to school. That needs to be discussed with the contractors to ensure the children are brought there safely and are looked after. It is very important.

Seasonal workers are also important. They are totally left behind and Kerry depends so much on those workers. Most of their stamps have now run out and in the next couple of weeks all of their stamps will be gone. This concerns hotel workers, pub workers and bus drivers. As Deputy Michael Healy-Rae stated, there is a yard full of buses parked in Killarney. It cost millions of euro to fund what has gone into that yard and they are all parked.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Every one of those buses had a driver, or even two, and those drivers now are not getting paid a cent. They are being left behind. It is wrong. I am sorry to say-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: On a point of order. According to the ethics, Deputies are supposed to declare a possible conflict through a connected person. They are supposed to mention that, so I am doing so.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am sorry, I must-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We have to declare-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have two buses. That is what I have, honestly.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is just doing the thing properly. We have to declare our interests.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputies.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Of course, I also have a pub, like all the others.

An Ceann Comhairle: We know that. We have heard about it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There needs to be a roadmap-----

An Ceann Comhairle: A good one too, by all accounts.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There needs to be a roadmap for publicans and the like all around the country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It looks like many will not be reopening, but for those that will try, a roadmap needs to be put in place. They need to be told roughly when they will get to open their doors again.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sure the Deputy will reopen in Kilgarvan anyway.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since the Minister did not get to respond to those questions, she might consider sending a written response, if possible.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Yes.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Could the Minister be given one minute to respond?

An Ceann Comhairle: No. The Deputies took all the minutes that were available. We will move on to the Independent group. Is Deputy Connolly first?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: With Deputy Harkin. It will be five minutes and five minutes.

I hope to ask three specific questions, and the Minister might answer them. I will put them as quickly as I can. Two are practical questions. What engagement has the Minister's Department had with the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht regarding the aftermath of the decision to close the Irish colleges, affecting 40 colleges, 700 families and 27,000 students? I understand from replies to parliamentary questions that the Minister was going to look at adapting existing packages to address the consequences.

My second question relates to personal protective equipment, PPE. I thank the Parliamentary Budget Office for this document, which I have read. It points out that Ireland relies heavily on other countries for PPE. Given that Ireland's imports of PPE amounted to €340 million more than its exports, making ours the seventh largest PPE trade deficit in the EU, what are the Department's plans to make us not self-sufficient, but to go along that road? I have two masks in my bag here. I do not wish to mention them as a gimmick, only to point out that they are works of art made by a woman in Galway for a nursing home. There is fantastic goodwill on the ground.

My final question is on small to medium enterprises. The Minister will be able to read the specific question that I have already asked. I read the Central Bank's two financial notes that came out last week. According to them, non-agricultural small to medium businesses employ more than 1 million people and, given the various indices and criteria, the requirement for liquidity will be between €2.4 billion and €5.7 billion. These figures are based on existing costs, for example, rents, rates and utilities, but what if companies could reduce those costs?

While I welcome the approach of the Minister's Department to date, particularly the help for employers, I am concerned by her comments today that businesses should go to the bank first. The Department should read what the Central Bank stated. I do not always agree with the Central Bank, but it talked about the non-availability of bank loans for quite a number of the companies in question. It also pointed out the cascade effect on those further up the chain that, while unaffected by Covid-19, could not supply or get money from those lower down. I do not mean "lower down" in that way, but further down the supply chain. Clearly, there is a need for a new roadmap to show how we will provide liquidity to small businesses.

I come from Galway. As with other towns and cities, it is despairing to walk its streets. Businesses have been good in complying with all of the measures, but they need hope now. The Minister mentioned the suspension of rates, but we need more than that. We need a plan that allows businesses to come back, albeit in a sustainable manner.

30 April 2020

I will leave the Minister with a little time to answer, as my colleague will use the last five minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister has approximately one and a half minutes.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising those issues. To be clear, I announced two weeks ago €1 billion worth of liquidity and grant supports for businesses. There is a long list of various supports available. We are considering another package of supports, which we will announce in due course. I am working with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, on that.

After the initial shock, some €4 billion in supports were provided through the wage subsidy scheme and the pandemic unemployment payment. That money is already available, and we must now consider how to reboot companies and get them back up and running. At the end of the day, that is what we all want. We want to get businesses back and people employed and to return to full production as quickly as possible. It will not just be as easy as switching on a light, though. We will have to work with companies and they will have to try to ramp up their production. At least those that have joined the wage subsidy scheme will have that connection with their workers. We are engaging with the Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, Senator Kyne, and are looking at the issues for mná tí and the communities affected. All of the supports that are available to other companies, across the board, are also available to companies in Gaeltacht areas.

Approximately 100 Enterprise Ireland companies are producing personal protective equipment, PPE, and other products to cope with Covid-19. Only yesterday, I visited Combilift in my own county. It has developed a splitter machine which means that one ventilator can serve up to six patients and each can be dealt with individually. That is innovation. Combilift has written the programmes and has been working with the HSE over the past four weeks. It started with Combilift wanting to see how it could help and has now developed into a good prototype that has been tested, working with the HSE. We have enough ventilators in this country but there are developing countries that probably do not have the funding to buy all the ventilators they might need. This innovation means that one ventilator can deal with six patients, each individually. Enterprise Ireland is supporting companies right across the country in how they can make changes.

I had also better mention Old Carrick Mill in Monaghan, which is now making hand sanitiser.

Deputy Marian Harkin: If the Minister is going to mention a distillery in Carrickmacross that is making hand sanitiser, I am going to mention one in Drumshanbo that is doing the same.

I thank the Minister for the actions she has taken so far. She has said many times that we must offer the right support at the right time and in the right place. I want to ask about right now. As the Minister knows, many businesses are facing a mounting wall of debt from rent, rates and utility bills. Those businesses need to pay those bills now. Many do not want to borrow because they have already done so up to the hilt. Would the Minister consider putting in place a small business interruption grant for SMEs to cover these expenses, in whole or in part? They would not be grants for planning or training, which are important, but a business interruption grant to deal with this wall of debt.

I have already asked the Minister about the rate of interest on microfinance loans and she

responded that there is a six-month holiday on both repayments and interest rates. Even taking that into consideration, a €10,000 loan over, let us say, three years will cost an Irish loanee twice as much as it would in The Netherlands. Others have spoken about this issue, but given that the NTMA is borrowing at 0.5% interest, would the Minister reconsider the interest rates on microfinance? That might help those who are thinking about borrowing.

My final question relates to tourism. Despite what Deputy Danny Healy-Rae says, we in the north west consider ourselves the jewel in the tourism crown. The industry supports well over 40,000 jobs. The industry will be slow to get back and people are concerned. I know that my question also impacts on other Ministers, but what specific supports does the Minister have in mind, if any, to support the tourism industry?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I have spoken to all the representative bodies of the tourism industry individually at different stages over the past week or so. I know that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, is engaging with the hospitality and tourism sectors about what the Government can do to support them. Those sectors, the pubs, restaurants and hotels, have been impacted more than any other. It is a difficult time for them.

Deputy Harkin rightly said that Microfinance Ireland loans charge no interest for the first six months. There is an option in the Covid-19 working capital facility whereby interest does not have to be paid for the first six months if such a request is made. The rates charged on the future growth loan scheme are in or around 4%. The rate is 3.5% for €250,000 under a long-term loan arrangement. Those rates are highly competitive in the marketplace. I am told that under the working capital scheme, the overdraft facility generally costs between 7% and 8% but of course it depends on the bank. The rate is 4% and we took the view that it represented good value in the marketplace. Anyway, I take the Deputy's point. Of course we are continually looking at these things to see how we can make them better and more easily accessible to businesses. As I have said in the House on several occasions, we all want to get these businesses back up and running as quickly as we can and to get people back to work as quickly as we can.

An Ceann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus b'shin críoch leis an ráiteas ón Aire Gnó, Fiontar agus Nuálaíochta agus ceisteanna agus freagraí maidir le tacaíocht gnó mar gheall ar Covid-19. Rachaimid ar aghaidh i gceann cúig nóiméad go dtí an chéad ábhar eile. We will proceed in the next five minutes to statements by the Minister for Health and questions and answers on Covid-19.

Sitting suspended at 4.15 p.m. and resumed at 4.20 p.m.

Covid-19 (Health): Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I welcome this opportunity to update the House once again on the Covid-19 disease and our national response to it.

I will begin by providing an update on our modelling work. I am pleased to say that the R number, which we have been talking about for several weeks, has remained stable at 0.5 to 0.8. That is quite an achievement by the people of this country. By now, Deputies know what this means but it is important to reflect on its impact on people and their lives. When the Taoiseach announced a series of restrictions on 27 March, our modelling at that point showed the R rate stood at 2.4 - 100 people were being hospitalised every day, 70 people were in intensive care

units and 22 people had lost their lives. If the epidemic had continued at that rate, our modelling suggests that today there would be 2,200 people seriously ill in critical care units. Our modelling also shows that if that trend had continued, by today, 30 April, 4,800 people would have lost their lives from Covid-19. Sadly, 1,190 lives have been lost to this virus. We think of all those families grieving at such a difficult time. However, thanks to the incredible efforts of the people, our modelling suggests that over 3,500 lives have been saved. That is 3,500 reasons to stay at home, stay the course and keep with us on this journey. We have made significant progress but we cannot let that mask the current reality. Up to 40 people are still being hospitalised with Covid-19 each day. Between three and four people are being admitted to intensive care units each day. They are the sickest patients in our country. We must finish the job.

If we want to give this country the very best chance of success, we must continue with the work. If we want to continue to save lives, we must stay united and stick together. I understand the fatigue that people are feeling at this stage. We all feel it. It is human nature. We are all human and denying ourselves many of the things most intrinsic to our very humanity.

We all now know a lot more about the virus and the ways in which we can protect ourselves from it. We must guard against any sense of invincibility, however. It is true that some people are more vulnerable to this virus. In truth, everyone is vulnerable to this highly infectious disease. In the past few days, we have heard a growing commentary that it is only people of a certain age or with certain conditions who are susceptible to this virus. That is not the case. We are all vulnerable to it. We must, as individuals and as a country, remain cautious and vigilant.

I know people want us to map out what the next phase will look like for Ireland. We will do so tomorrow. The Taoiseach has set out the criteria which will guide our decisions. We have every chance of success but we have to get the timing right. Moving too quickly will set us up for failure. That failure would have real and devastating human consequences of which we are all too aware. There will also be social consequences of this going on longer or of us going backwards, which is also a possibility if we get it wrong. We will provide a clear sense of direction, but in the meantime our collective objective remains to suppress this virus. We must do everything we can to stay safe and to protect each other. Despite some positive signs, it is too soon to say that we are safe from this disease, but it is in our power to keep ourselves safe and to keep others safe if we continue to stay at home, to wash our hands, to practise good respiratory hygiene and to continue physical distancing. We have come this far. Let us not risk undoing it and let us not risk going backwards.

For our part, we continue to build capacity across a number of areas to respond to Covid-19. I will now provide some updates on key areas. Our target for overall testing, as determined by the National Public Health Emergency Team, chaired by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, is 100,000 tests per week operating on a seven-day a week basis for a minimum of six months from mid-May. The HSE has developed a roadmap as to how we can rapidly reach that capacity. It has the full and unequivocal support of my Department. Significant progress has been made in a very short space of time to develop our testing capacity. The scale of this effort and the pace at which capacity is being developed cannot be understated. I know there have been bumps in the road; there has been in every country in the world.

I thank the people who have worked so hard to get us to this point and to build these systems, because huge progress has now been made. The establishment of 48 community testing centres across the country and a steady supply chain of swabbing kits is in place. Significant laboratory capacity has been sourced nationally and internationally and a range of supply

chains for reagents and other materials has been sourced. A robust testing referral pathway for GPs has been put in place. New IT systems have been developed and existing ones modified to ensure tracking of testing across the full process. Nine new contact tracing centres are in operation and 1,700 people have been trained to date to support specialist teams in public health, occupational health and infection prevention and control. A major programme of testing is under way in long-term residential care facilities. Some 28,000 samples have been taken since 18 April. This is a significant, complex and large-scale operation spanning a number of sectors and hundreds of providers.

As we continue to build the capacity of the health services to deal with Covid-19, we will also need to further plan how we will provide services for non-Covid-19 care over a protracted period. We know now this is going to be a protracted period and people are going to get sick with things that are not Covid-19. How do we care for them? This is a challenge with which all health services around the world are now grappling. At the end of March the HSE entered into an arrangement with the private hospitals to use their capacity, including their ICU beds and their isolation facilities, in our response to Covid-19. The deal was on a cost-only basis and all patients are to be treated as public for the duration of the crisis. It is important to remember that the requirement for this additional capacity will remain with us. I have heard some people suggest that perhaps because we did not see a peak that we do not need the capacity now. That is nonsense. Thankfully, and thanks to the sacrifices people have made, so far we have avoided the expected surge so that currently there is a level of spare capacity in the entire system, both the public health service and the private health service. We will use that capacity, particularly that of our private hospitals, to deal with the ongoing urgent work and the backlog of elective care need which has grown further in the past month. We will also use it to guard against the potential need for a Covid-19 surge in the future, a risk that should not be dismissed. As of today, we are using about 33% of their capacity, with some hospitals at 50%, and this is increasing and will increase further when we restart elective work when deemed safe to do so. Over 150 consultants have now signed up to the contract offer and I understand more intend to do so, once the recent agreement that the HSE can fund private rooms, if required, to provide public services, is concluded this week. The arrangements provide for continuity of care for existing patients on an equal basis to public patients. The more consultants that sign up, the more services we will be able to provide to all members of the public.

I thank all consultants currently providing excellent care in these challenging circumstances and everybody in all professions and all workers right across the health service. I know doctors would also want me to take this opportunity to remind everyone to contact their local health service if they are unwell. People should not feel they are a burden on the health service at this challenging time. If people feel ill they should please still come forward because the risk of secondary deaths and secondary illnesses arising from this Covid-19 pandemic is very real. People should please not wait if they need treatment.

The number of clusters of Covid-19 in residential facilities remains our area of greatest concern. We are continuing with the significant measures already in place to protect both the residents and staff. These measures include 18 response teams across the country, led by senior nursing support and infection prevention and control in public health input into preventing and managing clusters. We are prioritising the testing of staff and residents as I have outlined. The regulator, HIQA, has published and is now assessing a new quality assurance regulatory framework for long-term residential healthcare settings so that we have ongoing oversight, not anecdote, into the response of each of these facilities - public, private and voluntary.

We are currently looking, as the House will be aware, at the public health measures that are in place until 5 May. Our primary focus in that analysis will be to ensure that any access taken will not endanger the progress that we have made in suppressing this disease. Extreme vigilance will be needed so that we do not put our country at risk from future waves of this disease. Our society has already paid a significant price for the ground we have gained against this disease. As we move into the future, we must not lose that ground. The National Public Health Emergency Team is taking into account the expert advice of the World Health Organization, the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, and the European Commission in developing public health criteria to guide our decisions. In order to move forward, we must have the capacity to measure the effects on the disease of any changes we might make and to be able to do so very quickly. We can do this if our actions are underpinned by an efficient sampling, testing and contact-tracing strategy and access to real-time epidemiological and clinical data. At every stage, we must watch the transmission of this disease. We must be confident that we have sufficient capacity. We are also fortunate that as some countries are at a more advanced stage of this pandemic, we can monitor that also. The truth is that we cannot act unless we see that the disease remains suppressed and achieving that, as I have said, is in the hands of each and every one of us. If we continue to make good progress we can begin to restart our economy and, most important, our society, and we can look forward to a time where there are no new cases and no new tragic deaths. We will have a roadmap for the next phase but we must continue to unite around a common purpose to stay safe and to protect each other.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. We go first to Fianna Fáil's Deputy Stephen Donnelly.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will share time. I will take the first five minutes. Maybe the Minister and I could go back and forth, with the Ceann Comhairle's permission.

I would like to start by expressing my sympathies as well with the friends and families of the many women and men who have now died. This has come at an extraordinary cost so far. It is a very difficult time for anyone who is trying to mourn a loved one or a lost friend. I would also like to acknowledge that without the extraordinary work of our healthcare professionals and, indeed, of every individual and family in this country, that tragic number would be an awful lot higher. Much good work has happened.

I would like to talk to the Minister about getting the non-Covid healthcare going as quickly as possible. I cite the following case with the permission of the family involved. Callum is a five year old boy from Wicklow. He lives close to where the Minister and I live. He has Down's syndrome and he has unfortunately many medical conditions associated with that. Here is what his Mum, Gillian, told me earlier this week:

Callum is my lovely boy. He started walking in 2019 after so much hard work. A year and a half ago, it was felt he had juvenile arthritis and he was referred to rheumatology in Crumlin. Callum needs an MRI scan under sedation for this treatment. His scan is scheduled for next year, two years from when his doctor said he needed it.

Callum is in pain. He is pre-verbal so he cannot tell us when he is in pain or where the pain is. His doctors need the MRI done so that they can limit the damage to his body.

Callum's arthritis recently flared up so he cannot walk much anymore. He seems to have a lot of pain in his hips and his hands and he is now on very strong painkillers. This

week, his doctors in Crumlin thankfully decided to start the treatment but to do so without the MRI, and to try and provide what care they can.

Callum needs physiotherapy twice a week. He has not had any for six weeks now.

That is Callum's situation.

My question is why is the urgent therapeutic care in the community, including physiotherapy, not happening now? We have people going into work in supermarkets and other places without personal protection equipment, PPE, who are public facing. It would seem the trained clinicians, such as physiotherapists, with PPE should now be able to re-engage in urgent cases, such as Callum's. I would like to hear the Minister's thoughts on that.

On the Minister's point on the private hospitals, they are largely empty. We have diagnostic suites empty. We have operating theatres empty. We have entire clinical teams still not treating patients. Does the Minister envisage that children such as Callum will be able to get these scans and treatments through the private hospitals? If so, when can Callum and his Mum, Gillian, expect to start seeing that kind of treatment?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising these two important matters, which are both linked to the provision of non-Covid-19 healthcare. He has hit the nail on the head on a very important issue. In this country as in many others we have all been preparing for the pandemic to take a certain course of action: to come, to reach a very high peak with huge human consequences in terms of deaths and very serious illness and then hopefully to begin a downward trajectory. Thanks to the efforts of the Irish people we have not seen that awful surge. However, we now know it is highly likely that this virus will stay with us for a protracted period. That means we really need to ask and act on the questions the Deputy is asking about how to provide for non-Covid-19 care alongside Covid-19 care. I do not want to use up the time of the Deputy and his colleagues, but several examples of that have started. Community assessment hubs have been set up to try to keep Covid-19 care there and non-Covid-19 care in regular GP practices. Many of our physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists have already volunteered to be redeployed to help out with other areas of the health service, both in the constituency the Deputy and I share and nationally. People are helping with contact tracing or in community assessment hubs and testing centres. We are now going to have to make a call on the appropriate allocation to each of them to make sure their services can continue to operate. The HSE will finalise plans in that regard. One specific discussion at our medical leaders' forum last week, which was chaired by the Chief Medical Officer and the chief clinical officer of the HSE, concerned what a non-Covid-19 care work stream will look like.

While I cannot comment on a specific case, as the Deputy will be aware, I absolutely want to see private hospitals fully utilised for the benefit of public patients. The taxpayer is now paying for the use of these facilities. There are 19 of them around the country. We have diagnostic equipment in them. I made clear in my opening statement that we will need to keep some capacity free because a surge or a second wave could come, but we can do more than we are doing now. We have seen a quite significant increase in the number of cases being treated. We will need to see it increase further. I will look at Callum's case and others like it.

Deputy Mary Butler: As the Minister will be aware, 90% of deaths due to Covid-19 are among those aged over 65. All my questions today will be Covid-19-related. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre issued guidance for immediate implementation saying that surgi-

cal masks should be worn by healthcare workers when providing care within two metres of a patient, irrespective of Covid-19 status. Does the Minister agree that this should also be the case for home care workers, who see as many as six different people each day? Most people receiving home care are older or more likely to have an underlying health condition. I have been contacted by many home care workers who are concerned. That is my first question.

My second question is not exactly the Minister's remit, but he will certainly have influence in this regard as it affects the care of those cocooning during the Covid-19 pandemic. While I appreciate that we are coming into the summer months and the fuel allowance would not normally be needed at this time of year, we are in exceptional times. Older people are being asked to cocoon and are, therefore, unable to leave their homes, which is having a knock-on effect on their fuel usage. They cannot walk outside their homes or visit libraries or day care centres. I appreciate that the scheme has already been extended for four weeks, but it is due to expire on 8 May. Could the Minister use his influence to extend this again? When someone is cocooning and is not mobile, he or she can feel very cold.

My next question concerns nursing homes. The situation in nursing homes and care homes is still in need of urgent attention. According to HIQA, almost a third of nursing homes in Ireland have the Covid-19 virus. The agreement between the HSE and unions allowing for health staff to be diverted to private nursing homes, where needed, must be implemented urgently. I raised this two weeks ago. There are still issues around insurance indemnity. I acknowledge there has been movement on the issue, but it is dragging on and is causing a major issue where staffing is concerned.

I appreciate that testing in nursing homes has ramped up since last week and, as the Minister stated, 28,000 samples have been taken to date. There were two issues in nursing homes, namely, personal protective equipment, PPE, and staffing. I acknowledge that the position concerning PPE has improved significantly in many nursing homes whose representatives I have spoken to, but there are still huge staffing issues. The Government has tested 28,000 samples. It is imperative that the test results are accelerated, because staff members having to isolate for 14 days while waiting or a test result places significant pressure on staff numbers.

My final question relates to asylum seekers located in Cahirsiveen. I raise the question on public health grounds. According to RTÉ news last night, there were 22 confirmed cases. The fear and anxiety expressed by the residents, pleading to be removed from fear of catching the virus, was intense. The locked gate was a terrible image. There is also the worry and anxiety that it has caused for residents and businesses. I ask the Minister for an update.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister has a minute and a half. If he cannot answer all the questions, he might correspond.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will send a written note on the last one. I imagine it might come up in conversations here anyway.

Deputy Mary Butler: It will come up anyway.

Deputy Simon Harris: On the issue of home care workers' PPE and nursing home workers' PPE, over the past seven days, from 23 April to 29 April, 6.63 million items of PPE have been delivered across the health service. Some 54% of this volume was delivered to community residential facilities in 1,767 individual deliveries. As for the full distribution, 54%, as I said, went there and 8% went to home care. I had a very good meeting yesterday with Home

and Community Care Ireland, HCCI, which represents many home care providers across the country. We have put in place a direct contact point for them with a national director in the HSE. They have also brought forward some other suggestions, which I am working through, regarding their own provisions. Home care workers are now being provided with 8% of our entire PPE. Some 497,380 items of PPE over the course of the last week went to home care. We want to continue to do better and to do more on this. It is a fair point. Regarding the fuel allowance, I will resist speculating about Departments that are beyond my remit. I certainly will pass on the Deputy's comments to the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

The Deputy is right about nursing homes. A voluntary redeployment scheme is in place. I have seen figures of more than 200 HSE staff who have been redeployed on various occasions to private nursing homes. The number is significantly increased from when I was last in this House, when it was about 61. We have now reached an agreement with home care providers to redeploy too. The indemnity issue has been ironed out. An agreement was reached about 48 hours ago. I expect to see a benefit from that shortly. There was a bit of back and forth between Nursing Homes Ireland and my Department about the funding scheme. Clarifications have been issued. The deadline is 30 April, that is, now. A surge of applications is coming in. We are turning them around quite quickly, within 24 to 48 hours. That will also help our nursing homes. The Deputy is right about the testing. There was an occasion when more than 900 nursing home staff were out awaiting various tests or with symptoms. We are testing people and getting their results back quickly. Most of them will be negative and they will be able to go back to work. We can help nursing homes through quick testing, direct redeployment, the home care working scheme and the funding scheme.

An Ceann Comhairle: The protocols that we adopted stipulate that there should be only two Members from any party or group in the House at any one time. Please have regard to that. I call Deputy Niamh Smyth.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I pay my deepest sympathies to the families who have lost loved ones in this global pandemic. The efforts of our health workers have been truly inspirational, yet we heard this morning on "Today with Sean O'Rourke" that the Labour Court deal for nurses is behind schedule. I hope the Minister is dealing with that because as we know, these have the inspirational men and women at the forefront of this pandemic. I thank our doctors, nurses, paramedics and home support workers, as well as everyone on the front line, who have been to the forefront of this. We have been blessed in Cavan-Monaghan to have Cavan General Hospital and Monaghan General Hospital as the backbone during this pandemic. Unfortunately we have seen week-on-week increases and Cavan, as of Wednesday of this week, had 634 cases with 388 cases in Monaghan. Cavan has one of the highest rates in the country.

I want to raise two particular issues today. I am conscious that I have little time. One is home testing. There are incidents where referrals from home testing are being lost in translation. There is an elderly couple in my area. The husband was taken to hospital and subsequently died. He tested positive for Covid-19. His wife was at home, living alone for three weeks, waiting for a test. A referral for a home test had been made. Her daughter was living in the Minister's constituency and her son is somewhere else in the country. Eventually her daughter had to come and put herself, her mother and her family at risk, taking her to her own home in Kildare. She was tested within three hours of that transfer to a different community healthcare organisation, CHO, being made. I think that home referrals are a problem in CHO 1.

There is an issue with cancer patients. I am thinking of one particular gentleman, a young

man with a wife and four small kids, who is waiting for an operation on a tumour in St. James's Hospital. He has been given no clarity as to when that operation might happen. Are operations that were scheduled before this pandemic happened still scheduled? What are the implications?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Since this is an unorthodox time of social restrictions, my speaking opportunities in this Chamber are rather limited these days. I take the opportunity to express my immense gratitude to our heroic staff, especially our nurses and doctors. When this pandemic is over, we must remember them. That will have to come up in the autumn when we are into the budget process.

As health staff risk life and limb to treat Covid-19 patients, Ms Gemma O'Doherty and her band of followers are flouting all laws on the street, giving cheek to our gardaí, making a farce and being treasonous towards our front-line health staff. I hope the Minister for Justice and Equality will ensure that the laws passed by this House will apply to all individuals and that those who continue to flout them to court notoriety and attention on social media will be taken to task fully.

A constituent in Clare sent me a letter earlier in the week. It relates to her elderly husband who is suffering from advanced cancer. He had been due to undergo surgery at the Bon Secours Hospital at Barringtons in Limerick city on his private health insurance. The family is now being told, however, that due to Covid-19 the surgery cannot be carried out and that man now has to join many others on the public waiting list, a list that is not moving at the moment. This is causing major stress to the family and it is utterly unacceptable. I would like some clarity as to how people with private health insurance will be treated at this time, particularly those with life-threatening illnesses.

At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was right for the Department to strike a deal with 19 private hospitals to increase bed capacity. Now, however, there needs to be a little flexibility regarding those awaiting elective surgery. The word "elective" almost denotes flippancy and casualness, but for someone waiting for a hip replacement or any type of colonoscopy, there is nothing flippant or casual about that. Elective surgery is essential and we need to get that backlog moving. Without an easing of the elective surgery restrictions our health system will be hit with an unmanageable tsunami of cases when the Covid-19 pandemic shifts. I fear that this will disproportionately hit the University Limerick hospitals group, including Ennis hospital in my constituency. The waiting times in University Hospital Limerick have increased by 10% over the past year in respect of outpatient cases and by 12.6% in Ennis hospital in my constituency. These waiting times are only set to get worse as the pandemic drags on, and I would like to know what actions the Minister proposes to take.

I wish also to draw his attention to the fact that administrative staff in our country's now very quiet private hospitals are being laid off. This is fundamentally wrong, given that their places of employment are being very well reimbursed using Exchequer money by the Minister's Department. Will he intervene in this and will he consider using these staff to help with contact tracing?

An Ceann Comhairle: I should point out to the Deputy - I know he is a new Deputy so I would not expect him to be totally familiar with this - that he alluded to the actions of somebody outside of the House who is not in a position to defend herself. Whatever our feelings might be about the individual or her actions, it is not appropriate to refer to that person here in the House. I just draw the Deputy's attention to that. It is a subject we might all have strong views on. I

call Deputy O'Reilly.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I have very strong views on that topic, but we could be here all day discussing them. I want to address several pressing issues with the Minister. I am conscious time is tight. I am sharing time with Deputies Ward and Paul Donnelly, dividing the slot into seven minutes, four minutes and four minutes. I hope we can ask our questions in the seven minutes and if the Minister cannot then respond, I hope he will respond in writing. I want to be respectful to my colleagues and their time. Can he please issue a directive today to hospitals to ensure that nurses, who went on strike, fought hard for their pay increases and deserve them, get them? It is utterly ridiculous at this stage. It is all very nice to stand in here and give them a round of applause, but, as I said previously, nothing conveys appreciation for the work they do like decent pay and conditions. Nurses fought hard for these pay increases and I hope the Minister will be in a position to issue a directive today to say that they should be paid.

I have two questions about nursing homes. How many people have been seconded to the nursing home sector from the HSE to date? The Minister has given the figure of 200. I had a different figure given to me by the HSE, however. I want to know the up-to-date figures and I also want to know if the Minister is planning to second a geriatrician or a geriatric consultant to work in any of the nursing homes. They have spoken to me and have said they are willing to do this work. Their expertise will be invaluable in this regard and the Minister should look at that issue.

My next question concerns a decision to move patients from hospitals into nursing homes at the very start of this pandemic. Patients were moved from hospitals into nursing homes. Yesterday, on a conference call, I was told by the HSE that every patient who was to move to a nursing home would not be moved until he or she had two tests negative for Covid-19. Will the Minister confirm if that was the case from the very beginning? I lost a relative who died in a nursing home of Covid-19. His family and others in the nursing home are convinced that Covid-19 came into the nursing home when patients were initially transferred. Last night, Dr. Holohan seemed to row back a bit on this and suggest this may not have applied to all patients.

I have two questions on testing. I have said before and I do so again that the Government must stop blaming people for the fact that they are starting in some way to think about the relaxation of restrictions. The Minister and others in government put this thought into people's heads. There were mixed messages and I know that although work is being done to prevent it now. We did hear mixed messages about the schools reopening.

I am mindful of the view recorded in the NPHEI minutes, indicating that all "agree that testing and tracing is critical to tackling the virus spread". We know testing and tracing is important. Will the Minister state if the capacity is in place to move from disease surveillance testing to actively testing in the community so we can identify the total spread and transmission of Covid-19 and then contact trace every person involved?

My second question concerns the contact tracing app. I am a big fan of this app and I want it to work. I want maximum buy-in but we should be honest, as the Government has not exactly covered itself in glory with respect to data protection, particularly when we consider the public services card. We need maximum buy-in so I ask that the data protection impact assessment be published well in advance and that the Government will allow organisations like the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, Digital Rights Ireland and those with an expertise and interest in ensuring this is done right to give full input.

My final question relates to non-Covid-19 mortality rates. Has there been an increase in non-Covid deaths compared with the same death rates for this period last year or in other years? There is a worry among patient representative organisations that there may be significant health deterioration and even additional fatalities as data indicate a significant reduction in people accessing health care.

I have two people very close to me who are at home cocooning. I would feel much more comfortable when they can eventually come out if all the people around them were wearing masks. Has the Minister a view on the wearing of masks in the community? Will there be a steady and available supply of those masks so we might all be able to comply?

An Ceann Comhairle: Should we go to the Minister or does the Deputy's colleague wish to contribute now?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: We can go to the Minister as I had seven minutes.

Deputy Simon Harris: I have approximately three minutes. The Deputy raised a number of matters and I will write to her about some of them in the interests of time, as she has asked me to. The number of staff redeployed to nursing homes moves up and down and I saw a number of over 200. The number was 61 last week but I will send the Deputy the figures broken down by community healthcare organisation. I do not want to build expectation around this but I had a very good meeting on home care and I hope that piece will really help. Much work has been put into getting that agreement right. I will write to the Deputy on that and the matter of geriatricians. It sounds logical to me and I am conscious of the fact that we have a geriatrician leading from a clinical perspective in the HSE. I will seek her view on the matter.

I met representatives of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisations, INMO, about nurses' pay as recently as in the past fortnight. My Department has corresponded with the HSE clearly on the matter and my understanding is that 3,400 staff nurses have been appointed to this new scale in our public hospitals, up from approximately 700 in February. Approximately 220 have been appointed in our community healthcare organisations. There was an agreement in this regard and they need to be paid, so this must be processed. We are very keen to see that done very quickly. The contract is voluntary and it does not require somebody to complete an application process but I want everyone who has applied to go on the payroll very quickly. We have corresponded with the HSE and I will write to the Deputy on the timeline as well.

I sympathise with the Deputy on her loss. On the transfers from public hospitals to the nursing home setting, I am aware of the question people are asking. There are a couple of things to mention. First, we should remember that we were trying to move older and vulnerable people out of what was likely to be the surge setting or danger zone in acute hospitals to a safer place. That was definitely the motive followed by everybody. The Deputy is certainly not doing this, but I know many people are asking who brought the infection into the nursing home. Was it staff coming in, visitors coming in or other patients? The reality is that it is very hard to keep infection out of long-term residential care settings. I am assured by the HSE that testing guidelines were followed and clinical assessment carried out in all situations, but I will confirm the questions I do not know. The commitment the HSE gave was that there were two negative swabs carried out from that point in time. I will answer that in writing to the Deputy.

I will make one point. Dr. Tony Holohan has a graph showing the time at which infection came into nursing homes versus the rest of the community. Certainly it looks like many of

the transfers would have happened long before that trend and indeed that an incubation period would have passed. That seems to be the general view.

On testing, there is now a roadmap for getting to 100,000 tests a week. That does not mean we will be doing 100,000 tests a week. I am conscious of not making the mistake other people in other jurisdictions have made about this, but we will have capacity to do 100,000 tests a week by the third week of May - by 18 May - as outlined by the HSE. I believe we sent the Sinn Féin leader a briefing note on that.

Deputy Mark Ward: I take the opportunity to thank the people of Dublin West for not just electing me once but twice in the space of three months. This is my first time addressing the House since returning. Because of the limited time, as the previous Deputy alluded to, I ask the Minister to respond to my questions in writing to allow my colleague to come in immediately after me.

The Minister's big announcement of €1.1 million for mental health supports might have grabbed a few headlines but it will not deliver for front-line mental health services which were already struggling to provide a service pre-Covid-19. This is particularly noticeable in youth mental health supports. As of December, pre-Covid-19, 2,327 children were waiting for an appointment with the HSE child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. Over 100 of these kids have been waiting for 18 months and some have been waiting for more than two years. In my area of Dublin Mid-West, pre-Covid-19 our local youth mental health service, Jigsaw, was moved from a five-day comprehensive service based in north Clondalkin to a probable one or two-day-a-week satellite service. Jigsaw has seen a 420% increase in young people trying to access its service online since the outbreak of Covid-19. Why is this? Our young people are still unclear where they stand on the leaving certificate examinations. They are missing school, missing their friends and missing their sports. Some young people are witnessing and experiencing an increased level of domestic violence at home and they have no safe place to go to. Young people have lost loved ones and have not been able to attend the funeral and grieve properly due to the current restrictions. I take this opportunity to add my condolences to anybody who has lost somebody in these challenging times.

There are many other examples - I do not have time to go into them today - of why our young people would need mental health services more than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic. These are some of the questions I would like the Minister to reply to me in writing. What additional resources is he directing to front-line youth mental health services? What additional resources will he direct to front-line mental health services post Covid-19? How will the Minister reduce the waiting list for CAMHS? Will he intervene and retain the services of Jigsaw in north Clondalkin?

Our young people are very resourceful and are often not given the credit they deserve. For example, young people across Dublin Mid-West - it is probably the same in the Minister's constituency - have been painting positivity rocks. I do not know if the Minister has seen them. They are really good. They contain words of encouragement for our fellow citizens in this time of tribulation. I brought one to Leinster House and left it on the plinth for people to see. It simply states, "We're in this together." That is really good advice from young people.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: This is my maiden speech. However, I will dispense with most of the usual expressions of thanks because I want to have as much time as possible to outline the concerns of those in my community working and living in care settings. I extend my con-

30 April 2020

dolences to everyone who has passed away in my constituency and throughout the country. I heartily thank everyone who has supported me throughout the years I have been campaigning in Dublin West. They know who they are and I hope some of them are listening this evening.

I have been deeply concerned by the emails and phone calls I have received in recent days from parents, carers and staff of private residential care homes and private care home providers. I was contacted by a home care worker who provided support for an elderly person the previous week. He just found out that this person has sadly passed away from the coronavirus.

The elderly person was ill but the care worker was not told that it was Covid-19. He did what every caring person would do and asked his manager what to do in the circumstances. He was told to go to see all the clients that he was scheduled to visit that day, possibly *5 o'clock* putting them at risk. I was also contacted by two parents of very vulnerable and high-risk children. They stated that their care worker, who came into their home that day, had been off work for two weeks. They were not informed by the HSE, the company or the worker that she had had Covid-19. Rather, they were only told that she had been on sick leave.

A very experienced and professional residential care worker told me yesterday that staff have been told that they do not have to wear PPE even though it is on site and available and that new staff who have no experience have been taken on. He also stated that, contrary to normal best practice, there is no shadowing with an experienced and trained member of staff and that this is leading to poor hygiene and could have poor outcomes for residents. He stated that staff have been directed by the HSE to wear equipment one day for exchange the following day. The staff are confused and there is much frustration while they try to care for residents in very difficult circumstances.

Officials from the HSE visited a particular care home but only spoke to its management rather than also consulting the staff. It is very important that such staff are consulted because they are the ones working with people on the ground. Last week, I spoke to a family member of a home care assistant who summed up the situation very well. She self-isolates as best she can between shifts. She is too tired, furious and upset to put into words how she is feeling. She has not hugged her children in weeks. They miss her but they are proud of her. She is risking far more than I am, than the Minister is and than she ought to have to risk.

What does the Minister have to say to these front-line workers for whom we clap every week? They have heard many big announcements but there has been poor delivery on some of those announcements. Do they all now have the PPE they need? Are there sufficient staff to provide the proper care that patients need? Will the companies which victimise workers who speak out be sanctioned? Can families availing of home care packages feel safe in the knowledge that home care workers who come into their home will not put their children and elderly relatives at risk? Will the Minister acknowledge that the private care system cannot cope with a pandemic and that we need to move to a one-tier system of care for our most vulnerable citizens?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Does the Deputy wish the Minister to respond? The clock is ticking.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I ask that the Minister respond in writing to any of my questions which he cannot answer now. Will he consider providing specialist support services for children with autism spectrum disorder, ASD, along the lines of those to be made available to

the children of essential workers? Parents who are at home with children with ASD are under severe pressure and experiencing real difficulties.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am conscious that people at home watch these proceedings and hear the questions that are put but do not have access to written replies I send to Deputies. We must divide the allocated time better. I came here to answer questions. If I do not know the answer to a question, I will revert to the Deputy in writing, but I need some time to answer the questions orally.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I ask the Minister to do so briefly.

Deputy Simon Harris: I ask that the allocated time be divided properly.

Deputy Ward raised the issue of Jigsaw. I am due to meet its representatives on Thursday and I will revert to the Deputy thereafter. Mental health, particularly youth mental health, is a key priority. We wish to support Jigsaw in what it is doing.

Deputy Paul Donnelly is correct in the context of ASD. The reality is that many children have been out of school and may not have been able to access normal health supports. We need to consider what an intervention for them would look like over the summer months. I am working on that issue across Government.

I acknowledge the significant work done by people in home care and residential care settings. There are regulatory authorities to which complaints can be addressed. This week, HIQA started inspections and visits in line with standards, which is important.

I have put on the record of the House the increase with regard to PPE and dealt with the issue of staffing. I will revert to the Deputy in writing on the remainder of his questions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I understand Deputy Heydon is sharing time with Deputy O'Donnell.

Deputy Martin Heydon: That is correct. I commend the Minister and his officials on their ongoing work. I want to raise the concerns of nursing homes in the Kildare and Laois area. I have raised some of their concerns with the Minister directly. He is aware that they are under huge pressure. The staff are doing great work and showing great dedication in difficult times. From having spoken to nursing home owners and managers in my constituency, I know their main issues are financial and staffing support, and recognition for their staff. The Covid-19 temporary assistance payment scheme has generated some confusion because there is a short period. I know everyone is working under real pressure, the officials in the Department who are putting schemes in place, the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, and the nursing homes. However, we have to have due consideration. I ask the Minister's officials to bear in mind the pressure the nursing homes are under in trying to manage the problems they have as well as the forms they have to fill out. Nursing home staff and management are pretty exhausted now, as everyone else is, and are working to the pin of their collars. While the main form is due today, I have had a request that forms B and C for the NTPF be simplified as much as possible and be reviewed to ensure they cover the actual cost of the crisis for nursing homes. The costs of the private transitional winter initiative and delayed discharge beds also need to be addressed, as well as those of the empty beds, to ensure their future viability, because while there is the initial crisis here now, there is also the challenge of making sure we have a viable operating nursing home sector in three to six months.

Nursing home providers are worried about the future for their residents and staff. Their hard-working, caring and dedicated staff also need to be recognised and rewarded. In time we would like to find a way of doing that. Many are sacrificing time with their own families to live in and ensure the highest standards. Many of these workers are not on the highest of wages, yet the hours they are doing are pushing them into the higher tax bracket. This comes into the area of finance as well. I would be very supportive of measures to make sure that the people working those long hours are not subject to the higher rate of tax or that some rebate could be given to them, to give them due recognition. They are the front line for the nursing home sector caring for our most vulnerable loved ones in those settings.

Deputy Simon Harris: Staffing is a major issue. I know Deputy Heydon has raised this with me. There are four ways we are trying to assist nursing homes: through the direct redeployment of HSE staff; an agreement reached in recent days with home care providers to allow home care staff to be redeployed; to ensure a faster turnaround time for testing for staff and a priority for that so that the many staff who do not have Covid-19 can get the all clear and go back into the workplace; and the funding scheme that the Deputy referred to. I am very open to extending the timeline for that funding scheme. I did not want to do that too early because I want people to get the applications in and pay the money out. We are paying it out within 24 to 48 hours. I am meeting with Nursing Homes Ireland twice a week, and we have provided many clarifications about the scheme that it asked for. We have to have checks and balances but I will continue to keep that under review. I have no doubt that there are broader funding and policy issues in respect of nursing home care that we will consider in let us call it peacetime. For the moment, however, the scheme of up to €72 million worth of funding for private nursing homes over a three-month period is substantial. I am eager to ensure that it is not bureaucratic and I think we have made some improvements in that regard in recent days.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: This is a public health crisis but we have to strike a balance. The Taoiseach spoke today of five conditions he will consider in respect of easing restrictions: the progress of the disease, healthcare capacity and resilience, testing and contact tracing capacity, the ability to shield and care for vulnerable groups, and the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality . Where does the Minister see those? He referred to Covid-19 being with us for a long time. How long does he expect that it will be a daily part of people's lives and in respect of the business sector?

Will the Minister clarify the area around elective work? For many people in Limerick and north Tipperary, some of the elective work that needs to happen is veering into the acute area. Where does that fall into the issue in terms of private hospitals? How can that capacity be used? The Minister referred to preserving that capacity. Regarding people over 70 who are cocooning, I have elderly parents. They do not like to be called elderly, but they are. I have not seen them for over a month. The same is the case for many other people. In terms of lifting the restrictions, is the Government looking at ways in which family members outside the 2 km limit can see elderly relatives and check up on them while not coming into physical contact with them or undermining public health?

On testing and tracing, the University of Limerick is willing to provide testing and laboratory facilities on site for the community. Is the Department looking at regional testing? We must get back to some sense of normality in terms of business and daily life and in that regard, contact tracing and testing are key. We must get up to the 100,000 limit as quickly as possible because at the end of the day, peoples' lives are being impacted. Will the Minister look at it on a regional basis? One of the other issues coming up relates to third level students, many of whom

will shortly be finishing their online exams. Most of them will not be going abroad to find jobs and there is a worry that many of them who are renting houses will not be observing social distancing. Is that being looked at or considered? I ask the Minister to address those points.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am pleased we are in a position in the Dáil where Deputies can ask when we can recommence elective work because if one looks at the modelling, as of today, had we not lowered the reproductive rate for this virus from just over 2.0 to where it is now, we would have seen 2,200 people in our ICUs today and would be in a very dire situation. That is not to take away from the very difficult and sad situation of the 103 people in our ICUs today and the worry that their families have for their well-being. We think of them. The Deputy is right that, thanks to the massive work of the Irish people, front-line staff and public health experts, we have a situation whereby we do currently have vacant capacity in our public hospitals and significant vacant capacity in our private hospitals, for which we are now paying for the next number of months. We need to get the balance right. We need to recommence some non-elective, non-Covid work because one can get sick and die from things that are not Covid-19. We do not want a situation where we come through Covid-19 as best we can as a country only to find that there is a very sad situation with secondary deaths from Covid-19, although we know that there will be an element of that. We must get the balance right. We must keep a certain amount of vacant capacity, particularly critical care and isolation capacity, in case a second wave does come. On Saturday we had a meeting with medical leaders from across the country, including a leading doctor from Limerick, about how we can have the non-Covid workstream alongside the Covid one and we will be using our private hospitals for that as well.

On the issue of NPHE, the roadmap and the timelines, I am not going to speculate on the record of the House today when I know that the plan will be published tomorrow, other than to say that it will be grounded in public health because it has to be. This is a public health emergency and the moment we decide to take any tack other than public health is the moment when we begin to lose the progress that has been hard won and hard gained at huge expense to the people. I hope that we will be able to provide a degree of certainty tomorrow in an uncertain world. If we can get the virus into this condition, what does that mean we might be able to do in society again? It is important to get all of us thinking, not just the Government and the Oireachtas, but sports clubs, schools and businesses. What does this mean for me? How might I have to adapt how I run my life, my business or my organisation? There will be a lot to discuss in that.

I am very conscious of the fact that over 70 is not old. I am very conscious that there are lots of people over the age of 70 who are very active. I am also very conscious that they see it as a bit condescending when politicians tell them to stay at home but we are doing it on the grounds of public health advice and nothing else. I am conscious of their health and well-being. It is not for me to predict what NPHE will do or to become NPHE but I know it is an area that the team is continuing to monitor very closely. Of course, people can travel and visit relatives to meet their care needs.

On the issue of Limerick and a laboratory, I would be very happy to take those details and talk to the HSE. We now have 27 laboratories across the country and are very eager to find any more capacity that we possibly can.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Last week I asked if we could find a mechanism to pay our radiography students in the same way that we found a mechanism to pay our nursing students, given that they are putting themselves and their families at risk by working. The Minister told me he

would ask his Department to come forward with proposals for other students usefully working in the health service and whom we need. He said, “I hope to bottom that out before we meet here again”. I am here for an answer, not for me but for the radiography students who are wondering when they are going to get paid.

Last week, I also asked the Minister about extending the power to prescribe to optometrists. He told me he would speak to his Department and revert to me directly. I do not want my speech to be too accusatory but there is a pattern to this. The Covid-19 query system has replaced Dáil questions because we cannot put down questions. I am putting down these Covid-19 queries but I have not had an answer to queries I put down last week. We have passed the deadline. I have had answers from all of the other Departments, but not the Minister’s Department. Clearly, something is not working. Perhaps other Deputies could say whether the same thing has happened to them. I have not had answers to my Covid-19 queries to the Department of Health and I should not have to come in here and put them all to the Minister.

Last week, the Minister said he would update the House on progress with the mobile app which is key to being able to relax restrictions. Information I have received about the app has been scarce and I read in a newspaper this week that it will be a decentralised rather than a centralised app. The Minister suggested I raise this matter with the HSE during the weekly meeting with health spokespersons and I, along with Deputy Shortall, did so. A director in the HSE promised me that I would be supplied with a copy of the specification, which I look forward to getting.

If we decide to go with the decentralised model, I welcome that because there are only two countries in Europe, I understand, who are insisting that their health authorities should be able to see the data provided by contact tracing apps. If we tell people that we are going to spy on them or that the health authorities are going to see all of their data they will not buy into this and will not use the contact tracing app.

The Minister said we are all in this together and it is important that we pool our resources and work together. Yet, we are not having an open discussion about the app. I have asked questions, including about its basic specification, and I am not being supplied with any information. I will boil down my question to this. Will the Minister commit, before he launches the app, to publish the data protection impact assessment and the technical specifications?

The lockdown measures are due to expire on 5 May, as I understand it. We are a few days away from that date and there is very little information about what is going to happen. It is very hard for people to plan in that situation. I listened to what the Minister said today about that. We do not know what the criteria for the relaxation of restrictions will be. We do not know what different phases there are. We do not know the different variables and metrics involved and how they interact to make a decision.

The Minister talked about getting the R₀ below one, which is great. What about other variables such as the death rate and admissions to acute hospitals and to ICU? How do all of those things interact? The interaction of different variables is a model and I understand that Professor Nolan is working on this model with NPHET. Yet, after weeks of me and other Deputies, including Deputy Donnelly, asking about this, we still do not have sight of the model. Given that we cannot see it, as it has not been published, we do not know the mechanism by which decisions are being made.

The Minister points to NPHE, which is a black box, and says medicine and science is in a room and it makes decisions based on various variables that interact in a way which cannot be revealed to anybody. As a result of that, the public is looking on and many people would like to scrutinise this. As Deputies, we should be able to ask questions and ask why something is happening. It would be useful if we worked together and were all in this together. If we could scrutinise and see the decisions being made, it could create greater buy-in from the public and all of us into the very difficult restrictions which are being made or the decision not to relax restrictions, as the case may be. Our European neighbours are taking a much more open approach to this than we are.

I will not go into the same level of detail on testing for Covid-19 as other Deputies, but I want to ask about the Irish Blood Transfusion Service and blood donation. I understand it is still taking place. I ask the Minister to publicise the fact that people can still give blood and that it is a reason for people to leave their homes. A lot of people have a great need to contribute something or feel they are doing something for the cause. Can the Minister investigate whether we should screen blood donations for Covid-19 antibodies and if it would provide more information for the system in order that we could determine the extent of the spread of the disease and how we are getting on with it? The therapeutics, that is, the drugs to deal with Covid-19, are an important milestone in the roadmap to getting out of these restrictions. I understand that there is a very promising drug, Remdesivir, created by Gilead Sciences. I also understand that Gilead has extensive production facilities within this country. In the same way that PPE became a huge stumbling block for us in making progress with this disease, I am worried that the production of these antiviral drugs will also cause a slowdown or be a blocking point for us in making progress. What measures will the Government take to plan for the manufacture of these therapeutics in the Irish system?

I will not ask about face masks as my Sinn Féin colleague has already done so, but I will mention that the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has shifted position and published differing advice. The advice has changed in different countries and Germany is now telling its citizens to wear face masks in public. I feel sorry for people who are working in positions such as checkouts, where hundreds of customers are going past them all day. Those customers should be wearing masks in order that they do not cough on those people. I would like the Minister to make a change in that policy. People will forgive him for having had a different position earlier on.

Public parks are still open and it is important that people have somewhere to go which they do not have to pay for, particularly when they are restricted in the number of things they can do. However, private landscapers are not allowed to work. Those who work in public parks have been designated as essential workers, but people who work in private parks have not and many housing estates have parks which they cannot use. They have been locked and chained up for months because they have not been taken in charge. I do not want the Minister to make no changes next week. I would love if he could issue an executive order that allows private landscapers and gardeners to work, with sufficient precautions, in order to reopen these private parks.

Deputy Simon Harris: I would like to follow up the issue of any questions not being answered with the Deputy directly. I assure him that this is not the case. The Taoiseach and I met his party leader yesterday for two hours, as we generally do once a week. We also have the HSE briefing, two hours of questions and statements in this House, and a daily press conference with the Chief Medical Officer to update the public, but I am very eager that the information flows.

I said I would try to sort out the matter of the student radiographers before I got here. There are about 55 of them and we have been looking for that mechanism. Let me be clear that student nurses did not get paid for being student nurses. Student nurses were offered the opportunity to be employed and paid as healthcare assistants, and many thousands of them have taken us up on that offer. I have a proposal whereby we offer student radiographers the opportunity to be employed as assistant radiographers, and I have asked that my Department and the HSE meet SIPTU on that as their representative body. That is the proposal I would like to put forward. My Department and the HSE will engage with SIPTU, if they have not already commenced that engagement.

I have an 11-page note on the mobile app because I knew the Deputy would ask me about it and I said I would update him on it. In the interest of time I will have to share it with him but I will share it with him and any Member of this House now. We want to get this right. It will only work if there is public buy-in. I commit to coming back to this House prior to launch to take any questions and to publish any information that is relevant and helpful. This will only work if the people of Ireland download the app and buy into it, otherwise it will just be something nice that people will get a launch out of but which will not make a blind bit of difference. We need buy-in from people.

I take the Deputy's point on the criteria but the criteria for the easing of restrictions have now been clearly articulated by the Chief Medical Officer. We need ICU admissions to be lower than they are. There were 70 people in ICU with Covid-19 when we brought in the current restrictions and there are still 103 today. Despite the progress, there are still more people in ICU now than when the Chief Medical Officer thought it necessary to advise the Government to lock down. There were 160 people in hospital with Covid-19 at that time, and there are still, on average, around 700. We had about 200 cases a day on average then, and we still have that many and more now. The behaviour of the disease is still not where we need it to be. As the Deputy rightly said, it is not only one metric; we are looking at a number of things.

Regarding blood transfusion, I take this opportunity to encourage people to donate blood. It is, as the Deputy says, a reason to get out of the house, but it is also a good and life-saving thing to do.

On the issue of face masks, there will be no pride here. If the evidence changes and our experts believe it should be done, it will be done. I believe they are going to look at the matter again tomorrow. They have already changed their advice in relation to healthcare professionals, based on international expertise. A number of countries have changed their view on face masks or face coverings for the population at large and I think it is likely that that is going to happen here. At least in certain circumstances, an advisory or guidance would be issued. I do not envisage us making the wearing of face masks mandatory, only that advice and guidance would be given so that people could make informed decisions.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I wish to pass on my sincere condolences to all those families who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 since the House last met a week ago. The crisis continues and the sadness mounts as we continue to battle against this appalling virus. To reiterate, the Minister has our support in leading that fight, as do the CEO of the HSE, the CMO and all the workers on the front line and in support capacities in our health service.

We also support the work of the NPNET. For the past week and a half, we have raised issues concerning its transparency and decision making. We welcome today's publication of the min-

utes of NPHET meetings for the month of April. When questioning the Taoiseach today, our leader, Deputy Kelly, raised further concerns. I echo them, although I will not repeat them now. We look forward to seeing increased transparency, which I am sure the Minister will support.

NPHET is the decision-making body for tackling the Covid-19 crisis, but the Minister has overall responsibility for Covid-19 and all other health matters. In that regard, what measures are being put in place to manage the knock-on effects of this crisis for people with non-Covid-19 illnesses? What are the consequences of people not turning up for appointments and of operations being cancelled? Has much modelling on this been done? The Minister raised the question of how that currently unused capacity would be activated. We have severe concerns about secondary deaths. How is the Minister judging and managing that responsibility against the demands of Covid-19 with the directives that are coming through the NPHET?

We have major issues with the income supports for HSE workers, a matter that has been raised with the Taoiseach today as well as more recently in this debate. Will the Minister commit to issuing a directive under the relevant health Act to ensure that the pay deal for nurses agreed last year will be paid this May? Ten days ago, the Labour Party called for a €1,000 pandemic payment for health workers to coincide with May Day, which is tomorrow. Unless the Minister has a surprise for us in his closing remarks, that is probably not going to happen, but has he considered this proposal? It has been done in other countries.

What plans has the Minister for income supports for healthcare workers who have been unable to attend work during the pandemic because of their own pre-existing conditions? We want to ensure that they will not be impacted unfairly by such matters, which are outside their control, and that not only their incomes but also their certainty of work is protected.

Is there planning under way in the Department of Health for the healthcare workers who came home to join the fight against Covid-19? They showed the utmost selflessness and bravery in taking the decision to leave places where they usually had secure and, in many cases, well-paid employment to join our domestic fight. Will the Minister give assurances that they will have jobs once we have passed the stage of pandemic reaction and moved towards returning our health service to more regular business? Many people who were working in the HSE prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 had been pushing for the restoration of pay. We want to see progress on that front.

Deputy Ossian Smyth discussed student radiographers. That situation requires urgent repair by the Minister and his Department. Our position has been consistent and clear that student radiographers working on the front line in the battle against Covid-19 deserve the same respect as nursing, midwifery and medical science professionals and students. The Department and the HSE must recognise and respect the role that student radiographers are playing every day in the battle to stop the spread of Covid-19. I was encouraged by the Minister's remark that he had at least offered something similar to student nurses using the same principle. I would be interested in seeing whether that can get us to where we need to be.

I wish to discuss PPE. Last Wednesday week, the Department of Health issued a directive that all healthcare workers should wear face masks when working within 2 ft of a person. This policy change had implications for all health services. We have heard about acute, residential, outreach and clinical services, for example, but many home help agencies have been struggling during the crisis and many have lost staff. They are continuing to offer support to priority patients and all unnecessary calls have been stopped, as per the national direction. Many home

help agencies have been struggling financially. Not all of them are private enterprises with pools of money on which to draw. Every community healthcare organisation has a not-for-profit home help agency under its umbrella, often set up by well-meaning, former healthcare professionals who want to help their local communities. Now the agencies must source face masks themselves or wait in line for the HSE to offer same if and when resources allow. GP surgeries and nursing homes can purchase face masks from suppliers and are not liable for VAT, for example. Home help agencies need to be afforded the same exemption as soon as possible. If home support agencies are not given assistance, it will absolutely mean an increase in hospital admissions for non-Covid-19 related reasons. The number of older people currently supported by home support agencies is phenomenal and issues need to be addressed as soon as possible as the knock-on effect could be catastrophic.

I am also hearing that the primary insurance company of home care support agencies has issued advice that if healthcare workers do not have personal protective equipment, PPE, such as face masks, the agency is not insured. I am interested to know if the Minister has a comment on that or if he can investigate it further.

To move to screening, CervicalCheck has been suspended since the end of February or the start of March, initially to allow for the switch to human papillomavirus, HPV, testing in April. Unfortunately, we do not know when HPV testing is going to be introduced. Women need certainty when it comes to this essential screening service. When will it be coming back on stream and is there a plan for that? I know that an awful lot of the radiographers who work in screening have been redeployed to deal with Covid-19 and are doing a wonderful job, but I am interested to hear if we have a pathway out of this.

We still have no plan for dentistry. Dentists have been crying out for PPE in order for them to return to work. The Chief Dental Officer has offered direction in terms of emergency dental work, but there is also serious and routine dental work that is important. Speaking in a personal capacity and as someone who has had complex dental needs in the past, I and many people like me need routine dental work in order to prevent serious or emergency dental work down the line. In the absence of routine visits, we are potentially storing up serious and emergency dental problems in the not-too-distant future. We have already seen the somewhat stark protests, let us say, of dentists in France and I do not want to have to see my dentist taking part in similar protests here for basic PPE.

I turn to ask about direct provision and vulnerable settings. We have heard about the direct provision centre in Cahersiveen through the media and I would appreciate it if the Minister could speak to that. Have many clusters of the virus developed in direct provision centres or other vulnerable settings, such as prisons? I received a long and detailed response from the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, last week about the measures that his Department has put in place in conjunction with local authorities, the HSE and approved housing bodies for direct provision centres. I hope that those measures are being implemented and are working.

We will need direction on the use of personal face masks and whether we will need to wear them in shops or on public transport. There has, until recently, been contested medical advice on the utility of wearing masks in public to control the virus. It now seems that there has been a shift towards a view that we should be wearing them, at least in some capacity. It has been mentioned that the public will understand a shift in the Government's position on that, but we need clarity and to bring the public along with us. Will we have sufficient supply for members of the public so that they are not waiting in line behind front-line workers, staff from nursing

homes, dental and home care workers?

I thank the Minister and, if he does not manage to get to every question, I would appreciate it if he would correspond with me.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy. I agree with his views about transparency and NPHET. Minutes of meetings are kept and published. NPHET makes recommendations, but I remain the decision maker on Government policy and am accountable to this House, to be clear. I have not gone against any of the recommendations from NPHET, nor do I intend to, because I am taking a public health-led approach to this, but NPHET is not a mysterious object. It pulls together the best expertise from HIQA, the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, and the HSE. I think I counted approximately 20 people with “Doctor” in front of their names on NPHET. It then gives advice and recommendations to me and the CEO of the HSE. Those letters are also being published because it is right and proper that people see them. NPHET is doing a superb job, chaired by Dr. Tony Holohan, to whom I express huge gratitude.

The Deputy also asked about non-Covid-19 illness and he is entirely right to do so because a recent survey that we carried out showed that approximately 28% of people have put off seeking medical treatment. That is not a good thing and our GPs are worried about it. What are we doing about it? We are preparing a plan for non-Covid-19 care, alongside Covid-19 care, in the acute hospitals, using the private hospital capacity. We are also, through the setting up of community assessment hubs, trying to ensure that Covid-19 patients can go to a community assessment hub and non-Covid-19 patients can continue to go to a GP. We have seen a significant drop-off in the numbers of people attending their GP and that is how cancers can be missed and referrals to hospitals not given. I am hoping those community assessment hubs will help.

I also agree with the Deputy on the enhanced nurse contract and I will put the numbers on the record of this House shortly.

The Deputy asked about health workers with pre-existing conditions. I have discussed this with the HSE. I expect those responsible in the HSE to show maximum flexibility in terms of how they deal with that matter. I think they are doing so but I would like to hear about it if they are not.

The Deputy also raised the issue of home help and how some may need funding supports. That is a fair point. I started my engagement with those involved yesterday on what that might look like. I will investigate the question on insurance. The dentists are on my mind. I intend to meet representatives from the Irish Dental Association and the chief dental nurse in the next week.

I will have to write to the Deputy regarding the question on direct provision because I am out of time. I expect that we are going to receive the guidance and clarity on the issue of face masks that people rightly want in the coming days.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am raising with the Minister the question of testing and tracing. This is the strategy on which everything else is based. An enormous national effort is being put in based on the premise that the strategy of test and trace would actually operate, but it has not operated at anything like at the scale that is required. We have been told that the target figure for capacity should be 15,000 tests per day, which is 105,000 per week. We are currently testing fewer than 42,000 per week. There is a huge gap to be made up and people are becoming frustrated. People are making extraordinary sacrifices. They are doing everything they are told and

yet the State is not delivering on its side of the bargain. Frustration is growing, understandably, because of that. This really needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency. The public are putting in an enormous effort. We know now, according to the national public health emergency team, that unless the target is reached we cannot start to unwind the restrictions. That is the first point about test and trace.

The second issue relates to tracing. What are the current numbers regarding those being traced? Can the Minister provide detail on that? We have not had any detail on that whatsoever. Can he tell us about that now?

The third question is on nursing homes. There is a population of approximately 60,000, between staff and residents, in nursing homes. I gather that the Minister used a figure of 28,000 earlier in respect of those who have been tested. When are the others going to be tested? Can the Minister give us a target date for completing that testing?

Those are my questions on testing. Does the Minister accept that we cannot start lifting restrictions until we have full capacity in place? When exactly will that happen? When will the Minister complete nursing home testing? What is the current level of contact tracing?

Deputy Simon Harris: The public have put in an extraordinary effort, but those in the HSE have done so as well. I have watched them move mountains to try to robustly put in place a testing process from something that did not exist previously, and they have done a very good job.

We all share the frustration and we want to be further on than we are - I agree absolutely. Yet, when we look at the international comparisons, we see a number of countries are lifting restrictions but have done fewer tests than we have. According to our world data website, we rank fourth highest in the European Union out of 22 EU and UK countries in terms of the number of tests completed per million of population. Many countries are lifting restrictions but doing fewer tests than us.

I do not accept the premise that restrictions cannot be lifted on 5 May because of testing. My word is one thing, but the Chief Medical Officer would not accept that either. He made it clear that the reason he does not believe he will be in a position to advise the lifting of restrictions is because of the behaviour of the virus.

Deputy Shortall is entirely correct to state that testing is a key component - I do not dispute that at all. We need to get to the point of having the capacity to test 100,000 per week or thereabouts or 15,000 per day. I hope Deputy Shortall got our briefing note this morning. The HSE has given a roadmap on how it intends to get there. It was agreed with the Department of Health to have end-to-end capacity for 10,000 tests per day this week, beginning on Monday last, 27 April. It is agreed to move to an ability to have 12,000 tests per day from Tuesday, 5 May, and to have an ability to do 15,000 tests from Monday, 18 May. This does not mean we will be doing that many tests each day. It depends on the case definition and a variety of other things. The point is to have that capacity in place. I hope this is in the note Deputy Shortall got. The HSE has also given the swab-to-result times and the end-to-end turnaround times. It is the case that we have hit bumps in the road - there is no doubt about it - but I believe we now have an agreed trajectory to get to 15,000 tests per day by the third week in May. That is good news. It will absolutely be required. The HSE officials need to continue to update on that matter and they will.

Deputy Shortall also asked about testing in nursing homes. My understanding, from conversations with the HSE officials, is that they expect to complete that this week. The expecta-

tion was to complete that this week. The Deputy knows the HSE was starting with nursing homes with outbreaks and then moving to nursing homes with a case to test everyone there. Then it was moving to test at least staff in all other nursing homes and residents where clinically appropriate.

If the Deputy does not mind and in the interests of time, I will send her the answer about contact tracing.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister spoke about the behaviour of the virus. Dr. Tony Holohan raised this as well. We can only know about the behaviour of the virus if there is a proper test and tracing system in place. As I said to the Taoiseach earlier today, this is a circular argument. We need to get down the number of people in hospitals and, in particular, intensive care units. We will only succeed in doing that if we can tackle the virus at community level. However, we are failing to do that because of the absence of sufficient testing. It is great that we have flattened the curve and reduced the transmission figure. That is largely due to the fact, however, that people are locked down. To lift the lockdown, we have to have that system in place. Again, the Minister needs to honour his part of the deal in that regard.

My next question relates to staffing. There are certainly big problems in nursing homes. The Minister spoke about this earlier. There are 460 nursing homes but the scheme with the HSE has only brought just over 200 new staff. That is one staff member to every two nursing homes. When one actually looks at the number of nurses involved, there are only 85 nurses. Nursing homes desperately need nurses. Of course, they should be required to have more nurses. It would be interesting to see what HIQA has recommended in this regard. There are only 85 nurses on that scheme, which is one nurse to every five nursing homes. That is wholly inadequate. What steps is the Minister taking to improve that figure?

On trainee nurses and those who were due to graduate this year, a proposal was put to the Minister that it would be possible to bring on stream about 500 nurses if he was prepared to agree with an eight-week early graduation for those nurses. That would lead to a significant influx of nurses. The Minister has done this with medical students and medical graduates as well as with gardaí. Why will he not do it with nurses?

I want to add my voice to that appeal to the Minister to give a direction to pay the money due to nurses, particularly HSE nurses, as well as those in Cork, Limerick and the Saolta group. It is no good patting people on the back. They should be paid the rate for the job, and they are not getting it at the moment.

Another problem in staffing is the whole question of childcare. Will the Minister get together with other Ministers to sort this out? A significant number of healthcare staff, now along with other public servants who are partners of healthcare staff, are out of the workforce because of the failure to make provision for childcare. It is a shambles and it needs to be dealt with.

The last area I want to raise with the Minister is the whole question of mental health. All of the indications are that people who have existing mental health problems are in severe difficulty. A whole range of new mental health problems are emerging as a result of Covid-19 such as anxiety, depression and fear, particularly in the case of young people. Recent surveys showed that over 50% of young people are complaining about these conditions as a result of Covid-19. There is a need for a significant mental health response from the Government. Has the Minister had any engagement with mental health reform? If not, will he arrange that in order that there

can be a mental health response to the current problems? This involves, for example, ensuring that counsellors are regarded as essential service providers and that arrangements are made for one-to-one counselling to take place at a safe social distance. That needs to happen quickly.

We need a clear framework in place to take us through the coming months and possibly years to deal with the considerable overhang of mental health difficulties which are arising as a result of this pandemic. In that regard, will the Minister give a commitment to publish the review of A Vision for Change and to commit to funding it?

Deputy Simon Harris: I must check where the review is because I know it was ready to go to Cabinet.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Is it completed?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is completed and it was due to go before the Cabinet. The question is whether it is appropriate to bring it now or if it should wait for a new Government. I think it would be appropriate to bring it now. I will check that and come back to Deputy Shortall. I will meet with Mental Health Reform before we next meet. I am scheduled to meet Jigsaw as well. I think it is on next Thursday.

In response to the question on childcare, in the time available to me I can say that we have an in-reach childcare proposal. I hope that is something on the roadmap that will be published tomorrow that can be prioritised at the appropriate time so we can provide childcare, in the first instance, for healthcare workers and then for other professionals.

On the enhanced nurse contract, I gave the figure of 700 that signed up in February and now it is 3,400. I have been very clear to the HSE. I will consider issuing a directive but I have been clear that I want that to increase.

To respond to the question of allowing nurses to graduate early, this is something that I was very sympathetic to, but when I looked at the working group that had been set up that had student nurses on it, as well as the colleges and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI, on it, on balance, it came down against it. I will share the information with Deputy Shortall and I am happy to engage with her offline on it.

Deputy Brid Smith: Last week when we discussed the nursing homes the Minister reassured me that citizens in nursing homes were not being treated differently from other citizens. I am not yet reassured and I remain unreassured, if that is the right term. According to the latest figures from the NPHET, there have been nearly 600 deaths in nursing homes. I noted in today's debate that the Taoiseach stated there are obvious difficulties in nursing homes and sometimes medical directors, perhaps not even a GP or a medically qualified person, may be present. That is in contrast to the reassurance the Minister gave me last week. Accordingly, I want to ask the Minister again, who is making the decisions not to move acutely sick residents to a hospital setting. The question remains about the type of treatment that is available in nursing homes and whether it is equal to the type of treatment available in a hospital setting. I refer in particular to an article in *The Irish Times* on Monday concerning a memo from Professor Michael Barry of the HSE on the prescription of an antibiotic called azithromycin. I am sure the Minister knows the article. He said we must be careful about prescribing the antibiotic in community settings to ensure the safe use of the agent itself and the continuity of supply. There is a global shortage of this antibiotic. Which is more important - the safe use of the agent or the continuity of supply? If that agent is administered in hospital settings, why is it not available in nursing homes?

It seems to me that the statement about nobody being left behind does not tally with that fact.

My second question to the Minister relates to direct provision, which we also discussed last week. I said at the time that I believed this could turn into our next catastrophe after nursing homes. We all saw on the news last night the terrible scenes from Cahersiveen where the occupants of a direct provision centre were screaming to be taken out of there because they believed it was highly infected. They were correct because when they were moved from a Dublin centre on St. Patrick's weekend, there was at least one case in the centre in which they previously resided, yet I understand they were all moved without having been tested and now there are multiple cases in Cahersiveen. In last week's debate the Minister said to me that there would be 19 response teams across the country, led by senior nursing supports, to assist nursing homes and long-term residential care facilities. Will he now send such response teams into direct provision centres and ensure those who are seeking to be moved out of them will be moved out? I know it is the responsibility of the Department of Justice and Equality, but it is also the responsibility of the Department of Health to ensure people receive the right treatment and that any clusters in direct provision centres receive the same treatment response as the Minister promised for nursing homes.

Deputy Simon Harris: As the Deputy knows, HIQA has started its visits to nursing homes, both private and public. It published a new assessment framework, I think last Tuesday, and it has started those visits. HIQA is the regulator. It has a direct line to me and I meet it at least once or twice a week. It is in a position to highlight any issues of concern it may have. I repeat and stand by the comments I made in this House last week on clinical decisions deciding the care people get.

Regarding the Professor Barry letter to which Deputy Smith referred, I will provide a written response to that to ensure accuracy. I am glad Deputy Bríd Smith raised the issue of direct provision because it allows me time to respond to it. However, I need to let Deputy Paul Murphy in as well.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department of Justice and Equality and the HSE have worked closely together to support the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing the State's accommodation service. The Department and the HSE are following the Health Protection Surveillance Centre's Covid-19 guidance for homeless and for vulnerable group settings, including direct provision settings. That guidance is published on the HPSC's website. The guidance exists precisely because it was recognised that congregated settings, such as direct provision centres, present specific challenges. Together, they have put in place a range of measures in the Department's accommodation centres to address any cases of Covid-19 where they arise. This includes provision of self-isolation facilities in centres and a number of off-site self-isolation centres around the State.

In all matters related to Covid-19, the Department of Justice and Equality is working with the HSE to implement the latter's public health advice. The established procedure across all centres when a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus is that he or she is moved to a dedicated off-site self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of the person's period of isolation until such time as the HSE considers the person can return to his or her centre with no risk to other residents or staff.

All residents considered to be especially vulnerable to this virus on age grounds or special medical grounds have been cocooned. The direction from the HSE's national social inclusion

office is that non-family members sharing a room in centres are considered to be a household during the Covid-19 crisis and should implement social distancing measures on the same basis because they are already close contacts.

Residents have been made aware, as have we all, of the appropriateness of social distancing, good hand hygiene and cough etiquette. Information and posters have been distributed to all centres. Centre managers have been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres paying particular attention to communal areas. A regular supply of hand-sanitisers for centres is in place. The Department of Justice and Equality has put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff and it is used to advise, support and work with locations where vulnerable groups are present relating to the implementation of the guidelines.

The Department of Justice and Equality and the HSE want to protect the identity and medical confidentiality of residents as required by law but, obviously, will comment on outbreaks if there is a public health reason to do so. Generally, residents of centres are subject to the same current public health measures to which we all are in relation to remaining 2 km from one's home. The Department of Justice and Equality and the HSE will continue to work together closely on this for the benefit of residents and centre staff.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to ask the Minister about the cost of the private hospitals. The Taoiseach confirmed to me two weeks ago an estimated cost of €115 million per month for the leasing of the private hospitals. I then later asked the Minister for Finance why we are paying more than four times as much per bed as they are in the UK, which he was not able to answer. I then wrote to the Minister for Finance, copying to the Minister for Health, seeking the publication of the final agreements with the individual hospitals, a detailed breakdown of the €90.2 million which has been already given to the private hospitals and asking him again to explain the discrepancy between the €44,000 paid per bed in Ireland and the €10,000 paid per bed in Britain. I will give one example as to why we need to see these figures. The Beacon Medical Group was bought by Mr. Denis O'Brien for €35 million, according to The Irish Times. If they get €44,000 a month for 200 beds, the State will have paid more than €35 million in four months but will not own a bed at the end of that process. Can we get the full final agreements? Can we get a breakdown of the costs so that we can see if there is profiteering going on?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Paul Murphy. I have done everything I can to be transparent in relation to this. First, payment will be on a cost only open-book model whereby the hospitals will be reimbursed only for the operating costs properly incurred during the period. The costs that will be covered will be limited to normal costs of operating the hospital. Since the rationale for the arrangement relates to the Covid-19 pandemic for which no one can provide a definitive time horizon, it is not possible to indicate a precise cost estimate attaching to the arrangement but the final cost will be verified by an independent firm of accountants appointed by the HSE and the private hospitals. There is also an arbitration mechanism in place in the event of any disagreement.

Under the heads of terms, private hospitals are funded to 80% of their estimated monthly costs in advance by the HSE. As the Deputy says, €90.2 million was advanced to the hospitals for April. We will independently verify that and claw back if we find any issues as we audit it. This will continue to be examined by a committee of public accounts in due course and will be subject to the normal scrutiny by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and I lay an agreement before this House.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Directors' pay at Beacon in 2018 was almost €1 million. Are we paying the directors' pay? Are we paying the bloated pay of the CEO on top of that? These companies often officially claim to be making no profit but make intra-group transfers through transfer pricing, interest payments and fees to other companies owned by the same person. With that in mind, are we paying for any rents or interests to Mr. Denis O'Brien, Mr. Larry Goodman or any of their companies? Specifically, do the payments we are making include rent or interest payments made directly or indirectly to companies owned by Mr. Denis O'Brien or Mr. Larry Goodman which are registered in Luxembourg in order to avoid paying tax?

Deputy Simon Harris: I will ask for the HSE or the Department to respond to the Deputy in writing on this matter in the coming days. I want to be clear that nobody is meant to be profiteering as a result of this. The whole purpose here is to ensure that nobody can make a profit and we pay solely according to the cost-only open-book model. We were in a very lucky position to be able to acquire the use of these facilities. Thank God we have not needed to use their ICU capacities yet. The HSE will respond directly to the Deputy in the coming days.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I note that there are 25 minutes left for this and there are three groups. In the interests of public health and on the basis that the Business Committee and all of the Members have agreed to two-hour sittings, with the agreement of the House I will have to reduce the ten minutes to eight. Again, it is in the public interest. There are 25 minutes left and three groups. If that is agreed, we will proceed on that basis.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not agree to that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I am offering it to the House as a fairness measure because the final group, that is, the Independent group, will be short on time otherwise.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What happened during the other sections?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): When I arrived in the Chair we were running nearly 20 minutes late, but the allowable period for debate has not changed. Time is moving on. The time left for debate is now 24 minutes. There are three groups left.

Deputy Paul Murphy: All of the questions ran over and I do not think anyone-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I am putting it to the House on the basis of the advice that this session should not sit for more than two hours at a time. That is our agreement as Members.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: We cannot-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I do not want to spend too long debating it, but Deputy Connolly can understand my rationale.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Actually, I do not. This is the second time-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I did not ask whether the Deputy shared my rationale. I asked whether she understood it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: This is the second time my group has been penalised-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I am not penalising the Deputy.

30 April 2020

Deputy Catherine Connolly: -----through Chairpersons not keeping time. I suggest that we take a break now, in compliance with public health requirements, and then come back into the Chamber.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): There are 23 minutes remaining and there are three groups entitled to ten minutes each, amounting to 30 minutes. One does not go into the other. Somebody is going to get-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: If the Acting Chairman wants to comply, he can let us take a quick break.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Deputy does not have to agree if she does not want to. We are not in a position to take a break. If the Deputy does not want to agree she does not have to, but it will mean that the Independent group and Deputies Danny and Michael Healy-Rae will lose time.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My group is the last one and this is the second time we are losing time. It is simply not acceptable.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Deputy Connolly should bring the matter up with the Business Committee.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am bringing it up with the Acting Chairman.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: We are losing time. Can we carry on?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Please do.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I would like to pass my condolences to the families and friends of those who have sadly passed away as a result of the Covid-19 virus. I can only imagine the hurt and pain people must be going through right now. Many family members and friends in my constituency of Louth have lost loved ones. The hardest thing to cope with is the fact that they cannot have traditional wakes and funerals. I personally know the difficulties those people face because I cannot pass on my condolences to them during this period. Recent newspaper reports have highlighted the spike in cases of Covid-19 in the Border counties, with figures approaching those of the Dublin region. This is causing great concern and fear among those living in Border areas like Dundalk, Carlingford, Meath, Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal. Many people are suggesting that the cause may be the fact that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are not following the same course of action. In my home town of Dundalk it is quite obvious that the number of Northern Ireland registered cars has been on a par with the number of Southern registered cars in recent weeks. I would like to hear the Minister's views on this matter. Will he indicate whether he has discussed it directly with his Northern counterpart? Moreover, can the current regulations include a restriction on Northern registered vehicles travelling to the South? I wish to make it clear that I am not in favour of closing the Border. Nobody wants that. However, we need to do something to make sure that people on both sides of the Border are following the guidelines in place in both jurisdictions.

I am sure the Minister is fully aware that we are heading into a bank holiday weekend and that there will be a bank holiday in Northern Ireland the following weekend. The people in the Border area are concerned about what the HSE will do about this.

Deputy Simon Harris: To be helpful, I will keep my answers snappy in order to try to make

up time. I thank Deputy Fitzpatrick for raising this important matter. I agree that there needs to be good co-operation between the North and the South, between the Republic and Northern Ireland. The Tánaiste and I had a regular meeting today with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Deputy First Minister and the Minister of Health, along with our officials, to look at how we can continue to share information and co-operate. I am due to have another meeting at 6.30 p.m. with the Northern Ireland's Minister of Health about that sharing of information. The Garda Commissioner is conscious of the law here and enforcing that. I know that restrictions are in place in the North to be enforced by the PSNI. I hope that, through the good, close working relationship between the PSNI and An Garda Síochána, they could help to address some of the issues that Deputy Fitzpatrick has rightly raised. The Minister for Justice and Equality is due to speak to his counterpart about that matter shortly to see if we can provide clarity to people in the North and the Republic about current restrictions.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: The country has been in effective lockdown for five weeks. I do not think I will be the only person to say this today. The people have responded to the crisis with great resilience and spirit, which can be seen in a way the numbers have been controlled to a certain degree. What most people are now looking for is a plan for the easing of restrictions and a return to normal life. I know that this is a difficult situation but I feel that people have the right to know what the plan is and to have a possible timeframe for the plan. Has the Government agreed a plan and a timeline in respect of it, and when can these be made public? We cannot have a situation where people are left in limbo, not knowing what is happening and effectively kept in lockdown indefinitely. I feel that we need to form a task force with a specific role of co-ordinating our exit from the lockdown.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Government has not yet agreed a plan but I expect that it will do so at its meeting tomorrow. I expect that the Taoiseach will be in a position to share that plan with this House and the country, possibly as soon as tomorrow. The plan will be guided by the recommendations of the National Public Health Emergency Team. We will follow public health advice first, second and third. The plan will endeavour to set out a roadmap as to how to reopen parts of our economy and society in a manner that is consistent with good public health advice and the behaviour of the virus. I hope that it will provide a degree of certainty and clarity to people at a very uncertain time.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: At the HSE briefing yesterday, I asked if testing could be increased in the Border area in light of the fact that numbers are spiking there. To my disappointment, I was informed that there were no plans to increase testing in the Border area specifically. I was informed that the same level of testing is being carried out countrywide. I do not agree with this approach. Why would one carry out the same level of testing in Kerry, where the numbers are lower, as in Louth, where the numbers are higher? Surely we must pinpoint the hotspots of outbreaks and take the necessary measures to contain the spread of the virus in these hotspots? I would be interested in hearing the Minister's view on this matter. Will he confirm if he has discussed it with the HSE and whether he intends to take the necessary measures to contain the virus in these hotspots?

Deputy Simon Harris: The percentage of our population that has been tested is currently the sixth highest in the European Union. I have lost my document about that but we are currently very high up in the context of number of people here who have been tested. We are ramping up and significantly expanding our testing this week, next week and the week after, which I think will see many more people tested. We decide who is tested based on what is called the case definition, which is the view given to us by the National Public Health Emergency Team as

what the priority groups should be. It is generally done on the basis of vulnerability, a person's connection with front-line work, whether he or she is working in a nursing home or the like, and an individual's symptoms. A particular area could be viewed as a hotspot today, whereas a different area could be identified as the hotspot tomorrow. That is generally the guidance. The Government will be guided by the National Public Health Emergency Team.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I have spoken to many business owners in Dundalk and surrounding areas. While the vast majority fully support the Government in its approach to date, they are worried about the long-term effects. One of the main concerns relates to the support and assistance that will be given to businesses to implement social distancing measures for customers and employees once they reopen. The support should not only be financial, it should also be advisory in nature and indicate how to implement strong social distancing measures in the workplace. Has the Minister any views on this?

Deputy Simon Harris: I will leave the financial element to my colleague, the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, but I know she already has plans in that regard and will continue to work with the business community. From a public health point of view, Deputy Fitzpatrick is entirely correct. We need to provide as much support and advice to businesses, sports clubs, schools, etc. so they can adapt to what is going to be a new reality, at least for the time being, regarding physical distancing. When the roadmap is published tomorrow, or the national plan, I hope that will be an opportunity for sectors to engage with Government, in the widest sense of the word, on how they might adapt their approach to providing their businesses or running their organisations so that they can protect their staff or users during the period of this virus, but can still try at a safe point in time to reopen and get back to normality, but maybe a new normal.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: With so many deaths in nursing homes, I have been contacted by many of my constituents who have loved ones who got the Covid-19 virus in nursing homes, were transferred to hospitals and have recovered. The hospitals now want to transfer those people back to the nursing homes. These families are very concerned and want to know what assurance the Minister can give them that it is safe for their loved ones to go back to the nursing homes where they got the Covid-19 virus in the first place.

Deputy Simon Harris: Very clear protocols are in place before a patient will be transferred from an acute hospital back to a nursing home. That is for two reasons. One is the well-being of the patient and to ensure he or she is clinically fit to be discharged from the hospital, while the other is the well-being of other patients and to ensure that the coronavirus has definitely left the patient and does not spread. I assure families that clinical guidance and assessment is taken in this regard. I also assure the people of Ireland that HIQA tells me that many nursing homes are dealing with Covid-19 very well. They are working really hard. We know more than 400 nursing homes are seeking various degrees of support and assistance, but we know that about 70 of them are in serious difficulty or face a serious challenge. That means that many of them that have the coronavirus or Covid-19, just like we could in our homes, are managing it well. I say that to try to provide some reassurance to families.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: My last question concerns seasonal workers. Some 189 workers came in from Sofia last week on a Ryanair plane. They walked through Dublin Airport, got on buses and were distributed around the local areas. Some of them arrived in Termonfeckin in County Louth. The HSE restrictions state that these people have to go into self-isolation for 14 days and be restricted in their movements. These workers have been seen walking freely

through villages and towns in Ireland. What did the HSE do, or was anything done to ensure that these people adhered to the 14-day isolation and movement restrictions? There is also talk of more people coming in next week and the week after. We do not have a problem with seasonal workers coming into this country, but we do have a problem if the HSE has these restrictions but they are not being done correctly. Will the Minister give us some assurance that we have learned from the mistakes that happened last week in the airport?

Deputy Simon Harris: In the 27 seconds available to me, and I will write to the Deputy regarding this matter, I can say that we have now brought in a new passenger form. Anybody, regardless of whether they are a seasonal worker or an Irish person returning to the country, must fill in that form to state where he or she is going to be self-isolating for the 14 days. That form can be checked and followed up, and the Government is considering whether we need to regulate further to underpin that measure.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae of the Rural Independent Group.

Deputy Simon Harris: I have about five seconds left.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I want to ask the Minister about the direct provision centre in Cahirciveen. I appreciate that Deputy Niamh Smith asked a similar question. I ask the Minister to be concise, if he can. Seeing as this centre was sanctioned by the Department of Justice and Equality against and without the approval of the HSE or the Department of Health, will the Minister now close that centre and move these people to a safer place? All the world heard them crying out the windows and through a locked gate last night to take them out of that centre to preserve their health and sanity. That would also preserve those things for the people of Cahirciveen who have been greatly upset by this direct provision centre in the town which puts their lives and health in jeopardy. Will the Minister close the centre down and take those people out of there?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. I will have to look into this matter some more and respond to him and Deputy Michael Healy-Rae in writing on this matter. I have been informed that all residents who have tested positive have been notified and have been moved to self-isolation facilities. If any further test results are notified by HSE public health as positive, immediate measures to self isolate will also be invoked. The Department of Justice and Equality will continue to follow all public health advice and instruction, as it has done to date. In this regard, I am informed that the Department is in daily contact with the National Social Inclusion Office to manage the crisis in respect of direct provision centres. A wide range of measures has been put in place since the beginning of March. As outlined previously, work is under way to develop a protocol for mass testing, as this will be rolled out across approximately 80 centres. This is to ensure-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It was Cahersiveen I was talking about and the Minister has gone all over the country now. May I ask the Minister another question as he will not give me a straight and direct answer?

Deputy Simon Harris: I was going to-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Minister was-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There are 2.2 million people paying for private health insur-

ance. An eminent cardiologist-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is not appropriate for the Acting Chairman to be laughing with the Minister as the Chair is supposed to be impartial. A Member of the House is on his feet asking a question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I smiled at the Minister because he had to take his seat.

Deputy Simon Harris: I very kindly sat down while I was in the middle of answering a question.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: An eminent cardiologist from Cork, Dr. Cróchán O'Sullivan, has done great work in treating people with heart problems and he is very concerned that only 50% of the usual number of people are now presenting with heart problems or worries about strokes, cancer or hip issues. I am concerned about people who are losing their sight and who cannot get their cataracts removed. What will happen now? We appreciate that private hospitals were taken over and we are not saying the Government was wrong in allowing that. However, it will have to do something about the people who were always getting sick before or who had different problems. How will the Government address the problems that have arisen for people who are now afraid because appointments have been cancelled? Will the Minister give some insight to the Government's thinking on this?

Deputy Simon Harris: I will. The Deputy raised a matter but I am very conscious that on the floor of Dáil Éireann, our national Parliament, I am trying to balance the answering of questions with the protection of rights of individuals and requirements under law to protect the identity and medical confidentiality of residents. I know the Department of Justice and Equality and the HSE issued a joint statement on 23 April and I am told by the Department that officials are trying to provide as much information to local representatives as they can. That is the balance I am trying to strike and I am certainly not trying to avoid answering the Deputy's question. I would be more than happy to come back to Deputy Danny Healy-Rae on this matter in conjunction with my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality.

The Deputy is not wrong with some of his assertions on private hospitals. We have tried to ensure we have control of these private hospital facilities in case we need them, and we might still need them for a Covid-19 surge. The Deputy is right and I am thankful we have not seen it yet. We have not run out of ICU capacity in public hospitals, thank God, but we could well have done so. According to a model, we could have had 2,200 people needing ICU care today in Ireland and I am thankful that is not the case. We may yet need that, God forbid, if things go badly.

The Deputy is correct to ask, now that we have seen a different trajectory to the virus so far, whether we could use these hospitals for non-Covid care, including some of the issues raised by the Deputy. The short answer is "Yes" and it is our plan to try to direct more work into those facilities in the coming days and weeks.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am aware that direct provision comes under the Department of Justice and Equality but public health testing for Covid-19 and guidance for tackling the disease comes under the Minister's Department. Will the Minister answer the following questions directly?

Does the Minister believe it was right that residents located in four different emergency accommodation centres across Dublin were transferred to the direct provision centre at Cahersiveen without being tested for Covid-19? Was there infection in any of these emergency accommodation centres prior to those residents coming to Cahersiveen? Why was there a delay in testing after the initial confirmed cases in the Cahersiveen direct provision centre? Why has the HSE not been forthcoming with information? The biggest fear people have with matters like this is not knowing. Does the Minister agree this matter has been very poorly handled? Does it not go completely against the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team, the HSE and the Department to have members of different families self-isolating in the same room? It is clear where you cannot have one person to one room, self-isolation is simply not possible.

In the interest of public health, which is now clearly at risk, will the Minister recommend to the Department of Justice and Equality that this direct provision centre should close immediately? This centre is not good for residents for whom I have considerable sympathy. It is also of grave concern to the people of Cahersiveen and the greater Iveragh Peninsula in south Kerry with more than 20 confirmed cases in the centre, if that is correct.

I am acutely aware of the privacy surrounding individuals and all of that. At the same time there is no reason the HSE should not confirm the number of cases. We have all heard 20, 22 and different figures. Let the HSE confirm that. How many confirmed cases are there? How many tests were undertaken? The Minister should always tell the truth about all these matters. Have all the people who were tested and proved positive gone to a centre in Cork or is that not correct? Are they somewhere else in County Kerry? As long as the Minister is not forthcoming with all the information, then that creates a vacuum.

I raised this with the Taoiseach earlier. I also spoke directly to the Minister for Justice and Equality today, as I did last Monday, about this matter. This is of the utmost importance, not just for the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Health and the HSE but also for the users of the facility who were sent there. They did not choose to go there; they were sent there. It is also important to their neighbours and to the people who have lived in Cahersiveen and the greater Iveragh Peninsula all their lives. All they want from all the Departments is to be told the truth surrounding all this. No matter how much it is beaten, twisted and turned, if it is wrong it will stay wrong. I ask the Minister to please deal with this and I will give him plenty of time to answer.

Deputy Simon Harris: I appreciate that Deputy Healy-Rae outlined his concern being primarily for the people in the facility because in respect of everybody in our country, regardless of how they got to our country, whether they are a citizen or not a citizen, whether they are seeking asylum, we have a duty of care to everybody during this global pandemic and treating everybody equally in that regard. That is why I am very reluctant on the floor of the House to provide information on one residential setting - a direct provision centre - that I would not provide about a nursing home, a disability facility or a mental health facility. We need to respect their confidentiality and ensure the information that is published and commented on is the same. However, I will ask my officials if more can be said about this and I will talk directly to the Minister for Justice and Equality on the matter and come back to Deputies Michael Healy-Rae and Danny Healy-Rae.

I do not know about the issue of testing, nor necessarily should I because that would be confidential information about those residents. However, I know that as we ramp up our testing, we are targeting that extra testing at vulnerable groups of people more susceptible to the virus.

I will write to the Deputy in respect of the question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): There are about five minutes for the Independent group.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have two questions for the Minister. I have listened carefully to all his replies. I gave notice of my questions and I really would like them to be answered specifically. I ask him to clarify the position on testing and residential settings. I asked the Minister the number of residential settings and where they have been tested. In his speech he said that 18,000 samples had been taken. Where were they taken? Have the results been given? I ask him to clarify according to the question. I am conscious of time, but I point out to the Acting Chairman that the clock is not running, so we will gain from that by the looks of things. Are direct provision centres included in those 18,000 samples in residential centres? If not, why not?

Regarding private hospitals, the Minister gave us the heads of agreement. I have not seen the agreements. The Government is paying €125 million a month for private hospitals, and I welcome the extra capacity. However, in Galway the consultants have advised that they are functioning at 25% capacity which means that 75% is idle. I have any amount of correspondence about essential surgery not going ahead, particularly in gynaecology and in cancer, despite having two hospitals 75% under capacity. I do not share the trust that others have in the Minister and the Government regarding residential settings. I have meticulously gone through all of the briefings and even the most recent one fails to refer to nursing homes. It curtly refers to direct provision. The Minister stated that the 18,000 samples do not include direct provision centres in spite of the debacle in Cahersiveen. Since March I have repeatedly raised the issue of direct provision with the HSE via email. It referred me to the Department of Justice and Equality. Residential direct provision centres and nursing homes should have been top of the list.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Last week, the Minister stated that he would answer questions on the development of the app. Will he share with me the briefing note he has on the app? Is the app open source?

The importance of NPHET was raised. The Minister stated that he is the decision-maker but that he has always taken its advice and does not intend to ever not take its advice. As such, who is the decision maker?

Who advises the Minister on mental health issues? The pandemic is taking a significant toll on people's mental health. I understand there is no psychiatric representative on NPHET although there is a psychiatrist on it. However, although I am a barrister, I am not here to represent lawyers. The psychiatrist is on the team as the chair of integrated care. In light of the toll the pandemic is taking on people's mental health, it seems very strange to me that the Minister is not receiving advice on mental health and that NPHET does not contain such a representative.

Deputy Harkin raised the issue of the capacity of private hospitals with the Taoiseach earlier today. Those hospitals are working at 13% capacity. The Minister referred to the importance of people being able to undergo elective procedures. Where can the private consultants who used to work in the private hospitals carry out such procedures? As Deputy Harkin stated, the contract they are being forced to sign does not enable them to do so in the rooms they used heretofore or in the private hospitals out of which they previously worked.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will email an 11-page briefing note on the mobile app to the

Deputy this evening and make it available to other Members on the appropriate forum.

The Deputy made an interesting point regarding the representation of psychiatry on NPHET. I will discuss the matter with its chair. The Deputy is correct that there is a significant mental health challenge. I am due to engage with several mental health advocacy groups in the coming days. Deputy Browne suggested last week in the House that there is a need for a mental health task force to consider how to deal with the mental health fallout. I will revert to Deputy McNamara on the issue. I am advised on mental health by the Chief Medical Officer from a clinical point of view. There is a mental health division within the Department of Health. The Deputy's point on NPHET and mental health is well taken.

On being the decision maker, I am the decision maker in the sense that I am accountable to the House. If I choose to accept the decision of NPHET, that is the decision I make. It is not the case that an unelected group of people are the decision makers as has been somewhat suggested. I decided at the start of this public health crisis that we would be led by our public health response. The plan we will publish tomorrow will be more than a public health response. It will be a Government plan for which the Government will be accountable. It will factor in a range of matters that are compatible with public health and it will follow public health advice. It will also deal with broader matters such as the economy, as the Deputy mentioned.

On the issue of nursing homes, I am not sure to which briefing note Deputy Connolly was referring. Currently, I rightly spend more time on nursing home issues than on any other relating to the pandemic. I have twice-weekly meetings with Nursing Homes Ireland and meet HIQA at least once a week-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That does not answer the question I asked. I am seeking an answer to the question I submitted in writing.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is fine. The assertion made by the Deputy this week-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My time has been curtailed. I ask the Minister to reply to my question in writing.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will reply to the Deputy. She claimed that nursing homes were not mentioned in a briefing note. I can send her any number of briefing notes relating to the work we are doing on nursing homes.

The figure I have is that 28,000 swabs had been completed in long-term residential care settings as of 27 April. I apologise if I misspoke when quoting the figure initially. I expect that number to have increased since then and will provide the Deputy with the up-to-date figure as soon as I get it. As of 26 April, 11,500 laboratory results had been returned. At the moment we are prioritising long-term residential care facilities, private, public and voluntary nursing homes, and the disability and mental health facilities. As we broaden the case definition we intend to expand to more vulnerable groups, including those in direct provision.

Sitting suspended at 6.25 p.m. and resumed at 6.30 p.m.

Covid-19 (Agriculture, Food and the Marine): Statements

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Covid-19 pandemic is a public health crisis first and foremost. My Department, like all Government agencies, is working closely with the Department of Health as part of a whole-of-Government response. The pandemic has also resulted in a profound economic shock across the globe. Its impact is being felt right across the Irish economy, including in the agrifood sector. The impact on the public finances is also profound.

Notwithstanding the unprecedented nature of this crisis, the Government has acted quickly and decisively to ameliorate its worst impacts on those of our citizens who are most affected. Recognising the primacy of public health concerns but also the need to maintain critical food supply chains, I have been working to ensure that food producers and processors continue to operate effectively so that farmers and fishers continue to have an outlet for their produce and consumers continue to have access to safe, high-quality food products. I have also been working to ensure that the Department can continue to provide critical services, including those upon which these critical food supply chains depend. Against this background, I commend essential workers in the food industry, from farmers and fishers, those in processing, transport and logistics, to those keeping retail outlets stocked with food throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. I would also like to thank the staff in my Department for keeping services to the industry operational during this challenging period.

For businesses right across the economy, the past few weeks have been extraordinarily difficult. Many food businesses have been badly affected by the loss of food service outlets and this is having an impact throughout the supply chain. We export 90% of what we produce and a significant proportion of these exports are destined for the food service market. The decline in demand is having an impact on commodity prices, particularly the price of beef. The approach of seasonal production peaks in lamb and dairy against the background of reduced demand is also a concern. My Department is closely monitoring market developments and considering how the impact of any imbalance might be mitigated. In recent weeks, I have been in regular contact with farm leaders, representatives of the processing sectors, fisheries producer organisations, representatives from the forestry sector and State agencies in order to assess challenges and consider the most appropriate response.

A great deal has already been done. The Government is supporting businesses to reorient product in so far as possible towards the retail market. Bord Bia is providing additional marketing supports and training to food companies to help them to transition to online sales. It has also commenced an advertising campaign promoting quality-assured Irish meat, fish and dairy through television advertisements and recipe suggestions online. An additional €1 million has been made available from within Bord Bia's budget to assist with marketing. The Government has also made working capital and investment supports available. The Covid-19 working capital loan scheme co-funded by my Department will provide an additional €250 million in working capital loans for SMEs and mid-cap businesses. Some €100 million of this will be ring-fenced for companies in the agrifood sector. An expanded future growth loan scheme provides an additional €80 million in loan capital for investments in the agrifood sector, including for farmers and fishermen. Microfinance Ireland makes competitive working capital loans available to small businesses and its maximum loan cap has been increased to €50,000 for those impacted by Covid-19. Farmers and fishermen can avail of this funding. I have also spoken directly with representatives of the three pillar banks and they committed to showing

flexibility and support for their agrifood and fisheries clients. Access to liquidity, flexibility and forbearance from the banking system will be critically important for many food businesses. Many farmers and fishermen are also eligible for supports from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

At EU level, I recently led and initiative that resulted in the submission to the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development by all 27 member states of a joint statement seeking a Commission response to Covid-19 impacts on farmers and the wider agrifood sector. In response to this initiative, the Commissioner announced on 22 April a package of measures that includes private storage aid for the dairy and meat sectors. While this support is useful, I am nonetheless continuing to mobilise support for a more comprehensive response at EU level. However, this will be difficult.

This year it will be more important than ever that farm payments are made on time. Conscious of the cash flow pressures on farms at present, I brought forward a €26 million payment under the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, by one month. A new payment run is planned for each week to pick up any outstanding payments. I have also increased funding in the calf welfare investment scheme from €1.5 million to €4 million to assist farmers with extra calves on hand. Targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, payments continue to average at €1.3 million per week to farmers. The preparations to ensure that €250 million in ANC payments and €1.2 billion in basic payments are made to farmers on time are continuing.

I provided an additional €20 million in supports for the beef sector in budget 2020. The beef environmental efficiency programme will remain open for applications until 15 May. This scheme is up and running and available for suckler farmers right now. It is easy to apply for and the benefits are substantial. I urge all suckler beef farmers to apply. A new information line has been established to assist farmers with their queries about the Covid-19 restrictions in place. The number is 076-1064468.

I have also introduced a range of practical flexibilities to departmental schemes. I want to ease the pressure on farmers where this is possible. For example, I have extended the completion deadlines for TAMS by three months and the submission date for nitrate records to the end of June. Routine inspections have been temporarily deferred. Where possible, inspections are being done by telephone so as not to delay payment. I will keep these arrangements under review.

My Department has also worked closely with marts to develop imaginative solutions to permit trade to continue on a limited basis while the wider restrictions are in place. Standard operating procedures submitted by marts permit sales to proceed without compromising HSE guidelines. Of the 84 licensed marts, 78 have been approved to operate in this way. Any further relaxation of restrictions will be guided by public health advice.

Forestry payments average €700,000 per week and licences continue to issue at an average rate of 80,000 m³ per week. The cessation in construction activity in Ireland and the UK has caused immediate difficulties for the Irish timber sector, but it too is eligible for horizontal liquidity investment and employment support measures.

With regard to the seafood sector, on 2 April the European Commission adopted a proposal to amend the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, EMFF, to create new flexibility in European Union law to permit member states to reorient support for the seafood sector. No ad-

30 April 2020

ditional EU funds have been provided and member states must fund these additional supports from existing unspent EMFF allocations or from national funds. I am currently examining options and considering the best course of action, in consultation with the sector.

In the meantime, there is a range of investment and liquidity support available. I have already mentioned the Covid-19 supports from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. I have tasked Bord Iascaigh Mhara, BIM, with working intensively with the catching, processing and retail sectors and to seek engagements so that our supermarkets and shops have a ready supply of fish in their stores. There has been good engagement from all sides and progress on this.

This great challenge has, to date, been characterised by a remarkable level of solidarity and social cohesion. It has been a tremendous collective effort from citizens, the institutions of the State, public representatives, the media, trade unions and sectoral and business representatives of bodies across the board. It has also highlighted the critical importance of the agrifood sector in Ireland, not only to the economy but to the social fabric and food security in Ireland and across the European Union. The challenges facing us are economy-wide, but I assure the House that the agrifood and fisheries sectors will continue to be at the heart of the Government's deliberations as this complex situation evolves. I am happy to take any questions Members may have.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am sharing time with Deputies Jackie Cahill and Michael Moynihan. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Dáil today. It is important that we address the need for additional support for the agricultural sector because, unfortunately, the response so far has not recognised the pressure that agriculture and farmers are under, particularly the pressure that the beef sector has experienced. The response at Commission level has been totally insufficient. There is significant market disturbance in place. Farmers, in particular beef farmers, are losing money. Finishers are losing up to €250 per head. There needs to be a real and immediate response to that.

I want to raise some issues which I ask the Minister to address in the five minutes allocated to me. He mentioned marts. I understand that additional standard operating procedures have been submitted to the Department in recent days that would allow the auction aspect of marts to continue, while significantly restricting any access to the mart. Access would be restricted specifically to buyers, which would facilitate additional competition regarding what has been going on, and at which marts have been doing their best over the last period of time. Those procedures make sense. What is the Minister doing to further them? I would like a prompt answer.

The processing sector faces potentially significant challenges. We have seen some challenges in recent days and weeks in the management of Covid-19 within the processing sector, and there is a real risk of potential clusters. Can the Minister update us on any clusters the Department is aware of? What steps is the Department taking to ensure the processing sector is supported? The health and safety of staff is paramount and they are carrying out essential work in the food supply chain, ensuring the throughput of stock and product over the period ahead.

Proposals have been made for a temporary cessation package for the marine sector. What is the Government doing to support our fishing sector?

Finally, I refer to an issue which crosses over between the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, that is, the

farm assist payment and the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment being made available to farmers. Although it is the direct responsibility of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, it is affecting farmers across the country. Can the Minister give an update on the eligibility of farmers for the Covid-19 payment and farm assist being topped up, at a minimum, to the level of the Covid-19 payment?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister has about a minute and a half for a response.

Deputy Michael Creed: I will do my best. On the beef issue, I accept that this sector has taken the immediate visible hit from Covid-19. There have been consequences due to the closure of food services, not just domestically but more significantly in the volume of food service restaurants and hotels globally and within the European Union. We have been insisting that the European Commission is reminded of the common aspect of the Common Agricultural Policy. In recent days, comments were made by the National Farmers Union, NFU, about UK retailers stocking Irish beef. Elsewhere, we have seen trends for the renationalisation of markets. We, and particularly our beef sector, would be the biggest losers within the European Union if that were to happen. It is critical that we maintain that approach across the European Union. That is why we have led an initiative at European Union level. Up to that point, its response had been that it would relax state aid rules and we could fix the problem ourselves. That is certainly something I was not happy with and there is now some movement on the issue. We need to see more, particularly under exceptional aid measures for the beef sector, and we continue to engage in that regard.

I would be cautious about raising expectations regarding a further unwinding of livestock mart regulations. We engage with them all the time. Over 70 out of 80-plus marts have submitted standard operating procedures, SOPs, which have been approved. We continue to engage but we will be guided by the public health advice on these matters. The revised arrangements are working reasonably well. Without reference to an auction system, I appreciate there is a difficulty in valuations, but we are-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister can provide a written reply on anything he did not get to cover. I call Deputy Cahill.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: The Covid-19 crisis has brought another huge pressure onto primary producers and farmers. Usually when we talk about the pressure on farmers' incomes, it is due to over-supply, but this time it is due to a significant drop in consumption. The European Commission's response so far has been totally inadequate. An allocation of €75 million for all sectors is a drop in the ocean of what is required. It equates to €8 per European farmer. To give a comparison, when dairy prices were under pressure in 2016, €560 million was allocated for dairy supports. This package only proposes €30 million. In 2019, there was a €100 million package for beef farmers. While we failed to distribute some of that to the hard-pressed beef farmers, €100 million was allocated. Unfortunately, in the spring of 2020, prices are even worse. Beef finishers need financial support immediately. Otherwise, they will not be there in the next back end to buy the young stock that will be coming on sale from suckler and store farm producers.

The health of our community is paramount, but food comes a close second. It is an essential for all people. Food security, the basis on which CAP was formed, has to be part of the new CAP negotiations. To ensure food security, food for European consumers must be provided by European farmers. This was the basis of CAP previously and proper price supports used to be

in place for the European farmer, but that is not the case now and CAP has dropped down the list of priorities on the EU's agenda. That has to change.

The Minister might refer to advanced dates for payments, but that is money already committed. The current drop in prices is being caused by a drop in consumption. We need a properly funded and flexible aid to private storage scheme, APS, to deal with that. There are already forecasts of food shortages in the US and other parts of the world in the back end of 2020. With a properly funded APS, we would then have steaks, dairy products and sheep meat to meet that shortfall. Beef finishers are in a separate category and must get financial support immediately.

Flexibility in schemes' dates is essential in this unprecedented year. The farmers involved in the nitrates derogation need flexibility. The stocking criterion to qualify for the beef exceptional aid measure, BEAM, payment must be scrapped. Stocking rate requirements for areas of national conservation, for example, must be flexible. Inspections being postponed cannot be used as an excuse for the slow payment of grants or scheme funding. I want the Department to consider the system that operates at marts in Northern Ireland with a view to determining whether it can operate in the South.

A point has been raised with me by a few of our urban Deputies, namely, that many urban dwellers do not have access to allotments. Such allotments are usually 25 m wide. As such, social distancing could be operated there easily. They would do as much for people's enjoyment as for providing food for their tables. Mental health was discussed during the debate with the Minister for Health. Providing access to allotments would be another avenue for people in urban areas to exercise and help their mental well-being.

The Minister mentioned forestry. Stakeholders in forestry are still unhappy with the issuing of licences. They predict that we will only plant 3,500 ha of forestry this year, which is less than half the target.

Other countries on the Continent and across the water are discussing resuming horse and greyhound racing behind closed doors. Where are our discussions as regards those two sports?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I will be brief and allow the Minister to address some of the points that have been raised by my colleagues.

The ongoing crisis facing beef farmers has been multiplied by the Covid-19 crisis. Has the beef task force - the famous group that was set up a number of years ago - met in a virtual form or have there been discussions on setting out a roadmap for beef farmers as we move forward? There are various methods of holding conference calls now and it is crucial that every stakeholder be engaged at the highest possible level. It is important that there be a roadmap that, as other Deputies mentioned, considers the world economy as we go into the back end of 2020 and challenges the EU in every way to make as much available to beef farmers as possible. There is and will continue to be a crisis at the farm gate.

Regarding the dairy industry, milk processors are putting pressure on the prices they are giving farmers at the gate. We have at all times to be mindful of the primary producer who is producing top quality food. We have taken the primary producer for granted over the years because of other issues that have been around the place. We must look at that.

Has the Minister spoken to the chief executives of milk processing companies and got a sense of the implications, challenges and forecasts for the dairy industry in the coming 12

months?

The Minister mentioned various schemes, including the targeted agricultural modernisation schemes, TAMS, and changes in deadlines. Those have been already committed to. In the various discussions the Minister has had with the European Union, does it accept that agriculture on the island of Ireland is under savage pressure? We must ensure that every aspect of agriculture is brought to the table at European level. Is there recognition at European level, or has the European Union moved away from the Common Agricultural Policy and providing quality food for the citizens of Europe? Is there a commitment at EU level to make sure that every support is made available to the farmer and the agriculture industry as it faces the most unprecedented times it has ever faced?

I will leave my outstanding two minutes to allow the Minister to address other issues. I would particularly like to hear his thoughts on the beef and dairy sectors and the challenges at a European level.

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not think we will get many thoughts in two minutes.

Deputy Michael Creed: I will try to race through the issues. I have met with the dairy co-ops and executives by teleconference on two occasions in recent weeks. Our primary concern was to make sure that as we approach peak production, we keep processing capacity functioning and that there would be sufficient contingency planning in our Department and at individual plant level to facilitate that because there is little head room in processing over and above peak production levels.

There is recognition at EU level about the unique structure of our agricultural industry, its dependence on exports to the EU and the fact that we are disproportionately dependent on food service because we have a limited domestic retail market. Does that translate to additional supports? There would not have been the movement that has happened, albeit inadequate, were it not for the efforts we have made in reminding the EU that it needs to respond to a common problem, across the EU, rather than letting member states respond individually, which would run the significant risk of renationalisation to which I alluded earlier when considering comments that have been made by our nearest neighbour.

The beef task force has not met but there has been ongoing engagement with virtually all of the stakeholders during this period. Work that was undertaken and commissioned is progressing in my Department which will facilitate the task force when it meets at the earliest possible date.

Deputy Cahill made points around areas of natural constraints, ANC, and stocking rates. This is something on which we would want to reflect. I have resisted interfering with the stocking rate because people buying to meet stocking rate requirements are putting a floor on the price of live cattle at the moment. If we were to tell people they do not have to meet the stocking density requirement for ANC payments, we would undermine that trade and by virtue of eliminating that condition, qualify a substantial number of farmers who have not previously applied for the scheme. The pot would have to be shared out to a larger number of farmers and we would erode the base price that is underpinning the live trade market.

I have committed to keeping an open mind on the 5% reduction in organic nitrogen loads for the beef exceptional aid measure, BEAM, but I do not believe that something that will kick in only from the end of July this year to the end of June next year is currently a detriment to the

market.

I hear the point the Deputy made about allotments and it is one that has been brought to my attention by many others. I am subject to correction by the public health advisory team, but I do not think anybody could make the case that individually opening allotments would create a surge in the pandemic. The fear is a cumulative impact of a series of what look, individually, like minor issues. When those accumulate, it could be a trigger mechanism for a surge and that is the concern.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister might correspond with the Deputies on the remainder of the matters, if there are any. We move now to the Sinn Féin Party. Deputy Brian Stanley, please.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am sharing time, with five minutes for each the two other Deputies in the Chamber.

I thank the Minister. I have four questions for him. The first issue I want to raise is one to which I am returning, having raised it with the Minister some weeks ago. It relates to health and safety in food processing plants. I particularly want to raise the issue at Rosderra Meats. The company has plants in Edenderry and Roscrea and I have heard complaints from both. The worse scenario is in the factory in Roscrea, where there has been an outbreak of Covid-19. We want to keep the factories open and we have been very clear about this. There are approximately 350 workers on the factory floor there. Up to 140 of them were out sick throughout last week and 120 tested positive for the virus. I was informed - I checked the details again today - that the first case showed up over a month ago. Workers had to battle with management to get measures of any kind put in place, but they are still being denied two-metre distancing on the factory floor. There is congregating and no separation in the locker rooms or washrooms. The situation has improved in the context of PPE, which is now in place, but the virus was allowed to spread within that factory. That should not happen. No proper instructions were issued to workers, many of whom are not English-speaking or else English is not their first language. I want the Minister to address that. What is being done regarding inspections? What inspections are being carried out? Who are they being carried out by? What is being done to ensure that these industries keep going? It is important that we keep these jobs going, that workers are safe and that the food coming out is safe.

I want to ask the Minister about the beef sector. I have no wish to rehearse the situation. The Minister knows about the beef sector as well as I do. The aid package announced by the European Commission is literally a drop in the ocean. It works out at €8 per farmer across the EU. I welcome the fact that the Minister is front-loading direct payments - that is a welcome and positive move forward. However, we want the Minister to go back to the European Commission and get a better deal.

I want to ask the Minister about beef imports into the EU. That is still happening. Has the Minister spoken to other his counterparts? I have asked him to do this previously. I have asked him to speak to other agriculture ministers regarding this matter in order to bring about an alliance. We have plenty of beef in Europe. We have a vast amount of it within Ireland that we can get onto the supermarket shelves.

I want to ask the Minister about the fishing industry. There is a particular problem with restaurants being closed throughout continental Europe. There has been a drop-off in the level

of Irish exports. We are proposing that quotas could be increased for herring in the north east to help fishermen in that area. Has the Minister any plans in that regard? The Minister alluded to getting wet counters open. There is demand for fish but people cannot get it in most supermarkets. I know the Minister is doing some work on this but he might give me an answer on that question as well. I will stop at that.

Deputy Michael Creed: I would not like the message to go out - I do not think it is true, although I am not sure if Deputy Stanley meant it this way - that, either by commission or omission, factories allowed Covid-19 to spread.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I have confirmation that took place. The Minister can check it and the basis for it if he wishes.

Deputy Michael Creed: All I can say is that is not the information available to our Department. We have staff in those places and we have contracted temporary veterinary inspectors. I want to say that is certainly not the case on the basis of the information available to me.

In all of this, public health is the primary concern. The processing of meat is important but it is a secondary concern to the primacy of the health of the people working in those plants. The measures in place include social distancing, hand-washing etiquette, Perspex screens, reduced throughput and provision of PPE. All of these have been part of the response that the industry has been proactive with regard to. This was part of the negotiations we had early on with all the stakeholders in terms of their responsibilities as businesses. I have to say I have been encouraged by that response. There has been engagement by those meat plants. HSE staff and officials from my Department have been involved. The feedback to me is that there has been strong co-operation.

We are aware of six clusters, five in processing plants and one in a deboning plant

Deputy Matt Carthy: It would be generous to describe the supports given to Irish farmers during this crisis as pathetic. Today, the Minister referred to schemes from other Departments. He spoke about providing money to farmers to which they were entitled anyway but just that little bit sooner. He also spoke about the reliance on the EU package of €76 million. That package has been already described here as inadequate. I would go so far as to say that it is nothing short of an insult to our family farmers. That package should be compared to the support from the US Administration which comes to €27 billion. Christ knows that Administration has got much wrong. There are only 2 million farmers across the United States when there are 10.5 million in the EU. It is clear there is a greater commitment to the future of agriculture across the Atlantic.

The farmers I have spoken to were absolutely stunned by the inadequacy of the EU package. Farmers were also shocked to hear the Minister state he welcomed this response from the European Commission. I accept he went on to say it would probably need to go further. Many farmers have said to me, however, that the response of the Minister and the Government to the EU package was as pathetic as the package itself.

Considering that it is clear the EU is not likely to provide the type of package as quickly as is required, will the Government work to deliver a domestic scheme that actually provides funding directly to those farmers who need it urgently and desperately? Will the Minister do that as quickly as possible?

My second question relates again to the beef sector. It has been mentioned here already that during last year's protests many beef farmers were already on their knees. This coronavirus emergency has really made a bad situation worse. In the midst of this, we hear stories of the meat industry actually importing foreign beef into Irish factories. I have asked in writing for the Minister to intervene in that situation but he has refused saying these are commercial decisions. Whatever about intervening, will the Minister publicly condemn the actions of those factories which have been importing beef when prices given to Irish farmers are on the floor? Will he contact the factory owners to ask them to cease this practice? This is not about protectionism. This is about having a quality product in Ireland. It does not make any sense from a patriotic point of view for factories to be doing this.

Finally, I want a simple "Yes" or "No" answer to this question. Will the Minister and his Department consider providing a compensation scheme for those poultry farmers who have experienced culls as a result of bird 'flu outbreaks? These are farmers who have suffered devastating losses in recent days and weeks due to an occurrence against which they cannot insure. In the absence of an insurance scheme, the Government needs to provide support.

An Ceann Comhairle: That leaves a minute and 25 seconds.

Deputy Michael Creed: The structure of this is very difficult because it is not opportune-----

An Ceann Comhairle: If Members asking the questions consume all the time allocated asking the questions, they cannot expect the Minister to be able to answer them. It is quite sensible.

Deputy Michael Creed: We produce-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is why I asked simple questions.

Deputy Michael Creed: We will try to give the Deputy simple answers which he might understand.

We produce approximately 600,000 tonnes of beef every year, of which we export 90%. Approximately 300,000 tonnes of that goes to the UK. UK farmer representatives are complaining to UK retailers about stocking Irish beef. We see a story running about the Polish approach to renationalisation. Deputy Carthy's proposal, for which I understand there is some popular traction, is that we should be here clamouring for Irish beef for the Irish market. The logical conclusion of that, however, is a renationalisation across Europe of all markets. If we say the Irish market is exclusively-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: On a point of order, if we are exporting 90% of our beef, how does it make sense for factories to import beef?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not a point of order. Please allow the Minister to respond.

Deputy Matt Carthy: How does it make sense?

Deputy Michael Creed: Does the Deputy want an answer?

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to resume his seat. I call the next speaker.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buiochas ó chroí le toghthóirí dálcheantair an Lú, a chur muinín i Sinn Féin nuair a toghadh mé féin agus an Teachta Imelda Munster don Dáil seo.

Ní ligfimid síos iad.

The Covid-19 crisis has visited suffering and sadness on many and our thoughts are with these families. It has also forced us to look at how we organise our lives, work and society. We realise we can do better, from remote working to introducing universal healthcare for all, from cradle to grave and really tackling the climate crisis. Even during this crisis we still have to contend with other viruses such as drug dealing and criminal gangs. It does not need to be like this. We need to act together to provide for all and not just the few. Politicians must provide clarity to all sectors as we face possible changes so that we can operate in a Covid-19 world. We cannot operate without robust testing, sufficient PPE supplies and dealing with the tragedy that we have in some of our nursing homes.

The importance of a quality food supply and all those who work from farm to fork has been brought into stark focus in this crisis. Family farms have helped to ensure product on the shelves. They have kept us fed and their vital contribution must be recognised by the Government. We need real actions and not just rhetoric. The Minister, Deputy Creed, must make known to the European Union that the €76 million fund across Europe is pitiful. As has been stated here, it has been estimated that this works out at about €8 per farmer across Europe. The farmer from Knockbridge was right when he told me that you would not get enough for two pints, although he would have difficulty at the moment getting even one pint.

Operating capital is vital to farmers as much as it is to the SME sector. We need to ensure that the farming sector has access to debt-free liquidity. Money needs to be freed up from the BEAM scheme to help beef farmers who are facing brutal prices at the moment. I ask the Minister to consider a postponement for the time being of the BEAM requirement for bovine manure nitrogen production to be reduced by 5% over the next 12 months, because in order to meet it, farmers will have to sell herd at a time of terribly low prices.

Much of the red tape that was once a feature of sectors such as business, social protection, schools and healthcare has been rightly put to the side during this pandemic. Family farms need to see that happening too. Farmers continue to face quibbles and inspections over non-consequential boundaries that are holding up their single farm payments. That cannot be allowed to persist at the moment. The same flexibility that has been shown to other sectors needs to be shown to farmers.

Online audits for Bord Bia are proving troublesome. Instead of making life easier, some farmers are struggling to complete them without access to the know-how, proper technology and adequate broadband. Many farmers have difficulties with Bord Bia, but that is for another day. The audits can easily be postponed and I ask the Minister to consider that.

This House is seeking guidance for businesses as to how they can safely open in a staggered way when robust testing and other factors are in place. I ask the Minister to outline what steps he has taken regarding the care, safety and rights of casual labourers so we do not see a re-run of the problems caused by the Keelings incident. We need delivery for farmers and other sectors from this House.

Deputy Michael Creed: I alluded to the BEAM conditionality earlier and the willingness to keep an open mind on it, but I do not recognise at this stage that there has been any adverse impact on the operations of farmers.

My response to the EU response has been quoted out of context. We were in a situation

where the EU's initial response was to free up state aid flexibility and after that we were on our own. We contacted every member state to galvanise support for a common approach across Europe and in so far as there is a common approach we welcome that, but we said the extent to which it has been delivered is inadequate and we will continue to work in that regard, particularly in respect of the missing chapter to date, which has been around exceptional aid measures for the livestock sector. That is where we are focused. We will continue to apply maximum pressure in that regard at the next Council of Ministers meeting in the second week of May. We are part of a Common Agricultural Policy and there should be an appropriate response from the Commission to that.

On the issue of Keelings, it has to be said that during the previous recession and in recent years when there were low levels of unemployment, it has been difficult for the company to get workers in the Irish economy, as is the case generally for the horticultural sector. Changes that have been brought in for workers coming into the country. However, the consequences of failing to harvest crops here will be that produce from elsewhere will be on the supermarket shelves. We need to make sure that businesses in the horticultural sector are enabled to harvest their crops.

An Ceann Comhairle: That was Deputy Ó Murchú's maiden contribution, and I congratulate him.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I will share my time with Deputy Peter Burke and the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee.

The Minister is well aware of the challenges facing farming and the agricultural sector throughout this Covid-19 crisis. Never before has there been such a focus on the importance of food security. It is important that the general population does not take our top quality food production for granted.

There is a financial strain on farmers, as there is on all sectors of business. Successive Fine Gael Governments looked to agriculture and tourism to drive and lead the way out of the previous recession. Farmers were not found wanting then and they will not be found wanting in the recession and with regard to the challenges we face in the economy in the future. To be able to drive and lead again, farmers need to be supported throughout this time of crisis. I support the Minister's efforts to get national and European support, particularly for areas such as the beef sector given the challenges it faces.

With regard to the exceptional measures, the beef scheme has a deadline of 15 May. What is the level of take-up with that scheme and what is the position with the application process? I take this opportunity to encourage my constituents - farmers in counties Kildare and Laois - to apply to the scheme sooner rather than later because it would strengthen our hand in seeking more funds if the scheme were oversubscribed.

On horse racing, particularly flat racing and the knock-on implications for the breeding sector, the sector is worth more than €1 billion to the economy. The Ceann Comhairle will be well aware of how important it is to many rural areas. Horses are only two or three years old once. There is a knock-on effect on the breeding sector. We need to put our best foot forward with the team in Horse Racing Ireland, HRI, even if it means operating behind closed doors in a safe way and protecting the staff.

In terms of horticulture, Bloom at Home is a Government initiative. The horticultural sector

has had a tough time. We talk about the mental health benefits of people being able to garden. Some easing of restrictions in that area and in the areas of farmers' markets and allotments, which were mentioned earlier, will be important. I will leave it at that.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Minister and am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

It is important that we continue to work through this crisis in supporting the farming sector, including the beef sector, which has been under pressure for the past number of months.

One of the issues raised with me is that farmers have a small window for improving their infrastructure, for example, with sheds, and drawing down finance do so. The planning laws have been extended by 40 days. Some farmers are encountering difficulties with routine planning applications in drawing down finance for that short window. This is in the new legislation and I ask the Minister to look at whether anything can be done to expedite that.

It is important to get the marts up and running in a safe manner and to get a trading environment going for the farmers. That is another critical issue, one which I have discussed with the Minister in my constituency of Longford-Westmeath.

In terms of any payments that can be expedited from Europe, while the overall basket will not change, cashflow is key at this difficult time. I would support any improvements that can be made in that regard. As we all know, cashflow is the lifeblood of any business. As we get the economy and agriculture sector back up slowly, we need to ensure these businesses have timely access to cash. I thank the Minister for progressing the European and national efforts to try to get support for all these measures.

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind Members there should be no more than two Members of any party or group in the House at any given time.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade(Deputy Helen McEntee): I will be as brief as possible, if I may. As I did not have an opportunity earlier, I will take this time to thank all of our front-line workers who are fighting Covid-19. I thank our healthcare workers, the workers in supermarkets and other essential shops that are open, our gardaí and members of the Defence Forces and, in particular, the farmers who are producing the food in our supermarkets that we are now buying and which many of us are probably cooking at home for the first time in a long time. Many could be forgiven for thinking that everything is fine because our farmers are farming, food is on the shelves and people are eating it. That is simply not the case. The Minister has outlined several things that have had a significant impact, not just on beef but also on dairy and across the entire sector. Exports and prices are down. Farming is at the mercy of weather, global markets, prices and demand at the best of times. As we can see, all of these have been hit in the perfect storm.

I ask that the Minister continues to prioritise the beef sector as he has outlined. We can provide this sector with financial support at home and through our European colleagues and the European Commission. The beef task force has been mentioned. It has been raised with me by many farmers. While they might not be able to meet in person, the Minister has said he has spoken to all of them. We had started the process of setting out a roadmap for the beef sector. Now more than ever we need to continue in that regard.

I commend the Minister on leading the charge and getting all 26 member states to sign his response to the Commission's initial package. Can he outline the most recent response he has

received from the Commissioner?

What additional supports have been put in place in the context of farm safety? There are now a lot of children and others at home who would not normally be there. The last thing we want as we enter the summer months is more farm accidents.

Has the Minister had any conversations with representatives of the large supermarkets or retailers? Several fruit and vegetable growers have said to me that they are now being asked to sell at a greatly reduced price. At this moment, we should really be supporting local producers.

Finally I refer to climate, something that is very much on the agenda where farming is concerned. Whether it is a 3% or 7% target, farmers have always been and always will be custodians of our land. They are the ones who have protected it and will continue to protect it. We must work with them to set out a pathway to doing that. Last September we started the process of setting out a roadmap that would help us to achieve the targets set by the Joint Committee on Climate Action. Could the Minister provide an update in that regard? If the target is increased to 7%, how will that impact on the overall plan?

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Deputy. On the latter point, the industry is particularly aware of domestic and global consumer interest in a carbon-efficient production system. We are at an advanced stage in the implementation of the climate action plan that has been approved by this House and the Government. Ireland is a global leader in these industries. Along with their counterparts in New Zealand, Irish farmers are recognised as the most carbon-efficient dairy producers. I see no reason that we should sacrifice the industry on an altar of ambition. There is a global demand for the product. Why should we dismantle a dairy sector that is highly carbon-efficient? There is no doubt that we can improve. We do not need to dismantle the ambition. We need to make sure that we are global leaders in terms of carbon per kilogram of output, whether the product is dairy, beef, pork or tillage. We must ensure that our product is setting the global example of how efficient an industry can be.

Regarding supermarkets, as Deputy McEntee knows, we have undertaken public consultation on unfair trading practices. This is the vehicle by which we will transpose the directive into domestic law by May 2021. That is how we will protect consumers and provide financial support for the horticulture sector.

It is important not to forget that we have domestic supports for the beef industry. There is approximately €85 million in funding for schemes this year, including an additional €20 million for the beef environmental efficiency scheme. I urge Members who are concerned about the sector to encourage people to apply. We have about 12,000 applications at the moment. The closing date is 15 May. That scheme offers up to €8,000 in income supports per suckler farm. That should not be dismissed. It has been revised to take account of the pilot experience and has been welcomed by all farm organisations.

Regarding Deputy Burke's points on TAMS, we have acknowledged the difficulty arising from the planning process and are now accepting applications without planning approval, though planning approval will need to be submitted before approval will issue. We are trying to tweak our schemes as we become aware of particular problems.

We accept that there is a gap in the availability of working capital for farmers. One of the ways we can address that requires a legislative fix. We are doing all of the other preparatory work under the assumption that in due course, hopefully before too long, there will be a pos-

sibility of a legislative fix being approved by the Houses of the Oireachtas. On the point about further engagement with the European Union, I will have a bilateral engagement with the Commissioner by telephone next week to progress further the campaign that we have to deliver additional supports. We are continuing with that. I concur wholeheartedly with the matter relating to farm safety. We are in the beginning of the silage season. There are more kids around farm-yards and more people walking and cycling on country roads while social distancing. Let us all send a message to be extremely careful. We have had too many accidents already. Pedestrian accidents on our roads are already double what they were by this time last year. Considering the horror of children on farms with heavy machinery during silage season, we can all help to convey that message.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: In response to the point raised by the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, I think that the 7% is achievable across all sectors. It will require much constructive dialogue. It is important that constructive dialogue will lead to a much more climate-resilient future but also to a much more sustainable future for Irish farming. Farming is the anchor of our rural economy. Our family farms not only support our food needs but a wider ripple in rural Ireland, including mechanics, fitters, vets, contractors, co-operatives, local merchants, shops and schools, which all benefit from our farming sector. The agrifood sector has been hit as hard as any sector by falls in income and profit through the Covid-19 pandemic. Farm businesses are the fabric that holds our rural communities together. They are the biggest employers and generate the most wealth and income as primary producers in these regions. Beef profitability is at an all-time low and dairy incomes are forecast to fall by at least 20% this year. Prices in dairy have taken a big hit in these crucial peak milk production months. It is imperative that these sectors be supported through these unprecedented market disruptions that we are experiencing due to Covid-19.

Farm businesses should not have been excluded from the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, Covid-19 support fund. These funds should have immediately been made available to the agrifood sector. It is imperative that they are supported through this downturn and keep a strong trading position to help the national economy to recover from the impending downturn caused by Covid-19. To that end, in light of the SBCI announcement of the €17.5 million in lower cost funding for small and medium enterprises, SMEs, will the Minister ensure that the next round of SBCI's future growth loan scheme includes a facility for low-cost working capital to help farm businesses to work through this difficult period? Will the Minister put pressure on banks to ensure that they exercise flexibility and forbearance with their farmer customers as they work through this unprecedented crisis?

I want to raise the challenges facing animal welfare charities. More than 100 receive grants from €2,000 to €4,000 from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Most, if not all, have seen a dramatic decline in their income streams and fundraising due restrictions caused by the pandemic. Furthermore, the closure of some local authority pounds, and dog welfare and rehoming charities not being allowed to move animals that have been adopted by families, is causing further pressure on charities. Can we ensure that all local authority pounds remain open just to the charities? Animal rescue centres need clear direction on whether they can transport dogs under the Animal Health and Welfare Act. Can pounds be reopened to allow strays to be taken into rescue centres to reduce the stress on dogs? There is a funding issue too. Some €2.5 million is allocated to the rescue centres, while €16.5 million is given to Bord na gCon. I think some of that funding could be diverted to help these charities through this crisis. I welcome the comments that have been made by other Deputies about allotments and farmers' markets. I

think that we could ease some restrictions. Farmers' markets are effectively open supermarkets. With social distancing, they provide an essential food outlet for food producers and people who want to buy essential food.

Deputy Michael Creed: I share the Deputy's view that constructive dialogue is the way to go and I look forward to that. I have engaged directly with SBCI and accept that there is a gap in the financial instruments that we have so far been able to deliver, with regard to working capital. As I alluded to earlier, a legislative fix is required to enable us to deal with that. We are making sure that once that is delivered, everything else will be ready. I have also engaged with the pillar banks about forbearance for the industry. Regarding that engagement, they have been responsive. I have also had that feedback from individual farmers and farm leaders.

I accept the issue and the point made, and I have had some engagement with charities in the area of animal welfare. This lockdown is having implications and consequences in ways we could not have imagined. During my tenure as Minister, we have significantly increased the supports we give to these charities. They do invaluable work, which the State could never replicate, by virtue of their voluntary nature. We will have to keep an open mind as to how we will support them in future, given the challenges they are facing and the loss of voluntary support because of the lockdown. We were able to advise them regarding the care of animals and livestock, which includes the care of companion animals, etc. I appreciate, however, that this is an area that will require ongoing vigilance. Turning to the opening of pounds, etc., that is a challenge being considered in the context of a whole host of other areas. This is the cumulative impact of a host of what are seemingly inoffensive activities, and we have been in contact with the national public health team about farmers' markets, allotments, etc.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I support Deputy Cahill's call for opening allotments in urban areas. These fulfil an essential function regarding food production and provide an outlet for urban dwellers to carry out physical exercise in a safe and socially distant way, while also allowing positive interaction within communities.

The Covid-19 health crisis and the associated financial crisis have focused the minds of many worldwide on the importance of food security and the agrifood sector, which employs 173,000 people in this country. The United Nations has warned that while parts of the world are on the brink of a hunger pandemic, some countries are dumping milk due to a breakdown in supply lines. Irish farmers, meanwhile, are suffering significant financial losses, especially in the beef and dairy sectors. The Covid-19 crisis is affecting the agriculture sector and we must ensure we provide support to farmers.

Farmers are not just producers of food. They have a vital role to play as environmental stewards in areas such as water quality, biodiversity and climate mitigation and adaptation. Without the co-operation of farmers, Ireland cannot reach its targets of cutting emissions in line with the Paris Agreement. We need to engage with farmers and other stakeholders to review and analyse the full range of land diversification options, from horticultural production, protein crop production and organic farming to afforestation and agroforestry. Most of all, we must be guided by science. The science states we must reduce emissions to keep our planet from warming dangerously. We must ensure we listen to scientific advice to ensure every sector plays its part, while ensuring no sector is targeted unfairly.

To that end, I ask the Minister if he is aware that research by Teagasc has shown that multi-species grass swards can reduce artificial fertiliser use by 50%, increase the ability of soil to

resist leaching and increase biodiversity. Will the Minister commit his Department to funding further research with a view to promoting widespread movement away from perennial ryegrass swards and an associated reduction in the use of imported artificial fertiliser to help reduce the price of inputs for farmers as they face significant challenges as a result of the Covid-19 crisis?

Finally, I wish to ask the Minister a question about gorse fires. I have a concern about the pressure being placed on emergency services during the Covid-19 crisis. In common with my colleague, Deputy Matthews, I am concerned about recent gorse fires in Kildare and Wicklow. Does the Minister believe his Department is working closely enough with hill farmers in areas at risk of out-of-control gorse fires, and is there anything further that can be done to work in a co-operative manner with farmers to ensure good land management in hill areas at risk of gorse fires?

Deputy Michael Creed: On the latter point, the Department consistently advises farmers regarding the rules and regulations and timelines concerning when the burning of uplands is permitted. It is also brought to their attention that those in breach of those regulations run the risk of disqualifying themselves from their entitlement to payments from the Department. There is also a Commission interest in these matters. I concur with the Deputy that out-of-season burning is entirely unacceptable. We have been adamant in that regard. People such as those in the Wicklow Uplands Council have been quite proactive in working with farmers and finding ways of managing uplands that does not involve breach of the regulations.

I was interested in the Deputy's reference to the Paris Agreement. We have signed up to targets at a European Union level. It is important to remind ourselves occasionally that the Paris Agreement refers to meeting those targets without compromising sustainable food production. This brings us to the point that, by any comparison, our food industry - notwithstanding that it can do much more - is carbon-efficient by global standards. The Deputy referred to research by Teagasc, which has an independent budget for research that is quite innovative when we consider what it has achieved for the industry. Our ambition in the sector is to implement Teagasc research. Many people refer to the Teagasc marginal abatement cost curve, which is enabling us to tackle nutrient management issues in particular with respect to the application of chemical fertilisers and the appropriate management of organic fertilisers. That is the way forward in terms of science, innovation and research.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I hope there will be time at the end for the Minister to answer some questions. If not, I would appreciate it if I could receive some answers by means of correspondence. I first recognise the resilience and commitment of all the workers and producers in the agriculture sector in keeping our supermarket shelves stocked at this very difficult time. It is an industry vulnerable every year to various factors and with a pandemic thrown in, it is a testament to the sector that it can operate to the level it is at currently.

I am delighted Deputies Cahill and Leddin referred to allotments. I was concerned that I might be stretching the boundaries of the Minister's portfolio if I raised the matter. In my constituency of Dublin Fingal, urban meets rural and allotments are a very big deal. Many people have them. They play a big role in people growing their own food and there are mental health benefits. I received a number of representations on this. I am very committed to our public health guidelines - and I am quite strict about them - but I was running this matter through my head. I ask if the use of such allotments could be allowed while maintaining social distance and not risking a knock-on effect that would bring more loosening of restrictions. This could happen as these are private areas and many are gated. A simple rule of one person per allotment

would mean that social distancing and any public health guidelines could be adhered to. This is a matter that must be re-examined.

There are public parks and open spaces where people can get outside for a period each day for walks and physical activity. Allotments could fall into this category. They may be even more protected from contamination by Covid-19 than public parks. Did the Government or the Department specifically instruct county councils to close access to gardening allotments and will the Minister consider reopening private gardening allotments operating within public health guidelines, as we can see is happening with public parks and open spaces?

In the context of supports for farmers, we know food production is an essential service and workers in that sector must ensure they can carry out this essential work within public health guidelines. Will the Minister detail the supports and protection being provided for dairy farmers with outside contractors working on their land? Is it necessary for workers to have PPE when social distancing may be difficult in some forms of work, as is the case in other sectors?

What interaction has the Department had with the beef industry since the closure of pubs and restaurants in order to maintain a functioning supply chain while the demand from the hospitality sector has slowed to an absolute crawl? Does the Department have plans to ensure that food produced does not result in waste due to overproduction or cause delays within the supply chain? Has the Department made plans to ensure farm safety inspections can continue to be carried out throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure food production safety and the safety of workers in the sector?

I was very interested in the Minister's comments just now as they brought home to me the fact that on most farms children would be at school during the day and it would be a safe place to work. Farms are now a home and a place of work so those dangers have increased. I will certainly bring those comments to my party to get that message out of increased safety and vigilance on farms. What statistics are available for farm safety since the beginning of February, when the country started to deal with the public health emergency and how do they measure against statistics for periods prior to the outbreak of Covid-19?

I am very interested in the EU support package for farmers. Farmers have already been struggling with cash flows in the beef sector with a basic call for fair distribution of profits over the past year. I know some farmers feel undervalued and underappreciated by certain players in the supply chain in the beef sector. I would argue that regardless of the pandemic we face, farmers are always key members of the workforce that keeps the wheels of our nation turning. It is about time their voices are truly heard on the issue of a fair deal for their produce and decent support for their vital work during this time. Further to the EU support package for farmers, what plans does the Government have for income support for beef farmers? Does the Government have plans to ensure that no farmer working to supply the country with food and to make an honest living does not fall into financial ruin during the period and that income supports are available to the sector?

Are there plans to reopen marts in line with public health guidelines? I know other Members have raised this in the last hour. We are coming into the peak dairy production season. Have measures been put in place to ensure high-skilled workers across this area of manufacturing and production can work to ensure we meet the demands of peak production?

The horticulture sector is a big sector in Fingal. In the past two weeks a matter known as

the Keelings issue has come to light. Of course, this is an issue that exists nationwide. There are many different strands to it and we need to be very careful when discussing the issue. In recent years we probably turned a blind eye to the need for seasonal migrant labour to come here. They are skilled labour force coming in, reaping our crop and making sure it gets to our supermarkets. There have been issues with pay and conditions that have gone unheralded by the majority in recent years. These have been brought to light in recent weeks. Are we, as a society, happy to stand over poor pay and conditions for seasonal migrant labour? I know I am not. This matter needs real attention in coming weeks and months.

We also have issues with public health; we are working in a pandemic. Are the seasonal migrant labourers coming to work in our country being protected? Are the companies looking after them? Are they being accommodated correctly? How can we be sure that the restrictions the companies claim are in place are actually being put in place? That applies to the workers and to the communities in which they work because they need to shop, socialise and exercise in the surrounding communities.

These are really important issues that we need to get hold of. The elephant in the room and the issue Keelings exposed and for which we all have responsibility is that we have a particular element in Irish political life at the moment. We have these far-right ethno-nationalist people trying to sow division and hatred. I know this is absolutely rejected by the vast majority of people in this House. When we are talking about seasonal migrant labour, we need to be cognisant that there are toxic elements in our society seeking to harness these issues, pollute them and turn them into political footballs to sow division and hate and to promote their absolutely toxic politics.

I ask the Minister and everybody else to condemn that and to commit to being cognisant of that so that when we have issues relating to pay and conditions, which need to be looked at irrespective of the pandemic, all workers who come to work in our country in whatever sector are looked after appropriately. When these elements are trying to use them to promote their horrible racist agendas, we as a State and as a society need to protect them from that.

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Deputy. I will try to deal with many of the issues he has raised. On the issue of migrant workers, the European Commission in a communiqué in late March made a specific appeal to member states to recognise that this section of the workforce needed to be facilitated. They have been an integral part of, in particular, the horticulture sector here for many years. Many people who work here come back year after year. That in itself is a statement in respect of the terms and conditions under which they are employed. I do not wish to comment on social media posts and so on but I acknowledge the Deputy's point about some people hijacking this issue for other motives. If there are issues which need to be brought to the attention of the relevant authorities, that should be done. Otherwise, it is a case of give a dog a bad name and you hang him. People will deliberately conflate issues and that does a significant disservice to those who provide valuable and honourable employment opportunities for migrant workers, and they are an integral part of the horticultural sector in particular. I accept many of the points made by the Deputy in that regard.

There are supports for the beef sector other than those from the EU. As I stated in response to Deputy Heydon, €85 million has been allocated to direct support schemes. A long time ago, the Common Agricultural Policy moved from supporting product prices to supporting incomes. The market determines the product price but the schemes funded by the State or the European Commission support incomes. There is €85 million available through schemes for beef farm-

ers this year in addition to anything we may secure through our endeavour at European Union level. I ask Members to encourage farmers, particularly suckler farmers, to apply under the beef environmental efficiency programme.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I join other Deputies in expressing sympathies to the families of all those who have passed during the pandemic and in paying tribute to all essential workers.

Compared with education, health or housing, food is rarely thought of as being an area of public policy, but it is. It has taken this crisis for many people to realise the importance of our food producers and retail workers. It has forced us to ask where our food comes from and it has exposed our vulnerability in terms of food security. The flour shortage became a bit of a joke for some people looking to bake their way through the crisis, but it shows that many have been surprised to learn how much we rely on imports for basics such as flour, fruit and vegetables. Even the majority of our potatoes come from abroad.

When we rely so heavily on imports, we leave ourselves exposed to disruptions that are completely out of our hands, such as this crisis or Brexit. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has warned of disruptions to supply chains. Closer to home, the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association has pointed to our flour shortage, and a fresh outbreak of avian flu is causing an egg shortage. We have seen the impact that panic buying and stockpiling is having on food banks. The Committee on World Food Security has stressed the importance of strengthening government management of food markets, yet in many areas Ireland is a net importer of food. Central Statistics Office figures show that we import more seafood, milk, cereals, vegetables and fruit than we export.

The Government needs to take an active role in transforming our agriculture sector to ensure it is balanced and capable of producing the food we need. This emergency and future emergencies demand that food systems move towards a more self-sufficient model. Small change is not enough. It is time for transformative and systemic change. It will not be easy. Our food system is so complicated, as is the global one of which it is a part, with competing priorities such as consumer preferences, carbon footprint, animal welfare, economics and biodiversity, that there are inevitable conflicts.

What lessons can we learn from this situation? If we had known five years ago that this crisis was going to occur, how would we have prepared better for it? What we grow and eat is the result of our political choices. We know that, unfortunately, there will be more hard times like this as a result of Brexit and the climate and biodiversity crises. The bottom line is that families need access to healthy and affordable balanced diets, and farmers and other producers need to be able to earn a living.

With this mind, I ask the Minister what plans the Department would put in place to prepare for future potential disruptions to international food supply chains and end the country's reliance on imported fresh produce. What steps would the Minister take to expand our capacity to produce our own fruit and vegetables instead of importing produce that could be grown here? Throughout this crisis, we have heard politicians referring to taking expert advice, something I think we all agree is a great call, but it is not just during a pandemic. We talk about achieving a balance between a fair price for food producers, a fair wage for those who work in the food industry and a fair price for consumers. Experts have advised that, where possible, shortening the supply chain between producers and consumer is vital which is why I, like many others, was shocked at the closure of farmers' markets. Just like supermarkets, they are essential food re-

tail outlets. After I drew attention to this, people were in touch with me from Cork, Waterford, Limerick and beyond, seeking their immediate reopening. Thriving markets in west Cork and nationwide create supply chains that help us secure food sovereignty and attract thousands of tourists. Many market traders are small-scale producers with extremely tight operating margins who rely on the markets with direct access to customers taking out the so-called middle man. Before closure, markets showed great ingenuity in enabling social distancing and responsible transactions. Initiatives like NeighbourFood have helped connect consumers and producers during this time but what rural communities really need is a return to weekly markets. Bearing all this in mind, I ask the Minister to ensure that farmers' markets will be allowed to reopen as soon as possible as forms of essential retail outlets. Like everybody here today, I ask him to enable allotments to reopen at the same time as sources of small-scale food production.

Respecting workers is fundamental to a sustainable food model. In the recent Keelings controversy ,the media focused on the spread of the coronavirus but the incident highlights a broader issue within the food industry, namely, the treatment of workers. Although the jobs were advertised, it was not economically viable it seems for local people to take them. This is typical of the sector. Ireland, like the UK and other countries, relies on international, seasonal and temporary workers who are often treated poorly. This situation is even worse in the developing world where agricultural workers are subjected to horrendous abuse and exploitation. We need an agrifood system that can support families and communities, both in west Cork and Ireland and globally. To give us all confidence that the food we consume originates from a fair and just system, can the Minister instruct the Department to play a more active role in ensuring that the food produced in Ireland and imported here has been produced ethically? Bearing in mind that tomorrow is International Workers' Day, what measures are in place nationally and on a European level to ensure the protection of the rights of workers whether permanent, temporary or migrant, during the Covid-19 emergency?

Deputy Michael Creed: When we talk about food security it is important to remember that while we do import substantial volume and value of food, we are a very significant exporter of food to over 180 countries. Our exports in 2019 were valued in excess of €14 billion and sustain employment for over 170,000 people. There is a global complexity to the food market to which the Deputy alludes and I accept that consumers are interested in shorter food supply chains but we have certain global advantages in terms of our capacity to produce certain foods and I do not think they are incompatible with each other. Farmers' markets, the organic sector and allotments are all part of the milieu of shorter food supply chains. There is a role for that. The value of the organic sector relative to the value of the agrifood industry is minuscule and not everybody will become organic and not everybody can afford the premium associated with it. There is a role for both. We have a support scheme for the horticultural sector in 2020 in the order of €6 million. It will grow the products that it is commercially viable for it to grow. It is cheaper to import some things and that is the reality of the market place and we cannot force people to engage in enterprises which will not give them an economic return. We do support the horticulture sector.

On the question of the ethics of food production, we have laws in respect of minimum wage, for example. All employees are protected by that. It is one of, if not the highest minimum wage levels in the EU. That is a fundamental protection for workers. Many employers pay more than that. Many provide accommodation, as well as the minimum wage, or higher, for their employees. I would be concerned if the impression went out that this is an exploitative industry operates without any reference to the legal framework that applies to it. I have no evidence to

suggest that, and it would be wrong to create the impression that we are dealing with a sector that is indifferent to ethics or workers' rights. Obviously, we operate within the EU in the context of ethics in the broader sense, in terms of animal welfare and so on. An issue which attracts a great deal of concern is that relating to live exports but we have standards here that are higher than the minimum requirements set down by the EU for live exports. We are very conscious of our obligations in that regard and of our customer's concerns in that regard. We operate to EU standards-plus in that area.

In the context of food security, there is no room for complacency. I have often made the point that across the EU there are challenges regarding the age profile in agriculture. We have an ageing workforce across the EU and that is a big challenge. There is a real danger, if we do not attract new blood into the industry, that we could run off a cliff in terms of our food security. Ireland is, as an island nation, one of the most food-secure countries on Earth. It is joint first with Canada but there is no room for complacency. We have an age profile problem in agriculture, as do many countries across the world, not just in the EU. Nothing can be taken for granted here. In terms of the reform of the CAP, this is one of the areas about which we must be careful. We cannot just seduce young people into a career in agriculture but must also ensure that we can give them security in terms of an income that is comparable to what their peers earn in other sectors.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have three questions. I would like to pose a question, get an answer and so on. I raised earlier the issue of Keelings with the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, and she informed me that the HSA has the authority to go into any workplace and inspect it. Does the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine agree that the HSA should inspect the Keelings workplace?

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I just intervene for one moment? I am very conscious of the fact that several Deputies have alluded to a particular fruit-producing company. We have had references to employment standards, ethical production and so on. I put it to Members that this House is not in a position to make a definitive judgment on any employer or place of employment. I do not want to interfere with people asking questions but I ask Members to be very careful.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am asking for an inspection in order that we can find out. I have an internal document from the company - which I will not name again - which refers to family groups and hostel groups which, in my opinion, clearly indicates that social distancing guidelines are not being followed and that workers' health is being endangered. The document states that the accommodation units will be regarded as family units. It indicates that family units are of 50 people or more, with effectively no social distancing between those 50-plus people who are considered to be part of one family unit. It also states that workers may at times be required to "change family unit", meaning that this workplace may well be a hotspot waiting to happen. The company also admitted to RTÉ that its workers share bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens, making social distancing impossible and putting workers' health at risk.

There are two issues here. One is the issue of the union, Unite, which, in the past, has tried to represent these workers, to access these workers to discuss their rights with them and help to organise them. The second issue is that of a Government or State agency being able to inspect the workplace. I, along with workers, have been sent from pillar to post trying to work out the body with responsibility here. Originally, we were sent to the HSE but we got a response from the executive saying that this is not its responsibility. The Minister said today that the HSE has

powers. We will see about that. The HSA has said that it does not have powers to enforce the Covid-19 guidelines.

Earlier, the Minister said the HSA has power. Let us accept that as it is and presume it does not need to be granted additional powers. The question then is simply should workplace inspections take place so that we can see precisely what the problem is and whether workers' interests are being endangered.

Deputy Michael Creed: I am reminded of Deputy Duncan Smith's comment earlier about people who want to conflate a load of issues to point fingers at people who may have done no wrong. We have the appropriate authorities within the State to inspect and protect workers. As it happens, the HSA is not under the remit of my Department and I am not in a position, nor do I think it is my function or that of the appropriate line Minister, to direct those authorities to do their job in a particular way. They are set up to carry out their functions and they do so quite well. I share the concerns that there is an attempt to malign, without any real evidence, a particular company and sector. This is a sector that provides very valuable employment to many people who come back again and again to work for the same company.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The evidence I have is a document from inside the company that I will not mention again and is not disputed by the company. The document indicates that 50 or more people are being considered part of a family unit and people can be moved from one family unit to another. A statement given to RTÉ indicated that people are sharing bedrooms and so on, which suggests to me that social distancing is not possible. I asked the Minister a question earlier and I did not get an answer, but I suspect the answer is zero. I asked how many on-site inspections have taken place in respect of the Covid-19 guidelines.

I will move on to a similar issue, namely, meat factories. I will not name the factory concerned, which is in Ballyjamesduff. Many people received an email containing allegations about conditions there. SIPTU and the MRCI issued a statement confirming that they received calls from SIPTU members, many of whom are migrant workers, who are concerned about health and safety. Social media reports allege that up to 160 workers at the meat plant were continuing to work while showing symptoms of Covid-19. Meat factories and other workplaces could follow nursing homes in becoming the next big Covid-19 clusters. The original response of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine was to say that responsibility for health and safety lies with the management of each meat establishment, taking into account the relevant public health advisories issued by the HSE and other Government agencies. It simply is not good enough to say that companies are responsible and for Departments to wash their hands of the situation.

The Minister for Health has since responded to Deputy Boyd Barrett and said the alleged outbreaks are being investigated by the Health Protection and Surveillance Centre and local departments of public health as a matter of urgency. Have there been on-site inspections yet? This is important in terms of workers' health and safety.

Deputy Michael Creed: I alluded to this point in previous questions. We are aware of six clusters within the meat processing industry. We have direct staff and contracted staff in those operations who work closely with management and the HSE. I am assured that all steps are being taken. The import of the Deputy's question seems to be that management in these companies would in some way jeopardise the ongoing production of their own plant operations. The primary concern in all of these cases is the safety of employees in plants and citizens in the

country generally. Where there are issues of concern, companies work with the Department and local HSE officials to deal with them. I am aware testing has been carried out on workers because of co-operation with the HSE and management and that is as it should be. This is a pandemic. People get infected by one source or another.

Plants have responded by reducing throughput and implementing social distancing, putting in place Perspex screens and introducing a host of initiatives that are appropriate in various different workplaces, including those relating to the meat industry. That is as it should be. We are involved in an industry that is critical to the food supply chain and keeping supermarket shelves stacked, but not at the expense of putting the workers in jeopardy. I am assured by the information I have in my Department, as well as the staff working in those places and their co-operation with management and the HSE, that everything is being done in the first instance to protect workers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I do not share the Minister's touching faith in the attitudes of these employers.

Deputy Michael Creed: Why am I not surprised?

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are not driven primarily by the safety and the health of their workers; they are driven primarily by the maximisation of their profits and sometimes workers' health and safety can be sacrificed at the expense of that. That is the allegation made by some of these workers.

My final question is about the future of agriculture. Small farmers are facing the brunt of the coronavirus crisis right now. When the crisis comes to an end, climate change is going to hit them hard. Are we going to continue with a model of agriculture which prioritises the profits of the big beef barons - Larry Goodman and others - or are we going to use this opportunity to start working on a different way of using the land which gives priority to the interests of small and medium-sized farmers? We need to rapidly transition away from intensive beef and dairy production to a sustainable low-carbon model of agriculture, without loss of income and, indeed, with a guaranteed decent income for small and medium-sized farmers. Will the beef task force meet, will the BPS payments be brought forward for small farmers, and will the Minister work on developing such a plan?

Deputy Michael Creed: With regard to the previous issue, the Deputy does not substantiate his allegations but he is prepared to propagate them. That is unfortunate.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister did not substantiate the claim that these people care about their workers.

Deputy Michael Creed: I am substantiating the defence insofar as staff from my Department are working in conjunction with management in those plants as well as local HSE officials. There is nothing to suggest the allegation the Deputy is making, whether against those meat plants or any of the aforementioned workplaces, is true.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I should-----

Deputy Michael Creed: It is a smear tactic dressed up as concern, which is regrettable.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I was not-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please. We now move to the Regional Independent Group. I call Deputy Denis Naughten.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I turn to the issue of EU supports. After weeks of intensive lobbying, the European Commission eventually announced an aid to private storage scheme for both lamb and beef, which is paltry in value terms and the conditions regarding the cuts make it virtually worthless. The United States has introduced a Covid-19 support scheme for its farmers which is equivalent to €9,518 per individual. The EU, on the other hand, has provided a Covid-19 support equivalent of €8 per farmer. That is 1,190 times less support being given by the European Commission to European farmers than the US is giving its own farmers. As a very first step, will the EU ensure that the aid to private storage scheme for both beef and lamb caters for the cuts where there is no demand for them at present, rather than the current conditions being placed on it?

Will the Minister ensure that we have a second beef exceptional aid measure, BEAM, scheme to offset the loss in income for beef farmers as a result of the fall-off in trade due to Brexit? Some €100 million was set aside last year to compensate beef farmers for the first six months of losses from Brexit. That was €16.6 million per month for the first six months. We need another €166 million to cover the losses over the last ten months as a result of Brexit, plus €20 million in the underspend in the first round of BEAM. That is before we look at the issue of losses due to Covid-19. A fund of at least €186 million needs to be put in place to compensate beef farmers for the loss of income as a result of Brexit. In addition, a scheme of exceptional aid needs to be put in place for the lamb and beef industries due to Covid-19. What are the chances of securing real investment from the European Commission in line with what is happening in the US?

Deputy Michael Creed: I am somewhat surprised that Deputy Naughten has followed the path worn by Deputy Carthy, who has left the Chamber, and is advocating for the US model of agriculture. I am staggered by it. US farmers are dumping milk and have seen their beef plants close. At least we have managed to keep milk collected and farmers paid for that milk, albeit there is a price challenge in that regard.

Deputy Naughten cited the EU's response. I agree it is inadequate and we continue to make that case, but that inadequacy is on top of levels of support that are there generally. American agriculture is a free market model with no supports for family farms. It is an industrial model of agriculture that we should avoid like the plague. I am surprised Deputy Naughten is following the example of Sinn Féin in advocating a Trump-style agriculture in Ireland or the EU.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We said nothing about that. That is not what-----

Deputy Michael Creed: We will continue to work in the EU with colleagues to try to deliver the best possible deal. As to whether that might be a BEAM 2, we are seeking exceptional aid measures for the livestock sector generally because we foresee difficult challenges ahead for it. We have moved from a situation where the response to countries was to relax state aid rules and tell them to go off and fix it themselves to one where the Commission has shifted ground. We hope it will shift ground more, but if it does not, we are aware of what our obligations might be domestically.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I never advocated a US model.

Deputy Michael Creed: I am glad to see the Deputy is not.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Rather, I showed the stark contrast in the levels of support being provided in the US versus Europe. Many colleagues in the Dáil have highlighted the disparaging level of support of €8 per EU farmer that is being provided.

While we are on the issue of the European model of agriculture, I listened intently to the Minister's response to Deputy Carthy regarding beef imports from other EU states. Will the Minister explain why beef processors are importing beef for reprocessing in this country at a time when we are exporting 600,000 tonnes of beef and Irish finishers are losing between €200 and €250 a head?

My colleague, Deputy Lowry, asked the Taoiseach about bringing forward direct payments from October to July. The Taoiseach stated that he believed it was a good idea and that he had already spoken to the Minister about the possibility. Will the Minister give the House a response to the Taoiseach's request?

Given the six Covid-19 outbreak clusters that have been identified in the meat industry, has any concern been brought to the Minister's Department by its officials in those plants or by the veterinary officers, who are paid by the Department, in those plants about the operation of same or the social distancing that should be applied therein?

Will the Minister clarify something for me? I have been told of allegations about the plants. I do not know whether they are true, but I would like him to investigate. I have been told that staff have been brought into some of these plants from third countries who have high incidences of Covid-19 without the 14 days of quarantine being applied before they start work. Will the Minister confirm this practice has not happened?

Deputy Michael Creed: If the Deputy has evidence of the latter, he should bring it to the appropriate authorities. Evidence from my chief veterinary officer and staff in the Department is that at these individual plants, everything is being done by management, in conjunction with my Department and the HSE, to deal with these issues.

On the issue of bringing forward payments, we have had discussions with the Taoiseach on these matters but as they currently stand, EU regulations do not permit the bringing forward of payments earlier than 16 October. That may change.

On imports, I know there is a populist element to this in saying that we should not bring in any beef. In an ideal world, we would not bring in any beef, we would eat our own beef and we would send it everywhere else to be eaten. The National Farmers Union in the UK is kicking up about Irish beef on UK supermarket shelves. We export 90% of what we produce. We would be the biggest losers if there were to be a renationalisation. The Deputy is effectively calling for a nationalisation of the Irish market for Irish beef.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I am not. I notice the Minister is not answering the question.

Deputy Michael Creed: The Deputy is calling for an Irish market for Irish beef. I would love for that to be the case while, at the same time, selling our beef everywhere else without any consequences. We need to be the most vigilant about renationalisation because we are very dependent on exports.

This issue is not something that I welcome but I am certainly not going to jump on a populist

bandwagon because our primary interest is in making sure the European market works for us and we have access to those markets. If there were only an Irish market for Irish beef, we could have beef for breakfast, dinner and supper and we would still not eat all the beef we have. We need to make sure that we maintain access to markets in the UK, France and every other market within the European Union. That is the most important thing for the beef farmers we represent.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I note that the Minister did not answer my question about beef imports. That is the point I am making. I understand the broader issue very well. As the Minister knows, the United Kingdom is not a net exporter of beef. Ireland is a net exporter. We export nine out of ten animals, yet we are importing beef. What is the justification for that? I do not believe there is one.

There is a lack of equitable support from the European Commission. That is something the Minister has acknowledged and a weakness that I have identified. Can the Minister redouble efforts to ensure, at a minimum, that those regulations that restrict the payment of EU supports until October are amended this year to ensure we get income support to farmers much earlier in the year and also secure an additional tranche of funding for the income losses arising from Covid-19 and Brexit?

An Ceann Comhairle: As the time is up, perhaps the Minister will correspond with the Deputy on the other matters.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank and congratulate the farming community around the country, especially in Kerry, for continuing to work, as it always has in the past, when most other activities are closed down. I am glad that, when we look out the door or go down the road, we are meeting farmers with tractors, jeeps and trailers and that they are continuing to work, carry on and do their bit.

There is another thing I have to say that I have said to other Members in the Chamber. It is widely recognised that there is no excess carbon being emitted, or emissions being created, by farmers now, even though they are working to their maximum as they always have done. People who were focusing their attention on farmers and asking them to reduce the national herd had better start looking elsewhere. Maybe they should look up at the sky on a fine day. We can now see a blue sky from end to end so maybe the planes up there were the cause of the trouble. Maybe other things around the world were causing the trouble because it is not the farmer.

The farmer is in serious trouble. Whether a weanling is to be sold or an animal is going to the factory, farmers are losing between €200 and €300 per head. I ask the Minister to do something about the marts. Every mart, whether in Macroom, Kenmare, Castleisland, Cahersiveen or Dingle, has a capacity to hold maybe 200 or 300 people. Yet, at present the farmer is being asked to drop his animals off at the gate or maybe the mart manager will come out and buy the cattle with some buyer or whatever. That is not satisfactory. While I recognise that it is important to sell the animals, it is equally important to get a good and fair price. There is no competition in the market now. I am asking the Minister to talk to the mart people, the Irish Farmers Association and everyone involved to see if we could get the marts open in a capacity whereby perhaps 20 buyers could go in with ten sellers at a time. That should surely be possible. I call on the Minister to do that sooner rather than later. If there is no competition - there is none at present between buyers - then farmers will not realise the best price, the price they should be getting.

The question of meat processing plants has been raised here. Some of the meat plants admitted that they had to process Polish beef. At the same time, I know farmers around me everywhere who cannot get their animals into the factory. If they have 20 animals to sell or put through the factory, they have to wait. Maybe the factory will take five or six. They then have to wait weeks and that is costing them.

John Tyson of Tyson Foods in America says he is closing down many of his processing plants. Surely there is an opportunity for us to explore other markets, whether they are west or east of us. Anyway, we have to do something. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has been the Minister all this time. It is him I am asking what can be done. Can he do more for the farmers? How much money was sent back from the beef exceptional aid measure last year? The rules were totally wrong and the regulations meted out to farmers did not allow them to get the money. Many farmers did not access the BEAM at all. Will the Minister address that? The money we are getting from Europe is paltry. They should be doing far more for the farmers.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: First, I want to outline that earlier this week I met the leadership of the IFA in County Kerry. We had a comprehensive meeting because the representatives knew there would be speaking time before the Minister this evening. It is important to speak on behalf of the farmers and not only those from Kerry. The farmers in Kerry have the same problems as farmers from around the country. What I would like to do is address the issue of the €24 million that was unspent last year from the beef exceptional aid measure. At the time of the last budget in October 2019 the Minister said he had €85 million for beef farmers. There was no mention of taking any money from the BEAM to finance the beef environmental efficiency programme at the time. I am aware of comments the Minister made since to the effect that the €24 million is not available to us now and that it is already spent. The Minister cannot go around spending the same money twice. It was either there or it was not there. The funny thing about it is that the Minister never told us it was money that he was announcing twice. I want clarity on that. Is the €24 million there or not?

The Minister is well aware that before the Covid-19 crisis the price of beef had gone down considerably. It could have gone down by between €100 and €200 per head. As of today, it is €3.40 per kg. People are losing money. Farmers are losing money by producing beef right now. People want to keep working and farming. They are doing their best in these hard times but we will need help. We need practical things to happen. For instance the Minister could bring forward the farm payments. For God's sake, will the Minister do everything he can to bring forward any farm payments that will be out at the end of the year? Will he do this with his counterparts in Europe to bring forward all payments as early as July, or beforehand if he can, to help people with their cashflow?

I also want to speak about our milk farmers. Milk is down in price. It was down 2 cent per litre for March. We do not know yet what the price for April will be. Anyway, in every sector, whether it involves sheep men or beef men, people are finding it so difficult to make money.

I want to tackle the importation of beef from outside the EU. Last year, we imported over 320,000 tonnes. Surely be to God that type of importation of beef from outside the EU should be suspended in these difficult times. I am calling on the Minister to do everything he possibly can do to help our farmers.

I also want to speak about our fishermen who also are in trouble. I know the Minister has

been negotiating with his EU counterparts. He discussed it with me and I thank for him for doing that. As the Minister has said himself, the best place to store fish is in the water. It is about not bringing in fish, storing it and then flooding the market at some other time. The proper thing to do is have a scheme to allow the fishermen survive while being tied up at the pier. It is not sensible that they should be fishing for intervention. We have these categories of fishermen who are in trouble. We also have the situation with trawlers under 10 m which are in trouble. Will the Minister do everything he can to help all sizes of trawlers and all categories of fishermen? They are in west Cork in Castletownbere, Cahersiveen and Dingle. All they are trying to do is make a living or supplement their existing incomes through fishing.

We have mussel farmers trying to do their best but who are also in trouble. Now more than ever before, I am calling on the Minister to do his level best for these people. He must remember that we want him to be toggled out on the field fighting for our farmers and fishermen. We want him to do everything he and his Department can do in these difficult times.

With regard to regulations, now is the time to show leadership. We know we must have cross-compliance and regulations in place. However, common sense needs to be put in place too. Officials in the Department must be instructed by the Minister to give farmers a break. They are tied up with red tape and every other colour of tape that one could possibly imagine. Will the Minister please give them a break and allow them to do a simple thing, namely, make a living or part of a living to the best of their ability?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister has only 20 seconds. We can ask him to correspond with the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Will the Ceann Comhairle give him a little more time? After coming all the way from Kerry to hear what he has to say, will you give him one minute?

An Ceann Comhairle: If I do that for you, Deputy, I will have to do it for everyone else.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Will you give him a chance, please?

Deputy Michael Creed: As it was not raised in any great detail by other Members, I will reply to the fishing points.

I have had a lot of engagement, including as late as yesterday, with representatives of the fishing industry. The Deputy is correct in his analysis that there is a challenge whether one is an inshore or offshore fisherman. We have been granted a freedom to reallocate European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, EMFF, funding. The problem is that there is not a lot of funding under EMFF that is not previously committed. We are looking, however, at the opportunity to do something for the sector. I appreciate it is a question of doing it as soon as possible. I have had much engagement on this.

On the point about imports to the European Union, I alluded to it earlier that we export to 180 different countries. If we ban imports, those countries to which we export may well say they do not want our exports either. We need to be extremely careful. I have spoken to the Commissioner about the issue of imports to see if there were legal instruments available to us in certain circumstances. I am advised there are not.

A similar point was alluded to previously about the renationalisation of markets. If fish from Dingle was on its way to the Spanish market, as happens, and the Spanish said they did

not want our fish and stopped it at a port in Spain, we would not be happy. We must ensure we protect the European market because we are the biggest beneficiaries of that free market.

I have had much engagement with marts. I know the mart in Kenmare which is near my own area. Dan McCarthy does a great job there. We are engaged with the marts to see how we can liberate them further without transgressing HSE Covid-19 guidelines. I do not want to raise expectations that anything will happen in the short term. However, we are in constant engagement with the Irish Co-operative Organisation Society, ICOS, and with the Association of Livestock Marts, the private mart operators, to see what other progress can be made.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. We must proceed. I call Deputy Pringle who is sharing with colleagues.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am sharing with Deputy McNamara and Deputy Fitzmaurice.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I have one quick question. I am pleased to see that after almost two hours, fishing was mentioned in the previous contribution. The only question I wish to ask relates to fishing. I want to know the Minister's plans. Previously, he said he did not want to redirect the EMFF because he felt it was not suitable. What is going to happen in regard to fishing? What is critically important as well is that all fishermen will be assisted. It might take different measures to assist different categories of fishermen, such as those with boats of under 10 m in length, but all fishermen should benefit from whatever measures are introduced by the EU. It is vitally important to make sure that everybody does benefit. A number of existing financial measures for Covid-19 do not apply to fishermen or farmers anyway. That is in the document. I checked it this evening on the website before I came into the Chamber. Only one out of three of the criteria apply to fishermen or farmers. It is vitally important that the Minister would outline what is going to happen for the different elements of fishermen within the State. Perhaps he would respond to those questions.

Deputy Michael Creed: We recognise that we have some room to manoeuvre in terms of EMFF funding that may have been earmarked for expenditure in other areas but due to Covid-19 it will not now be necessary. We are looking at how we might reallocate the funding.

There is a view that up to €30 million is available in the context of uncommitted EMFF funding but there is not the smell of that kind of money. We are looking at what resources we might be able to allocate. I accept Deputy Pringle's point about all the sectors, including the inshore sector. I have been quite proactive in terms of looking after the inshore sector, as Deputy Pringle is aware. I refer to such measures as excluding the larger boats from inshore waters. I am very keen that in any deliberations we have on these matters that the National Fisheries Inshore Forum, NIFF, would be in the room. As recently as yesterday its representatives were in the room in consultation on these matters with all of the other producer organisations, POs, and representatives of processors, including from Deputy Pringle's constituency. We are acutely aware of the situation.

A person employed on a fishing boat that boat is tied up and who becomes unemployed is entitled to the Covid-19 payment of €350. A self-employed person who is now unemployed is entitled to the Covid-19 payment. The sector is as entitled to the horizontal supports as any other sector.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: What about assistance for ongoing costs? The costs can be up to €12,000 for a small vessel, and that has to be paid continuously.

Deputy Michael Creed: That point is applicable to every sector in the economy. I appreciate that in the context of tonight's debate the issue is what other supports might be available. However, whatever other supports are available, we need to make sure that we get the maximum bang for our buck in terms of how we target the funding. In consideration of that, I am following two direct levels of engagement on these matters with representatives of the fishing industry.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the Minister for facilitating this debate. First, we must give our condolences to the families of those people who have died over the past month or six weeks. I also thank the farming community right around the country and across Europe for keeping the flag flying, as well as those who process produce. People who were once kicking the daylights out of farmers should now appreciate what they have done in this time of crisis.

I have a few questions for the Minister. My understanding is that Europe has agreed that the single farm payment or basic payment scheme, BPS, will roll over for a year or possibly two years. Is that set in stone yet? If so, will other schemes such as GLAS and the environmental scheme be rolled over as well until we have the new package in place, especially in light of Brexit and the current situation? The rules in the EU at present seem to be that one can give state aid or help out in situations. The rule book has been basically torn up fairly well in the line of rules and regulations throughout Europe. I heard a question that was down to the Minister earlier. A few years ago, where France's computer system had glitched in a scheme similar to the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, they paid the money out of the exchequer to the farmers and then recouped it when it came back. Are we considering doing anything for the farming community in the line of bringing the payments forward, taking it out of the Exchequer, which by the way we are allowed do, and taking it back when it comes in the envelope from Europe?

On a BEAM scheme, we had a conference where each representative talked to the Minister and his officials a few weeks ago. Cattle prices are at 340c/kg at present. Sheep prices are dropping. I think it is €15 per lamb today. Is there a scheme being brought up by the Department to try and put life into this? The intervention or cuts that are going may help, but the figures that Europe has given would be spent by the Minister in Ireland, never mind what 26 or 27 countries will do, in a week. It was a derisory amount of money in the whole-of-Europe effort when one considers what we would produce, be it in milk, beef or sheep. Will we do something to help those farmers?

On the Covid-19 payment, I want to be clear on whether someone who is not working somewhere else and is only a farmer can get it. My other question relates to the plants around the country. Has the Department figures for the numbers of people who have been in isolation or confirmed cases, and what does the Minister intend to do if the shutdown continues for the next few weeks, on the seven-month areas of natural constraints, ANC, scheme? I had more questions but I want to let Deputy McNamara go.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice.

I have three succinct questions. I represent a coastal county. Obviously, I am concerned with the plight of fishermen, in particular those with boats under 10 m. Is the Minister actively

considering a tie-up scheme? The Minister said he wanted to do something but he has not said what it is. Is it a tie-up scheme?

I refer to the beef task force. There are many constitutional constraints on this House - where it can sit, how it sits, etc. There are no such constraints on the beef task force. It has not sat since January. Has it achieved its role, which was to get Fine Gael through an election or will it produce something that is useful for farmers?

The Minister discussed imports. I accept the position is as he set it out to be but some of those imported foods have been labelled with Bord Bia quality assured labels which is of great concern. Will he engage with Bord Bia to make sure with such imported foods that there is not the potential for confusion which now exists because consumers associate a Bord Bia quality assured label with it being an Irish product? Sometimes it is and sometimes it is not.

Deputy Michael Creed: On the latter point, bar one exception where Bord Bia acknowledged there was a difficulty, if one sees a Bord Bia quality assurance stamp on it, it is an Irish product and there should be no mystery about that.

In terms of the issue of imports to which Deputy McNamara alluded, does it not send a shiver down his spine when he sees the National Farmers Union in the United Kingdom giving out to our retail partners in the UK about stocking Irish beef? That is the flip side of the coin.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I acknowledge it is as the Minister set it out to be.

Deputy Michael Creed: On the beef market task force, I am amused at Deputy McNamara's inference that this was a vehicle - if that was the Deputy's view, it certainly did not work - to secure Fine Gael through the election. Far from it, the task force is a serious piece of work. It is in the difficulty that all of us are in in terms of meetings but there is ongoing engagement with all of the constituent members. The job that was identified for it continues in terms of reports that have been commissioned by independent bodies, etc. The work is important and it is ongoing.

There are may different segments to the issues facing the fishing industry, but I refer particularly to the inshore sector, the whitefish sector and the pelagic sector. The options are as outlined by the Commission. I have had a personal telephone call with the Commissioner on these matters. No additional funding is available from the European Union. There is only the flexibility to reallocate funds. A lot of our funding has already been committed to projects that will go ahead. The funding that is available is scarce and we must act on the basis of getting the maximum return on whatever scarce resources we have. The projects I have spoken about tie up our storage aid. We are looking at all of those at the moment.

In reply to Deputy Fitzmaurice I note that there is an issue around the transition period for the Common Agricultural Policy. We are looking for the maximum flexibility within that so that persons who have payments under existing schemes can continue to receive them. We are also seeking the flexibility to introduce new schemes to help us deliver on our climate ambitions, for example. We will need to work with farmers to encourage them to meet those targets and that is part of the necessary toolbox. We are looking for the maximum level of flexibility and we are making progress in that regard.

An Ceann Comhairle: Perhaps the Minister will correspond with the group on these matters.

Deputy Michael Creed: Perhaps I might make a final point on the areas of natural constraint, ANC, issue. As I alluded to earlier, I am not really in favour of flexibility on the ANC stocking rate. The Deputy alluded to the price of cattle. Removing the obligation on buyers of cattle to meet that stocking density requirement will completely remove the floor from the price of cattle. What looks like a good idea on a superficial level would have an adverse impact on the price of store cattle and weanlings.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Sin deireadh leis na ceisteanna chun an Aire Talamhaíochta, Bia agus Mara. Tá gnó an lae tagtha chun deiridh.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.40 p.m. until 12 noon on Wednesday, 6 May 2020.