



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 3 Meitheamh 2020*

*Wednesday, 3 June 2020*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## **Minute's Silence for Victims of Racism**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Yesterday, the Business Committee, on foot of a proposal from the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan, decided we should have a further minute's silence today as a demonstration of our abhorrence and rejection of racism and as an indication of our solidarity with and respect for all those people internationally who have died on foot of vile racist attacks.

*Members rose.*

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

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I remind Members that the House has agreed, for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency only, that the rapporteur's report shall not be read out but should be taken as read. Accordingly, I will proceed to put the two proposals for this week's business to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed. I thank the Deputies for their co-operation.

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

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That leads us immediately to No. 4 on the agenda, which is a statement by the Minister of State for Defence on Covid-19, followed by questions and answers. I call the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, to make his opening statement.

**Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I welcome this opportunity to update Deputies on the response of the defence sector to Covid-19. At the outset,

I express my deepest condolences to all who have lost loved ones during this pandemic and I wish a full recovery to all those fighting the coronavirus.

I will outline the contribution made by the defence sector as part of the overall response of the State to this terrible disease. The collective response of the defence organisation involves personnel of the Permanent Defence Force, members of the Reserve, Civil Defence volunteers, civil servants and civilian employees within my Department. At an early stage in the response to Covid-19, a Defence Forces joint task force was established in McKee Barracks. The joint task force is co-ordinating the Defence Forces supports during the response to Covid-19, with the priority on supports to the HSE.

The contribution of the Defence Forces to our national response includes helping the HSE with contact tracing, engineering support, the fitting of temporary facilities for the agency, such as in Citywest, and operating the new testing centre in the Aviva Stadium on the agency's behalf. In addition, they have provided tentage for and marshalled HSE testing sites, transported tests to Germany, collected personal protective equipment, PPE, from 150 cargo flights and taken responsibility for the storage and distribution of PPE for the HSE. The Defence Forces also support the National Ambulance Service and its crews.

From 20 March to 29 May, the Defence Forces have undertaken more than 21,000 troop taskings, with the overall commitment of Defence Forces personnel totalling 55,000 taskings, including an average of 446 personnel on standby each day. We should not forget that during the Covid-19 crisis the Defence Forces have continued to fulfil other roles and provide support. Explosive ordnance teams have responded to 35 call-outs, the emergency aeromedical service, EAS, has carried out 117 missions, the inter-hospital transfer service has provided 17 lifesaving transport missions and the Air Corps has provided firefighting support to combat gorse fires in counties Wicklow, Kildare and Laois. The Air Corps conducted 15 military transport flights to and from missions abroad involving the movement of personnel, equipment and PPE. The Naval Service continues to patrol our seas. Most important, the Defence Forces have maintained more than 500 members on overseas missions on behalf of the United Nations.

I wish to commend every member of the Reserve and Permanent Defence Forces who has contributed to this effort. The Government and the public deeply appreciate their efforts in supporting our national response. These efforts are supported by a substantial programme of investment in equipment and infrastructure projects that sustain the capability of the Defence Forces. For example, my Department has committed more than €250 million to acquire six new planes for the Air Corps. The first of these PC-12 fixed-wing utility aircraft, acquired by the Department from Pilatus Aircraft Limited, Switzerland, for €5.2 million, including VAT, has been used to transport Covid tests to and from Germany.

Deputies will be aware that the Covid pandemic has impacted on overseas deployments. Neither the troubled zones in question nor those charged by the UN with keeping the peace there have been immune to Covid-19. To safeguard local populations and peacekeepers, on 5 April the Secretary-General of the United Nations suspended the rotations of 100,000 peacekeepers in 39 missions until after 30 June. I am pleased to state that all of our rotations have been completed. In the case of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, mission, the UN granted us an exemption that allowed our troops to rotate before the end of June deadline. As I stated, I recognise the impact of the delay on members of the Defence Forces and their families. I hope the exemption we negotiated with the UN brings greater certainty in respect of the dates it provided. I wish to thank it and all others involved for their help. I wish to confirm that the

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two officers who were stationed in the Congo returned to Ireland at the weekend.

The focus on Covid has impacted on Defence Forces recruitment and resulted in changes to training and work practices. I can confirm that the current strength of the Defence Forces is 8,485. This is lower than planned. The ability of the Defence Forces to induct and train recruits has been severely impacted by the Covid-19 situation. Inductions in the first months of 2020 were postponed. Some 160 extra general recruits were expected to have inducted by now. The Defence Forces are currently finalising a revised training schedule to take account of public health guidelines. Covid-19 will continue to have an unprecedented impact on the number that can be inducted and trained at any one time and, as a result, on the rate at which the strength of the Defence Forces will increase during this period.

There is increased interest in careers in the Defence Forces, as borne out by the level of applications for all recruitment competitions, of which there have been 13 so far this year. For example, the number of general service recruitment applications, at 2,994, is above anticipated for this point of the year. The number of applications for Air Corps apprenticeships has also increased significantly over the past year. It is worth noting that overall officer numbers are close to full establishment figure. There are vacancies in some areas or ranks and excess in others. Gaps in particular areas, such as a shortage of pilots, are being addressed.

I am pleased to report that more than 600 applications have been received under the new scheme for re-entry. Some 500 have gone forward for further assessment by the Chief of Staff. In excess of 35 applications have also been received in regard to the re-commissioning scheme for PDF officers. I anticipate receiving the recommendation of the Chief of Staff shortly in regard to the first batch of re-entrants. The contribution to be made by such experienced enlisted personnel and officers will, I believe, assist in addressing capability gaps.

Despite the demands and constraints arising from Covid-19, work has continued on the Government's high-level plan, Strengthening our Defence Forces. While some projects are taking longer than anticipated, a number have been significantly progressed to date. Any management quotas arising from these finalised reports fall within the scope of representations and will be discussed with the representative associations, RACO and PDFORRA, as appropriate. I would like to thank the civil and military staff undertaking this work for all their efforts to date.

In terms of additional expenditure, and in common with other Votes, the Covid-19 response has placed essential, additional and unforeseen expenditure demands on my Department across a wide range of areas. To date, some €10.8 million has been spent by the Department of Defence in responding to Covid-19-related issues. This expenditure includes, as I mentioned earlier, €5.2 million towards the acquisition of a new aircraft; some €4.2 million in respect of additional medical, engineering, building, PPE, audiovisual and transport costs across the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps; over €1 million in additional allowance payments; and some €400,000 in respect of additional Civil Defence costs. In addition, ICT investment has facilitated remote working opportunities across the defence organisation and has ensured ongoing business continuity during this turbulent period.

Turning to the Civil Defence, the organisation is built on 3,500 volunteers giving freely of their time and expertise. Since the outset of Covid-19 in Ireland in March of this year, the Civil Defence has been activated by the principal response agencies and has undertaken over 2,500 individual tasks. This has required almost 20,000 volunteer hours to be provided by over 800 individual volunteers. In many cases, Civil Defence volunteers have undertaken front-line

roles, utilising the fleet of Civil Defence vehicles, such as the transport of Covid-19-positive patients to hospitals and isolation centres, and transport of suspected Covid-19 persons to testing centres. The Civil Defence has assisted the Irish Blood Transfusion Service, delivered medicine, food and support to vulnerable people in the community and transported PPE, tests and staff across the country. I want to acknowledge and recognise the contribution of Civil Defence officers and assistant Civil Defence officers, including the newly-appointed 18 temporary assistant Civil Defence officers and, of course, the volunteers.

As part of our national response to Covid-19, we are seeing the very best of all aspects of the defence sector. The challenge of achieving the full strength of the PDF is acknowledged and there are many strands to the work under way in that regard. There is also significant investment by the taxpayer in equipment, infrastructure and people. While recognising the challenges, it is crucial to also recognise how the Defence Forces have demonstrated their capacity to provide excellent support to the front-line services, alongside the other roles defined by Government.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all of the front-line healthcare staff and other essential workers, including all those across the defence sector, for all of the work that has been ongoing and that continues to be done in these extraordinary times. I welcome the opportunity to update Deputies on the defence sector's response to Covid-19. I again express my deepest condolences to anybody who has lost family members in this very difficult period.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Jack Chambers, who is sharing time with Deputy Robert Troy. I want to clarify if there will be questions.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** There will be brief questions at the end.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** However, the Deputy will take written answers afterwards.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** If the Minister has an update and we have time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is fine.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I want to take a moment to acknowledge all those who have sadly lost their lives due to the Covid-19 pandemic. More than 1,600 people have died here in the past two and a half months. As we have heard, these are not statistics on a page; each case represents families who have lost loved ones dear to them. We honour their memories while continuing to do everything we can to keep rates of infection down and overcome the virus.

As has been mentioned, the Defence Forces have played a central role in the national front-line response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Today is a welcome opportunity to commend their work and remind people of our reliance on Óglaigh na hÉireann, which continually rises to the challenge in the most testing of circumstances. As is the case with the health services, the gardaí and all of our emergency services, our Defence Forces' greatest strength is the character of the personnel we call upon who serve this country and their communities with great bravery, courage and commitment.

Equally impressive has been the continuance of essential non-Covid duties throughout all of this upheaval, such as our peacekeeping operations throughout the world. I have received a huge volume of contacts from family members of those serving on missions in Lebanon and I know the rotation and return of these personnel is causing great concern for their families who are anxiously awaiting their return. I understand there is unhappiness with how developments

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on this have been communicated to them and the need for better communication. This is an issue I have raised directly with the Minister.

Separately, I am pleased and relieved to see the necessary arrangements have been put in place to ensure our two peacekeepers have been returned from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The safety and well-being of our personnel is paramount in all of our overseas peace-keeping duties.

Ultimately, poor pay and conditions continue to overshadow many aspects of the Defence Forces, who remain the worst paid in the public service. It is no surprise to see the ongoing concerning rates of turnover and not meeting the White Paper target strength of 9,500. As has been mentioned, the strength is now below 8,500, which is well below the minimum strength figure. Last year, the Defence Forces suffered a net loss of 265, with 870 departing and only 605 being inducted. This represents a concerning trend.

My questions relate to the Defence Forces high level implementation plan. I have to say I am very concerned that eight out of the 15 projects are significantly behind schedule. The pay review of technical grades 2 to 6 was presented to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in January and we are a number of months on, almost in the summer. The representative associations were sceptical when the report was published last summer that things would not be followed through and they would not see this being implemented. If the implementation plan is failing and eight of the 15 projects are behind schedule or are not being followed through, it continues to raise morale issues and affects retention and our ability to recruit. Perhaps the Minister of State will give a more specific update on why very generic responses are given to the representative associations. Some projects were started eight months late. I can go through all of the projects but the Minister of State is better aware of them than I am. I am disappointed because when an implementation plan is put in place by the Department of the Taoiseach it should receive cross-departmental follow-through, particularly when we have such a recruitment and retention crisis in the Defence Forces. To see more than 50% of projects behind schedule and not meeting their deadline raises serious concerns about who is implementing the plan, why it has been delayed and why there is no follow-through. Covid cannot be the net excuse for this delay because it started last summer and I would like an explanation of where it is at. Will the delays be rectified soon because we are still seeing an increase in churn and turnovers? I would appreciate clarity on these matters. PDFORRA and RACO are very concerned about the follow-through. Their members and the Defence Forces, to whom we pay tribute today, need to see that politicians are serious about their issues. The implementation plan was the focus of the previous and current Governments. I would appreciate a brief update.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Deputy Chambers referred to the UNIFIL mission. As he knows, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, cancelled all rotations of all of our UN missions. This was always going to cause some distress to members of the Defence Forces and their families. My Department, the Defence Forces and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade got working to see if we could get our members home earlier than the end of June. I am glad to report that they will be home. We have secured two dates. I thank our UN ambassador, Geraldine Byrne Nason, for her efforts and all her work in that. Ireland is one of the first countries to be able to move out of the UNIFIL mission area. Our members will go into isolation at the weekend for two weeks before they go out. This has been a huge stress on all families. The Deputy referred to communications. When we are dealing with a large number of people, of course information is going to leak out to the media or whatever. There were mixed messages coming back. I was very clear that I did not want to go back to the

families until I had a specific date on the return. There was a lot of misinformation out there that was not coming from me, the Department or military management. I know that this caused a great deal of anxiety among people. I am glad we were able to get our two people home from the Congo at the weekend as well.

The Deputy mentioned the high-level implementation plan. Covid-19 has impacted on the project timeframes. I met PDFORRA last week and have agreed to meet with RACO. I am aware that both representative associations have a number of issues that they want to raise with me. Much work has been done already on the high-level implementation plan. Independent chairs have been appointed to a number of the projects and work is ongoing. This will be a priority. There absolutely are challenges. I thought we would have been able to get some of the projects over the line but because of the amount of work involved, it has taken a great deal of time.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Last week we celebrated International Day of UN Peacekeepers. Ireland has a proud record of unbroken service since 1958. I thank all those who have served and remember the 86 people who have died in service. The Minister of State talked about not being able to control what was being leaked. The big issue I found when engaging with those serving abroad relates to the lack of clarity coming from the Department on when they could expect to get home and when their families could expect to see them. It is because of the lack of clear information from the Department that the misinformation was circulating. That created great concern and anxiety for our Defence Forces members overseas. I do not think this was right or proper. The Minister of State compliments the Permanent Defence Force, the Reserve and Civil Defence on the role they are playing, and he is right to do so. They have stepped up to the mark, as they have in so many crises down through the years. They have done so again in supporting other front-line services during Covid-19. However, just like when we complimented the role the Defence Forces played during the centenary celebrations of 2016, they are tired of lip service from the Government as regards acknowledging the respect we have for them. What they want to see are the adequate pay and conditions that have been promised. It is no wonder that the current strength of the Defence Forces is just over 8,400 when its established strength is 9,500. That is a clear demonstration of the lack of morale that has been allowed to manifest in our Defence Forces in recent years. Can the Defence Forces be guaranteed that a restructuring or a commission on their pay and conditions will commence and be published because we have a serious issue with the retention of serving members of the Defence Forces?

Part of that retention issue stems from a decision taken by a previous Government to abolish the fourth western brigade because there are no longer the same career progression opportunities for people in the midlands and the west of Ireland. As a consequence of that, people are leaving the Army. In terms of a renewed programme for Government, does the Minister of State commit to looking at re-establishing the fourth western brigade to brigade headquarters status in Custume Barracks in Athlone?

I refer to the issue of serving personnel, with four or five people to a car, travelling to locations outside of Athlone to serve and carry out their responsibilities during the Covid-19 crisis, and I raised this directly with the Department as well. There were concerns around separation in this regard. Have those concerns been addressed?

A commitment was given in Athlone for a number of Army personnel to retrain and to be re-deployed to help within the HSE and nursing homes. Has that happened and have those people been redeployed to help and assist the HSE and the nursing homes?

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Columb Barracks in Mullingar was closed by a previous Government in 2012 and it was earmarked three years ago to be transferred to the Land Development Agency. Can the Minister of State reaffirm his commitment that the community groups that have made a home of this facility and used it in recent years will not be railroaded by the Land Development Agency and that something will be put into the contract when the land is being transferred to make sure this fine facility can be used by community groups in Mullingar in the future?

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Like my colleagues, I commend the service members of the Defence Forces have given, as have many public servants, during the period of Covid-19. I also look forward to an opportunity to having more than just gratitude with which to reward them for that.

Deputy Troy mentioned 1916 and I want to raise the case of Mr. William Halpin with the Minister of State, who has not yet been awarded a medal for his service in 1916. He suffered profound mental health difficulties in Frongoch prison camp. I do not expect the Minister of State to have the details with him but I will write to him about it and I ask him to examine the case and to try to find a way to provide a service medal for Mr. William Halpin.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister of State might just provide a brief response because he has less than a minute and he can correspond with the Deputies afterwards.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I ask Deputy McAuliffe to write to me about Mr. Halpin and I will follow up on that case for him.

I know Deputy Troy was in contact with my office about the rotations and we kept him up-to-date with any information we had on same. I was clear from the start that I did not want any misinformation going out. I said that when we had clarity on the dates of return of personnel from UNIFIL we would tell them the exact dates and that is what we did. Of course there was misinformation out there because, as I said to Deputy Chambers at the time, we were dealing with a large number of people and people had received different information. Some people had received information on service with UNIFIL and some people were listening to other information here in Ireland and it was an anxious time for all family members.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have to move on. I am sorry. The time is up. Is Deputy Ó Snodaigh sharing with two colleagues?

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Yes: na Teachtaí Mark Ward agus Sorca Clarke. Tógfaidh mé ceithre nóiméad i dtús báire agus ansin tá súil agam go mbeidh freagraí againn ón Aire Stáit.

Ba mhaith liomsa, cosúil leis na Teachtaí a chuaigh romham, mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le fir agus mná na bhFórsaí Cosanta as a ndíograis agus as an slí ina bhfuil siad tar éis tabhairt faoi na tascanna agus na dualgais atá curtha rompu go dtí seo, in ainneoin na gconstaicí atá orthu agus in ainneoin an slí ina bhfuil an Stát tar éis caitheamh leo le blianta anuas. I also praise the Defence Forces personnel who have been involved in Covid-19 operations in support of the civil power, the HSE and those who were and are now stationed overseas and their families. Thankfully, as the Minister of State has just mentioned, there is clarity on the UNIFIL troops returning in June, and I thank him for communicating with me along the way in that regard. Any time I have got a communication from him I have passed it on to those who had made inquiries.

I have a brief question about future rotation of those UNIFIL operations, specifically the one that is to happen at the end of June. Since there has been a run-on of the current deployment,

will the troops going out to Lebanon have a six-month or four-month rotation? If four months, will they enjoy the overseas allowances for the full six months, as the Minister of State seemed to indicate in early correspondence with me, given that many families have budgeted for a full six months' overseas allowance and that often their mortgages depend on it?

The Minister of State and his Department, and previous Ministers, have undermined the Defence Forces and their ability to respond fully to challenges, in this case Covid-19. Those who have been tasked with work have done their damndest and gone over and above the call of duty, but I am sorry to say that, given the reduction in personnel numbers and the stripping and undermining of their equipment, buildings and so on, they have not been able to respond as fully as we would expect.

In the Minister of State's response there was no mention of a reserve force. He even mentioned the Civil Defence. Did he say 800 of them were mobilised to do something? That leaves another 1,700 in the Civil Defence who were not called on at all.

This is an emergency, with all hands on deck, yet the Minister of State says how great it is that the Department was able to spend money on an airplane. That was already committed. It is the same with the proposal he brought before the House about recommissioning officers and re-entry. That was all committed to last year. What exactly is being done this year? How much of the €10.8 million he talked about has been committed already?

What about the purchase of new field hospitals and medical equipment? Is that buried in the middle of that figure? It does not seem to be there. I do not see mention of what other armies around the world have, such as field hospitals which are containers like Lego pieces that join up and can be used at a moment's notice. Again, they were not mentioned. I know they were asked for in the past. The Department turned them down. The Minister of State has had since very early in February or March to allow the purchase of such equipment and allow the Defence Forces to continue and enhance their work.

The Minister of State said it would cost a substantial amount of money to bring St. Bricin's hospital up to date. The Government is spending a substantial amount of money on private hospitals. Would it not be better to spend it on public hospitals which are in the Defence Forces' hands, in both the Curragh and St. Bricin's, and bring them up to a standard such that they can be utilised now and into the future in our response? Does the Minister of State accept any responsibility for having the Defence Forces under strength, ill-resourced and badly paid, which has impacted their ability to deliver fully for the State in the Covid response?

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I will ask a couple of questions on two separate items. At 5.25 p.m. on 21 May, the rear door of an Air Corps helicopter detached and fell more than 250 m onto the grounds of Moyle Park College in Clondalkin, which is in my constituency. The aircraft had successfully completed a lifesaving mission to a Dublin hospital and was on its way back to the aerodrome at Baldonnel to refuel when the door fell off. Reports have emerged about how the door fell off at the far side of Clondalkin village. It was then blown by the wind across the village and over the heads of pedestrians and motorists before landing in the grounds of the school. People have spoken to me about it. As the Minister of State can imagine, Clondalkin village was a hive of normal village activity at the time. Had we not been in the middle of a pandemic, Moyle Park College would have been bursting at the seams with children training for GAA, soccer, basketball and other sports. It is a miracle that no one was injured on the ground or in the aircraft.

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What is the status of the investigation? When will the investigation be concluded and made public? What is the scope of the investigation? Will it include an investigation into what budget is provided for regular maintenance of Air Corps aircraft?

I have seen in my area at first hand the valuable contribution that retired members of the Defence Forces have made during Covid-19. For example, there is a group of seven retired Army personnel who voluntarily collect and deliver prescriptions for people who are cocooning and self-isolating. To date they have collected more than 1,000 prescriptions for our community. I want to take this opportunity to thank Anto, Sammy, Mick and the rest of the lads who are doing that.

On 1 April, the Government announced a scheme to re-enlist Defence Forces personnel to fill the gaps in the Permanent Defence Force. I have spoken to several former members of the Defence Forces who have applied to offer their services to the State but who are disappointed with the lack of response. A written response to a parliamentary question I tabled informed me that 502 applicants had been deemed eligible for re-enlistment. How many of these 502 eligible applicants have been re-enlisted to date? How many will be re-enlisted? What is the delay in the process?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Minister of State, you have two and a half minutes to respond.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I can speak if the Minister of State wants to wait to the end to address all of our questions.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Yes, we can do it that way. Go ahead, Deputy Clarke.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** First, I wish to add my voice to the thanks to our Defence Forces for the role they have played in the emergency of Covid-19. I want to raise a couple of issues with the Minister of State today.

The first is the deep concern regarding the future use of Columb Barracks in Mullingar and the proposed construction of 100 homes by the Land Development Agency there. I have put forward several parliamentary questions but have yet to receive responses. The questions I have put forward are to address the deep concern but also to provide clarity on the confusion around the LDA announcement. The agency website states that the number is actually 200 homes and that a design team has been appointed. Who is in this design team? When did they visit Columb Barracks? What is the timeframe for the next complete preliminary design phase?

There are also genuine concerns regarding the future of the protected structures on that site dating back to when construction began in 1814. The history and heritage associated with the site is far more than the physical built structures. Since its opening, Columb Barracks has stood witness to some of the most historic events in our country's past, a history that should not now or ever be bulldozed but rather incorporated into a future for all. The heritage and history of this site is unique. Despite being closed in 2012 it remains an intrinsic part of the DNA of Mullingar and the surrounding areas.

Columb Barracks, the previous home of the 4th Field Artillery Regiment, requires investment. It requires an ambitious vision and approach that combines the needs of the town today with the future needs of the coming generation. The vision for Columb Barracks must not only respect and value the built heritage of the site, alongside the historical elements, but must also provide a secure future for those valued and valuable community and sporting groups operat-

ing there and providing much-needed services to the wider community. It cannot simply be plundered for profit.

Will the Department of Defence consider transferring the built structure to the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht? This would provide security to the sporting community and ex-Defence Forces groups who currently use these buildings. It would ensure that the structures were preserved and their history recognised, not only for those who live in and visit the town today, but for those who will do so in future.

A number of years ago, the Defence Forces were seen as a viable career, not only in general terms, but for those who were successful in applying for the apprenticeship programmes within. That was then and this is now, however. Grassroots members of the Defence Forces tell me that they are seeing an entire system in crisis and that they are underfunded, under-resourced and undervalued. They see no respect or loyalty. No member of the Defence Forces should be forced to rely on social protection income support to put a roof over his or her family's head or food in his or her children's stomachs. None should be unable to meet monthly rent payments or be locked out of home ownership because of choosing to serve this country. I am proud to represent the people of Longford and Westmeath, but it is far from pride that I feel when a young man tells me that, if his wife was handed his medals and flag, his dream of a forever home for his daughters would actually come true.

Will the Minister of State set up a pay review commission tasked with establishing the fair remuneration of Defence Forces members? Will he give our Defence Forces the right to collective bargaining on pay and conditions? Will the Department of Defence initiate a root and branch review of itself and instigate necessary reforms to improve the working relationship between it and Defence Forces structures, particularly in respect of responsibility for budget spending?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have three and a half minutes left. Could the Minister of State perhaps respond to some of those questions in correspondence?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I will not be able to reach them all.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Whatever you can.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** In my tenure, I have been able to deliver a package of measures worth more than €20 million in increases in Defence Forces pay through the independent pay commission, public sector pay increases, increases in new entrants' pay and outstanding adjudications. There have been increases under various headings. I do not have time to go through the pay of all of the different ranks in the Defence Forces. I would like to, but I am unable to do so.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh raised the UN's decision to suspend all rotations. My Department is considering a full range of issues, including those the Deputy mentioned, for example, people not being able to go out for a full rotation. We are engaging in discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on that matter. It is my intention to get clarity on all of these issues as soon as possible, specifically before the 116th Battalion deploys in two weeks' time, but it is not as simple as my Department just sorting this out. We have to go through the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Local authorities are the agencies that call out and give all taskings to the Civil Defence. I compliment the Civil Defence. Its volunteers are fantastic and have done great work in recent

weeks. Like many thousands of other volunteers across the country, they have put their lives at risk during this dangerous pandemic.

Regarding the air accident investigation into the helicopter incident, I received a preliminary report. As the Deputy knows, I asked for an extensive investigation into the incident. That is ongoing and I do not want to prejudge its outcome. I want to give the Air Corps the time and space it needs to carry out its work. I assure the House that I have received an incident report from the Chief of Staff. While the Air Accident Investigation Unit was involved earlier in the process, it is an internal investigation and remains ongoing.

I launched the re-enlistment scheme on 1 April. We have had more than 600 applicants, a little over 500 of whom are eligible to return to the organisation. A significant process must be gone through - interviews, security checks and so on. This is ongoing. I hope to have a list from the Chief of Staff soon recommending to me a number of people to be brought back into the organisation. This is the right thing to do for people who have left the organisation and who want to come back. It has been hugely successful and will give people another opportunity to serve.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State. Time is up.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Deputy Ó Snodaigh referred to the plane in which we invested. That was an additional plane; it was not one of the those for which we had planned for last year. It is additional and we decided to invest in it in March.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I am sharing time with Deputies Higgins and Feighan. I thank the Minister of State for taking questions. I wish to ask about Columb Barracks, which has also been raised by other colleagues. I want to give the Minister of State time to respond regarding the 24-acre site that was closed several years ago when a number of barracks in the midlands were closed. The Land Development Agency, which does not have legislative power as yet, has drawn up a design proposal for a number of houses and uploaded a video in connection with the site. This online video is unhelpful because it does not show much detail. I want to make clear that the buildings on the site are listed. When I raised this issue previously with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, who has responsibility for the Land Development Agency, he made it clear that it would not be sliced and diced and assured me that there would be a significant community dividend in respect of the site, which is historically significant. General Seán MacEoin was captured there in 1921. He went on to serve as Minister for Justice and Minister for Defence. A number of clubs operate from the site that are vital to the fabric of the local society and community. The old jail is historically significant and Mr. Jason McKevitt, a local historian in Mullingar, has done considerable work aimed at unlocking the huge potential of the site. I ask the Minister of State to assure people that it is not the case that a bulldozer will go in and knock down all of the buildings in the barracks and that there are no plans to do same. A clear commitment was made that there would be public consultation and a clear plan to deliver development on this essential site. The site requires resources but it has enormous potential for the local community. We must ensure that we unlock its potential for the benefit of the people of Mullingar. Housing can be built on the 14 acres of the site on which there are no buildings. I ask the Minister of State to reassure people in that regard.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will hear all of the questions and then come back to the Minister of State.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** The response from our public service has been heroic. In Ireland's time of need, we know we can always rely on the loyalty and dedication of our Defence Forces. Whether it is establishing and operating test centres on Dublin's quays, playing a vital role in contact tracing, putting overflow facilities together in Citywest at a moment's notice or transporting vital and life-saving PPE, the Defence Forces have risen to challenge. I want to especially acknowledge the efforts of the Defence Forces personnel serving at Casement Aerodrome in Baldonnell, which is in my constituency. I am sure they will be pleased to hear that the Minister of State has allocated over €250 million for six new planes for the Air Corps. I ask the Minister of State to outline his plans to recognise the efforts of the Defence Forces and the dedicated and talented volunteers of our Civil Defence once this crisis has passed. I also ask that a thorough investigation is completed into the freak incident in Clondalkin just two weeks ago when the door from a military helicopter landed in Moyle Park College. Thankfully - and possibly miraculously - nobody was injured but we cannot ever have an incident like that again. I would welcome details from the Minister of State on how aircraft maintenance will avoid any such future incidents or potentially catastrophic situations.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I join my colleagues in thanking all of the members of the Defence Forces community for their efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic. We have a strong military community in counties Sligo and Donegal, with Finner Camp in south Donegal as well as the Army barracks in my home town of Boyle. The latter has been there since the foundation of the State and before. I was a member of the FCA in the early 1980s and thoroughly enjoyed myself. We went to Finner Camp and Dunree in Donegal. When the FCA upskilled to the RDF in the early 1980s, people like me who thoroughly enjoyed themselves were not called back. The 90th anniversary of the 1916 Rising took place in 2006 and at that time Bertie Ahern held a showcase in O'Connell Street involving the Army and Air Corps. I was hugely impressed to see fine young men and women who were very professional. Fourteen years later, it is great to see professional, well-turned-out and, hopefully, well-mobilised but mostly well-paid members because the Defence Forces can sometimes be neglected and sometimes we need to show they are the people who are defending our State.

Does the Minister of State believe the Permanent Defence Force could have played a more prominent role in providing assistance to An Garda Síochána during the Covid-19 outbreak? I know Civil Defence played a significant role.

Deputy Berry mentioned military aircraft on a previous occasion, and it was appropriate to raise it with the Taoiseach. I am not taking from Deputy Berry, who spoke on the last occasion, but I thought it was ironic that we were one of the only countries in Europe that did not have its own military aircraft. I think the Taoiseach rightly said that he would investigate this. Given the serious difficulties we have seen in efforts to repatriate Irish citizens, I was very taken aback. I believe that serious consideration will now be given to the expansion of Air Corps capabilities and I thank Deputy Berry for raising that issue because it was one I did not fully understand. I thank the Minister of State and all members of the Defence Forces for their service and dedication. As political representatives, we should do everything we can to assist them in choosing that vocation in the defence of our country.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** As Deputy Peter Burke is very much aware, Columb Barracks, which closed in 2012, is now longer required by the Department of Defence for military purposes. In establishing the Land Development Agency, LDA, at the time, the Government recognised the potential of this site for development as part of meeting housing demand. The LDA has confirmed that Columb Barracks is a key site that is suitable for its development requirements. To

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this end, the Department is in discussions with the LDA to formally transfer ownership of the site to the LDA. It is understood that the LDA is in the process of planning for future development. I know that some of these plans have been published. The Deputy has approached me on a number of occasions regarding this very important issue.

In response to Deputy Higgins, I compliment members of the Defence Forces - our cadets - who were very much involved in the first part of contact tracing. Members of the Defence Forces are still part and parcel of contact tracing. I also compliment the Naval Service, which had a testing centre on Sir John Rogerson's Quay, and administrative staff who are very much involved in the testing centre at the Aviva Stadium. They are performing a vital service for the HSE with regard to testing.

I compliment the Air Corps for its assistance with regard to Covid-19. I am delighted that the Government was able to commit €265 million for the acquisition of six new aircraft. On 2 April 2020, we took delivery of a new Pilatus PC-12 worth €5.2 million. In July, we are scheduled to take delivery of a further three PC-12 aircraft worth €39 million. These will be well equipped and will have intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance capabilities. They will be an important piece of kit for the Air Corps. In December, I signed a contract to replace the two 26 year old C-295 maritime patrol aircraft to the value of €221.6 million.

There has been discussion recently regarding strategic lift. The Taoiseach spoke about it in the House last week. We have tasked the Chief of Staff to prepare an options paper in that regard, inclusive of what use Ireland, as a country, might have for it. Other countries do have it and it is fantastic to have. In recent years, aircraft availability was never an issue in terms of transporting military personnel from overseas. There were other issues rather than the availability of aircraft. It would be fantastic if we did have our own lift capacity but we have to ensure value for money for the taxpayer in circumstances where we make investments.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** I will put a number of questions to the Minister of State and give him an opportunity to respond. Before doing so, I join him and colleagues from across the House in recognising the huge work that members of the Defence Forces have done during the Covid-19 crisis, from the establishment of the early testing centres on naval vessels to their participation in contact tracing and their involvement across the country in the community call. We are all incredibly grateful for the steadfast work of members of the Defence Forces and their efforts at this time.

It is always worth noting the unique role that the Irish Defence Forces have played, particularly in matters of peacekeeping over 60 years, their involvement in Mediterranean rescue missions in recent years and their participation in UN peacekeeping duties in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Lebanon. Our Defence Forces are unique. Their uniqueness is recognised internationally. It is recognised by the United Nations. The impartiality that members of the Irish Defence Forces display in the conflict zones in which they serve is hugely valued.

We are well aware of the challenges that are faced by our Defence Forces, many of which have been raised by previous speakers. I refer to retention and recruitment owing to low pay and the fact that members of the Defence Forces are not permitted to be members of trade unions, which creates issues for them in terms of a lack of support in the context of their participation in public pay agreements.

In mid-April, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade began urging Irish citizens to return home, where possible, before the strictest of the Covid-19 restrictions in Ireland and abroad came into place. It was around the same time that the Irish peacekeeping troops in Lebanon were informed that rotations were being suspended to prevent the spread of the virus.

*1 o'clock* Understandably, this led to a great deal of uncertainty and stress for members of the Defence Forces and their families. It is welcome the Minister of State's confirmation that those serving in Lebanon will be allowed to return to Ireland later this month. However, there is a lack of clarity on a number of issues. I hope the Minister of State will be able to provide that clarity today. First, can he clarify the quarantine requirements for those who are returning. Will he outline the level of contact troops will be able to have with families during the quarantine period, particularly those who choose to quarantine in a barracks? Second, I understand members of the Defence Forces who are being rotated out in Lebanon will be required to complete the full 14-day quarantine. Can the Minister of State clarify what procedures will be put in place should a member of the Defence Forces test positive with Covid-19 during this quarantine period?

For members of the Defence Forces who are due to be deployed overseas and have been delayed because of the extension of the original rotation, there will be a consequent delay in receipt of the overseas peace support allowance. Can the Minister of State advise if there will be any additional financial supports put in place to mitigate the loss of income that those people and their families will incur?

We are all aware that allowance and that extra income is extremely important to many members of the Defence Forces and their families.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Members coming back from Lebanon have the option of quarantining in their own home or in barracks. Personnel deploying to UNIFIL in Lebanon will go into quarantine together two weeks from departure. I understand arrangements are in place and the chief medical officer of the Defence Forces is very much involved in preparing the quarantine of personnel going to UNIFIL.

My Department is looking at a full range of financial issues affecting members of the Defence Forces regarding allowances and there is full engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform at this time. I want to be able to let members and personnel know the outcome of those discussions and negotiations as soon as possible. I hope the Deputy understands the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is dealing with a range of other areas as well, but it is my intention that as soon as I get the information I will inform personnel going out to UNIFIL and give them full clarification on it.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** When will PDFORRA be able to affiliate to ICTU?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** There are discussions between PDFORRA and ICTU. This was a recommendation from the recently published C&A scheme, which I recommended at the time. The new C&A scheme is up and running with an independent chair. When the report came out there was a recommendation that the Department would get into discussion with ICTU and discussions are ongoing.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** What exactly is the state or nature of those discussions? When will PDFORRA be able to affiliate to ICTU?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Can I get back to the Deputy with the exact state of play on that? My

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understanding is - I can be corrected on this - there is discussion between PDFORRA and ICTU at this time. However, I do not want to say that is the exact state of play, but I will get back to the Deputy with an absolute, full and frank reply on the issue. There is absolutely no delay on my behalf. These discussions are ongoing. The Deputy can understand this is a very sensitive matter. He can be reassured that I will come back to him with a full and frank reply.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I want a reassurance that there is no impediment on the Government's part to ensuring that, as a principle, PDFORRA can affiliate to ICTU.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Probably, it will not be a decision for this Government, but it will have to be an issue for the new Government. This is a big decision to be made. I do not believe a caretaker Government should be making a decision of this magnitude. The next Government should make this decision. The Deputy can be reassured that if I had been able to get a decision on this one way or the other, I would have done so. A huge amount of work is ongoing and has been done between my Department, PDFORRA and ICTU. Management were kept aware of ongoing negotiations as well.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** On pay and conditions, the Minister of State spoke to the issue of engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform regarding those who have either returned from overseas deployment in Lebanon or are going out. He told us that there is full engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and that he hopes to come back to Members on the various issues that have been raised as soon as possible. The latest UN deployment to Lebanon took place in mid-November 2019 and would have ended in May 2020. As I understand it, approximately 50 personnel would have then come home for leave. They have an entitlement to a two-week leave arrangement, which they would have taken up. They understandably did not return to Lebanon because of the pandemic we are in the midst of, but the net effect of those 50-odd personnel having returned home is a loss of income. They have effectively lost one third of their allowance, though provision would have been made for that allowance anyway. Will the Minister of State give an assurance to those who returned home on leave during the last tour of duty that they will have the element of their pay they lost restored?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** A number of claims have been received by my Department regarding people who might have been on leave and who were not able to get back. Those claims have been received from various individuals in varying cases. They state that as a consequence of the travel restrictions on movements back and forth to combat the spread of Covid-19, and specifically UN Under-Secretary-General Jean-Pierre Lacroix's announcement that there would be no rotations until after 30 June, these people were denied the opportunity to return to their deployment. This matter is under consideration and there will be full engagement with the Defence Forces representative associations through the conciliation and arbitration scheme. I am aware of this issue and it was unfortunate that people who came home for holidays or took leave during that time were unable to get back. I am not able to give the Deputy the exact number of people affected because the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF, was able to do the rotation as planned and very successfully right before the real lockdown came into force. Unfortunately some people were home on leave when the UN announced that there would be no rotations and that for people who were home on holidays or who were due to go home on holidays, rotations would be delayed. Unfortunately, it was out of my hands. As I said in my opening statement, this affected over 100,000 personnel from various countries. We were lucky enough to be able to negotiate and discuss getting our troops out earlier than had been planned with the UN.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I welcome the Minister of State's response, because he is aware of the issue and is sympathetic to the plight of those people. I return to my point that this money would have been budgeted for anyway and through no fault of their own, this situation has resulted in a serious loss of income for these people. We know the consequence of that loss of income for a Defence Forces family, especially in terms of keeping a household and managing bills. If there is a process of engagement with the relevant authorities, I ask for a clear and sympathetic view for that cohort of Defence Forces personnel who were affected by a set of circumstances that was entirely out of their control. I ask that that issue be dealt with.

Like other Deputies, I wish to make the case in respect of those who are now going into quarantine before going out. They are away from their families and households. It is arguable that for the sake of equity and fairness they would have a case for the payment of allowances while they are in quarantine on Irish soil. I add my voice to the case that has been made by other Members that they receive appropriate recompense for the period of time during which they are in quarantine. I ask the Minister of State to respond to that.

The Minister of State may not be able to respond to a particular issue I wish to raise. I refer to the current status of the Lynch Camp in Kilworth, County Cork. What is the status of the barracks? It is being used by the HSE, as I understand it, but there is anecdotal evidence of families being asked to socially isolate there. Can the Minister of State confirm whether that is the case? He may not be able to answer that question now, but if he could write to me I would be most grateful.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I am very sympathetic to the financial issues raised by Deputy Sherlock. I wish it was as simple as me writing a cheque, but it is not. The paymaster is the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, as the Deputy is very well aware given that he served in and understands the workings of government. Any financial issues have to go through the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. If he has an opportunity to talk to the Minister for Finance and for Public Expenditure and Reform he can have a friendly word in his ear.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** There have been two Ministers who have come in here and have used the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for a bit of cover. I am not sure how acceptable it is.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I wish I had the chequebook. I will revert to the Deputy on Kilworth. I know any returning personnel from overseas are given an opportunity to quarantine in a number of barracks. Kilworth is available to the HSE. Thankfully given that the spread of Covid-19 has slowed somewhat I am not sure what the HSE's plans for Kilworth are, but I can get the Deputy a full reply.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I have a few questions for the Minister of State and will give him plenty of time to respond. I would like to extend my sympathy to the family and friends of George Floyd and express my strong solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. It is important that we all stand united against racism in all its forms at home and abroad and strongly reject State and institutional racism. We must stand up against the politics of fear and hate espoused by President Donald Trump and state leaders in Hungary and Poland and we must move quickly to end the dehumanising practice of direct provision in Ireland.

I want to join with other Members who have commended the Defence Forces on the role they have played at home and abroad during the Covid-19 crisis. I want to strongly support the

members of the Defence Forces.

My first question relates to the comments made by the Taoiseach about the possible purchase of an airlift carrier for the transport of personnel. Is there any update on that? Is it under consideration?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Chief of Staff has been tasked with coming up with some options or a discussion paper on this. If we are going to buy such an aircraft we have to ensure that, given that it will be funded by the taxpayers, it will not be used for only 100 days a year. We need to ensure there is dual use of this. We need to bring other areas into the discussion as well as the Defence Forces. As I have said previously in my tenure in the Department, we have never previously not had the availability of aircraft to bring members home from missions. This year we did because we do not have an aircraft available and we were unable to bring two members home from Congo. We have the smaller jet, but it would have taken at least seven hops - three stoppages on the way down, a stoppage in Congo and three stoppages on the way back with very difficult challenges in trying to do that. I understand where the Deputy is coming from. However, if we are to invest in such an aircraft, we need to give good tangible reasons for needing it and what we might be able to use it for in the future.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. My concern relates to the retention problem in the Defence Forces, morale issues and issues over pay and conditions. It was notable that the Taoiseach was giving consideration to this level of expenditure and yet we do not see the same movement in addressing issues such as pay. I agree with previous comments that it is very important that the Defence Forces representative organisation, PDFORRA, is admitted into Congress. As is the norm in many other European countries, it should be playing a full role in participating in public sector pay talks.

The return of the two officers from Goma is very welcome. Will more officers be sent out? If so, how many will be sent and when will they be sent?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I met the Chief of Staff and the Secretary General of my Department yesterday. Because of the restrictions on rotations, we had planned on sending three officers to replace the officers who were out there, but that rotation will not take place until after 30 June. The Chief of Staff is in discussions with the head of the mission in MONUSCO and we will be rotating. I have asked the Chief of Staff to give me a full security and medical assessment to ensure the safety of the personnel going out there. At the moment it is our intention to send three further officers out there to replace the officers who had been there, but it will be after 30 June.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Is the Minister of State giving an assurance that they will not be sent if there are concerns over safety because there were concerns over the safety of the two officers and the time it took to get them home? Is it a strong assurance that it will be the safety of the personnel first and foremost and that they will not be sent if there are concerns? How will that be evaluated?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** That decision will be made when I get the reassurances that I have asked the Chief of Staff for. I want to make sure that the safety of all personnel in any of our mission areas is paramount. I am not sure when I will get that from the Chief of Staff, but as soon as I get that we will make a decision on it.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Minister of State and others have rightly praised the role of our Defence Forces in the public health effort. They have done fantastic work in areas

like testing and tracing. Obviously, there is the bravery of forces on missions in Lebanon, Congo and elsewhere. Does that praise not ring a bit hollow when we consider the failure to really support our military personnel with decent pay and conditions? The figures are damning, because of the poor levels of pay, the cuts in allowances and the failure to restore pay and the many allowances cut in the period of austerity. The strength of the Defence Forces stands at 1,000 fewer than it needs to be. We have 610 unfilled vacancies at junior non-commissioned officer, NCO, ranks and 77.6% of establishment at the rank of captain. We no longer provide accommodation for many of our military personnel caught up in the housing crisis that grips the rest of the country. We also refused to refurbish the married quarters that could provide affordable accommodation for our military personnel on or near bases.

We do not have the airlift capacity to bring troops back from the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, mission. In addition, we had the ignominious situation where military personnel out in a very dangerous situation in Chad essentially had to hitch a lift with the French in order to get home. As I understand it, they had to leave their weapons behind and lose all their ammunition because they had to go on a civilian aircraft to get back as we do not have that airlift capacity. I welcome that we do not have a jet to whisk Ministers and taoisigh around the place, but would it not be a good idea to have airlift capacity for our military personnel, for the many thousands of our citizens stranded all around the world during the Covid-19 crisis and for mercy missions we might wish to undertake? It seems pretty crazy to me that we have the bizarre situation where we do not have that key airlift capacity. Let us back up the rhetoric of support for our military personnel with decent pay, conditions, accommodation and the airlift capacity to bring them home.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I am very much in favour of airlift capacity. It would be brilliant to have it. As the Deputy knows, however, it costs a great deal of money. I would be supportive of any Government proposing to buy that capacity. I am delighted to be able to say that during my tenure in the Department we have been able to invest some €265 million in aircraft for the Air Corps.

On the pay of the Defence Forces, the Government was able to deliver a €20 million package of measures to increase pay through the independent pay commission, the public sector pay agreement, new entrant pay scales and outstanding adjudications. We also put in place the high-level implementation plan. The recommendation of the pay commission was an increase in the military service allowance of 10% and allowances cut under the Haddington Road agreement restored. The weekend premium rates were restored. A pilot service commitment scheme, valued at €22,000 a year, has been reintroduced. Outstanding adjudications were implemented. Allowances were increased for the Army Ranger Wing by €50 a week to €200 a week. There were also increases for cooks from €13.50 a week, account holders at €65 a week and for those not already in receipt of allowances. The long-standing practice of charging recruits and apprentices for rations and accommodation was ended, which is a weekly saving of €43.63.

Other pay-related initiatives include a tax credit for sea-going Naval Service personnel, exemptions from benefit-in-kind for healthcare provided to members of the Defence Forces and exemption from the lifetime community rating loading for the private healthcare provided to officers.

Since 2016, the basic starting pay of three-star privates has increased by 31%-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Perhaps the Minister of State could respond to the Deputy in writ-

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ing because we are running out of time for Deputy Paul Murphy.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** After six months training, a new soldier earns €28,685. More can be done. I am the first to recognise that there are challenges.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State. We must move on.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Like every other member of the public service, members of the Defence Forces are regaining-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** From day one, members of the Defence Forces have got stuck in to help fight the impacts of this pandemic. They have transported PPE, helped with testing and tracing and much more besides. Like retail workers, cleaners and other essential workers, they have worked throughout the crisis, in many instances putting their health and lives and those of their families at risk in order to keep society running. Despite the remarks of the Minister of State, it is a fact that they receive shockingly low pay for so doing. At the start of 2020, more than 100 Defence Forces personnel were in receipt of the working family payment. They were receiving another payment from the State, such was the low nature of their pay. More than 80% of Defence Forces personnel are paid less than the average national wage. They are low-paid, as are many other workers on the front line. The cheap talk of the Minister of State and the Government about how much they recognise all the work that members of the Defence Forces are doing does not pay rent or put food on the table and so on.

An additional factor has been referenced which differentiates these workers from others. Like certain other workers, their health and safety have been compromised and their need for PPE, sanitiser and proper social distancing has often been forgotten. However, unlike other workers, they do not have the same legal right to join a union or take industrial action to demand, for example, that unsafe working conditions be improved. That is a real slap in the face for these workers and their families and highlights the need to give full trade union rights to Defence Forces personnel. I listened to the earlier reply of the Minister of State in respect of this issue to the effect that this is a question for the next Government. He is probably correct in that regard because it is likely that we will soon have a new Government. Does he personally support the idea that these workers should have full trade union rights as well as decent pay?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** That will be a matter for the next Government to decide. I never stated that discussions had concluded. Had they concluded, I would have brought a recommendation to the Government. Unfortunately, we did not reach a point whereby I could bring a memorandum to the Government regarding whether we recommended the extension of trade union rights. As I stated in reply to Deputy Sherlock, discussions are ongoing with PDFORRA and RACO. This is a recommendation of the review of the conciliation and arbitration scheme and I acted upon one of its recommendations.

The Deputy is totally incorrect to state that more than 100 members of the Defence Forces are in receipt of the working family payment. He should go back and check that out.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I stated that that was the case at the start of the year.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** There are varying circumstances surrounding why a person would be in receipt of the working family payment. A three-star private who has passed out earns

between €28,685 and €39,583 and might be single or in a relationship with one, two three or four children. If the latter is the case, that person may qualify for the working family payment, as do many other people.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I have another specific question I wish to ask the Minister of State.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Deputy can ask his question when I have finished answering this one.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** If the Minister of State keeps answering it, I will not have time to ask another.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Deputy asked me a very simple question. I gave him the opportunity to ask a question and I wish to have the opportunity to answer it. A three-star private earns between-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I wish to ask about the 116th Battalion. The Minister of State is aware of this issue. Will its members receive their full six months' overseas allowance in order that they will not end up out of pocket as a result of Covid-19?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I answered that question earlier. Several claims have been submitted to my Department on a range of issues. We will work with the representative associations and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on those issues.

The Deputy raised the issue of pay. A three-star private starts off on €28,685. That can rise to €39,583. A corporal is on between €38,786 and €40,523, a sergeant is on between €41,479 and €43,938, a company sergeant is on between €47,960 and €51,010, and a sergeant-major is on between €52,613 and €56,096. For commissioned officers, a lieutenant is on between €41,666 and €51,922 and a captain is on between €50,472 and €62,460, depending on the class of PRSI the individual is on. I can give the Deputy the full range of pay and allowances for all ranks of personnel.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to answer questions on defence matters. If it is okay, I might go straight to questions and answers. To provide some structure to the proceedings and for the convenience of the Minister of State, I might group my questions in regard to the four domains the Defence Forces operate under, namely, land, sea, air and cyber. I might take a break between each one to allow the Minister of State to respond.

From a land perspective, the Minister of State launched a re-enlistment scheme or pathway and it was voted through the House on 26 March. In the ten weeks since that date, the HSE has managed to recruit more than 1,200 personnel and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has been paying approximately 1 million people income protection. The Minister of State mentioned a lot of statistics in regard to 500 or 600 people who are interested in joining. The only metric that really matters is how many people have joined the Defence Forces through the scheme in the last ten weeks. That is the first question.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** On 1 April last, I launched a scheme for re-enlistment of former members of the Permanent Defence Force, in particular former enlisted personnel who have skills and expertise required to fill identified vacancies that currently exist and that were identified by military management. The scheme will allow for initial re-enlistment for a minimum of six

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months up to three years. The duration of the re-enlistment offered will be dependent on the vacancies.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** Does the Minister of State know the number?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Over 600 people applied and, although I cannot be exact, something like 514 or 520 are eligible to come back into the Defence Forces. A huge amount of work has been ongoing within the Defence Forces organisation.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** Just the number, please.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** None as of yet, but I expect that the Chief of Staff-----

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** That is zero.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I expect that the Chief of Staff will recommend to me next week a number of people to come in. Deputy Berry said at the start we would only get 12 to re-apply.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** To confirm, the number is actually zero. To correct the Minister of State, I did not say 12 would apply; I said that approximately 12 would be inducted. I was being over-optimistic in thinking it would take place in the month of May and, obviously, that has not happened. Is there a target date or does the Minister of State have a preferred date for when the first inductions will take place?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Deputy said at the time that no more than 12 people would apply for re-enlistment but, instead, we have over 600 people. I should also say that more than 30 officers have an interest in coming back into the Defence Forces and I am awaiting a recommendation from the Chief of Staff on that. As I said, I expect I will have a list of recommended candidates for re-enlistment from the Chief of Staff next week, and there will be further people who will come back into the organisation over the next short while.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank the Minister of State for confirming that the number is zero and that not a single member of the Defence Forces has been re-enlisted through this scheme in the last ten weeks. I also point out there is no projected date for the first person to be enlisted. I want to confirm as well, and people will be very happy to check the record-----

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** As I said, next week I will have a full list of people who want to come back into the Defence Forces, as recommended by the Chief of Staff. Yesterday, it was confirmed by the Chief of Staff that I would have it next week.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** Understood. To clarify, my question is when we will have the first person in uniform and working. That is what induction means.

I see my role here as to facilitate and advise and maybe gently nudge things along rather than being adversarial. I have no intention of being adversarial. There is a group of people, the Army nursing service, that I suspect people in the Chamber may not be aware exists. A report on reinvigorating the Army nursing service, which would have been very useful over the past couple of months, has been in the Department of Defence headquarters since 2012. It has not been acted upon over the past eight years. A number of agency nurses are working in the Defence Forces. They would love to join the Army nursing service but cannot. They are not allowed because the report still has not been implemented. This is a gentle request in the nicest possible way. Perhaps the Minister of State has only a few weeks left in the role. Would it

be possible for him to look at the report and try to regularise their situation? It would save the taxpayer a fortune. Instead of paying agency rates for agency nurses we could bring this couple of nurses into the fold and pay them a normal decent wage with a permanent salary.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I will come back to the Deputy on this issue.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank the Minister of State. To move on to the Naval Service, we know that two Naval Service ships have been in Cork Harbour for approximately 12 months. We recognise there was some miscommunication approximately 12 months ago as to whether they were in for maintenance or because of a lack of personnel and sailors. As of this date, 3 June 2020, why are the two ships still in Cork Harbour? My understanding is that it is exclusively for lack of sailors. Will the Minister of State please confirm whether this is the case?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** There are particular challenges in the Naval Service. Given the highly specialised nature of personnel, staffing shortages have had a significant impact. At present, the Naval Service has 898 personnel and its establishment strength is 1,094. This means there is a shortage of 200 personnel. As personnel return to career courses, it is likely we will have ongoing challenges in the Naval Service. The next Government will have to take a serious look at this. If we are to recompense members of the Defence Forces, the Naval Service has to get special attention. I say this because we have to make the Naval Service an attractive organisation to join. It is not seen as an attractive organisation at present for various reasons.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** People have to spend long periods at sea. We have to make sure they are financially rewarded for this.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Berry has further questions.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I would ask that they are specifically looked at by the next Government.

**Cathal Berry:** Perhaps Deputy Berry will pose all of his questions now, given the limited time.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank the Minister of State for clarifying this. The reason the two Naval Service ships are tied up in Cork Harbour at present is because of a lack of personnel. We understand this now.

I am glad the Minister of State mentioned that pay is an issue. A high-level implementation plan was launched on the plinth on 4 July last year. One of the main focuses and reasons for it was to sort out the retention issue in the Defence Forces. Does the Minister of State have the statistics on the net loss of Naval Service personnel who have left since the launch of the programme? How many people have left the Naval Service?

With regard to our UNIFIL troops, has a flight been booked to move them from Lebanon to Dublin? My understanding is that people are not home until the troops have landed safely in Dublin Airport or Baldonnell. If a flight has been booked, which airline is involved? Is the Minister of State satisfied the airline will be punctual, reliable and safe for our troops to fly back on?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** There has been only one occasion that an airline has let us down on a rotation. That was when a mobile phone fell down between the electrical works and the air-

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craft was unable to take off. The aircraft was not the reason for a delay on any other occasion. I understand that it is the United Nations rotation on this occasion. I have not got the specific details as to whether the flight has been booked. I presume work is ongoing on this issue. I have never stated that personnel are home from any mission until they safely land on Irish soil. I only have the figures in front of me regarding the personnel from the Naval Service who were discharged. From 1 January to 21 May 2020, we have 45 who have been discharged and in 2019, I think from the same dates, there were 62 people discharged. The three-year average for the period is 49, with the 2020 figure slightly better than the three-year average. However, the current trend is concerning. I have stated on numerous occasions that we have some real challenges within the Naval Service. There is a working group between military management and my own Department working with the line flag officers. Some recommendations have come back. They are being looked upon. I will have a look at those recommendations as well. If it is at all possible to do anything for the Naval Service through these recommendations, I will put them in train.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I am sharing time with Deputy Nolan. Like everybody else in this country, I was absolutely shocked, horrified and disgusted at the recent death of Mr. George Floyd over in America. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the minute's silence for people who have been victims of racism in all different ways. This particular act hit a chord with everybody, not only in government but also on the Opposition benches and with people up and down the length and breadth of the country.

Over the last months, the people of Ireland have put their shoulders to the wheel, adhering to the guidelines and restrictions put in place by the Government. Great sacrifices have been made by the people to contain Covid-19. This has come at a cost. Very sadly, we have lost 1,658 people to this virus. Thousands have lost their jobs. Many businesses will not reopen. Front-line staff cannot see their families. Weddings have been cancelled, grandparents cannot see their grandchildren. The very fabric of normal life has halted and possibly has been altered for the foreseeable future. I fully support the people and the reason they protested over the last days, and I fully support that people are so driven by what has happened in America that they want to go out and protest. I really do respect that very much. I would go so far as to say that if there were people protesting outside on the street this minute, I would want to be there to stand shoulder to shoulder with them because of what has happened. However, at the same time, we have to obey the rules and have consideration for the sacrifices that have been made already. That is why I have to say that we really must be careful with regard to that protest and future, planned protests. We cannot ignore social distancing. We cannot afford to lose sight of the regulations such as the 5 km travel restriction. We cannot waste the good work that has been done so far or the sacrifices that have been made. Even though it is with the best of intentions and even though the people who want to protest do so over such an important thing, I ask that we really make people aware of this. I want to allow the Minister of State an opportunity to respond so I will stop now.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** This is probably a matter for the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, but I agree wholeheartedly with the Deputy. When one looks at what has happened in this country, specifically in the past nine or ten years, one sees the amount of people who have become Irish citizens. They are black and white and from different races and ethnic backgrounds. It has been fantastic to see how many people have become new Irish citizens. I accept that my party was in government at the time, but I take this opportunity to applaud the then Minister and former Deputy, Alan Shatter, for introducing that policy, which

was continued by the current Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, and his predecessor, Frances Fitzgerald.

I understand that a number of protests are planned for the weekend. Anybody who intends to protest should take account of the public health guidelines. The citizens of Ireland have done a fantastic job over the past three months to combat Covid-19. I call on people to continue that great work. I saw some of the scenes the other evening of people protesting in Dublin over this barbaric tragedy that happened in America. It should never have happened. However, if people come out and protest this weekend, I ask them to take social distancing into account. I do not want to stop protests but there is a time and a place when we can do that, namely, when we emerge from this dangerous pandemic. I do not want to stop people from expressing their frustration at what happened. It did not happen in Ireland, it happened in the United States of America. I do not believe it would ever happen in Ireland.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I want to begin by thanking the Minister of State's office for the constructive engagement it had with myself and my staff on Lebanon and the UNIFIL soldiers returning home. I was contacted by many constituents who were left struggling with everyday issues such as childcare and work duties. The decision made by the Secretary General of the United Nations to suspend the rotations was extremely unfair and it had a negative impact on the families of the soldiers concerned. I welcome that the rotations have been put back in place, with the first being on 21 June followed by the second on 29 June. I want to stress to the Minister of State that he ensures that all military personnel are returned home on those dates because it has a hugely negative impact on families of members of the Defence Forces.

I was contacted last week by RACO. It is deeply concerned that the number of Defence Forces personnel continues to decrease and is now at an all time low of 8,485. This issue has been raised with me many times by people involved in the Defence Forces and their families. They are extremely concerned. RACO has also called for immediate and significant intervention in the form of retention initiatives, to include improved remuneration and other non-pay measures. According to RACO, the initial and modest pay commission recommendations have not stemmed the outflow, while the Government's plan to strengthen our Defence Forces is being allowed to fail despite commitments to the contrary. Has the Minister of State received the submission from RACO? What actions will he be taking to address the legitimate and genuine concerns it raises? RACO is severely critical of the recent report issued on the Defence Forces by the Parliamentary Budget Office. It is being claimed that the Parliamentary Budget Office report on recruitment, retention and remuneration only uses data up to 2017 and relies on Department of Defence and Department of Public Expenditure and Reform figures and trend analyses. According to RACO, however, the situation has become much worse in subsequent years and vacancies have increased by a staggering 310%. These developments must be highlighted to provide accurate and complete advice on the Defence Forces to the Houses of the Oireachtas because this issue has come up here time and again and it is very important that the correct figures and the true reflection are conveyed. Is the Minister of State aware of these claims regarding the inaccuracies in the budget office report? Normally I find our Parliamentary Budget Office to be exemplary, but this is a serious charge being levelled against it by RACO and it needs to be addressed and clarified. We cannot allow the impression to go out that the PBO is somehow deliberately misleading the House.

Finally, I wish to highlight the incident in which three Irish soldiers received minor injuries when an improvised explosive device exploded near their convoy in eastern Mali on Tuesday, 25 February. As the Minister of State is aware, there was serious concern last year when the

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decision was taken to send our troops to Mali. Many people raised particular concerns that such missions continue to erode any meaningful sense of neutrality we have. My question is whether there continues to be any real value to the so-called triple lock guarantee on our neutrality.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before I call the Minister of State, I point out to Deputy Nolan that the PBO is a matter not for the Minister of State but for the House, and I assure her we will investigate the matters she has raised.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Absolutely. I just wanted the matter on the record of the House.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I welcome the fact that she has highlighted the superb work the PBO has done.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Yes, it has done superb work.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I would think it highly unlikely, and see no reason, that the PBO would have any vested interest in misrepresenting any fact.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Absolutely. It is clarity that is needed.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will take the matter up.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** In my 18 years as a Member of the Oireachtas, the Library and Research Service and now the Parliamentary Budget Office have been an absolutely great source of information. Whatever information was sought from my Department by the PBO, we handed over. This was totally independent of Government and my Department. I had absolutely no influence over it whatsoever. Neither the Government nor my Department had any influence over it. I thank Deputy Nolan for her comments on the staff in my office and the assistance they gave her. Yes, it was a very difficult time for family members. I spoke to a huge number of them. They contacted me directly. Once I explained the situation to them, they fully understood that getting the personnel to return from the UN mission was out of my control and that it was a UN decision to delay all rotations until 30 June. Fortunately, we have been able to get them home earlier.

On the Deputy's issue with RACO, officers at the moment are at 99% capacity. Their established strength is 1,233, and the current strength is 1,222.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will have to come back to the matter because we are way over time. Perhaps the Minister of State will correspond-----

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I wish to make just one further comment on that. There are 35 officers, former members of the Defence Forces and the officer corps, in respect of whom expressions of interest have come back in. This is something I really pushed. Quite a number of pilots - five, I think - have re-enlisted already and more have shown interest in returning into the organisation.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We hope Deputy Berry is not one of them and that he is happy to stay here. Is Deputy Pringle sharing time with Deputy Harkin?

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Yes. I wish to ask a number of questions, and perhaps the Minister of State could respond to them before Deputy Harkin comes in with her five minutes. I compliment, as all Members have done, the very important and very welcome role the Defence Forces have played in the Covid-19 crisis.

My first question concerns the aircraft. This has been discussed by a couple of Members already. The Minister of State has kind of answered the question but will he explain how the Department uses transport under normal procedures? Does it hire in aircraft? How does that work? What would the actual use of it be? Do we need actually to purchase a military aircraft at all?

The second question for the Minister of State is on the view of the Department on the discussions taking place in Europe around permanent structured co-operation, PESCO, and the European initiative being fostered by France in respect of military actions in Africa. What is the view of the Department and Ireland and what is the likelihood of these being developing further?

Does the Department have any view on the continued use of Shannon Airport by the American forces and the ongoing use of Shannon during the lockdown period? Is that factored in to the defence services?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The last question is a matter for the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney. I will let the Deputy take that up with him.

Regarding an aircraft carrier or troop carrier proposed to be used for bringing troops back and forward and transporting troops back and forward, at the moment every second rotation is either an Irish rotation, which involves my Department, or a United Nations rotation. We share the rotation, taking every second one. My understanding is that the current rotation is a UN rotation. I can come back to the Deputy and give him clarification on that. When we are doing a rotation, we put it out to airline carriers and they tender for it. There is an abundance of carriers that tender for the contract. I presume we give it to the most secure one, but price comes into it too. I presume there is a kind of scoring sheet like for any tendering document. My understanding is that different carriers have been used in the past. My understanding is that this has never let us down, except on one occasion when a mobile telephone fell between the seating into the electricals. This delayed one of the rotations by one or two days because it was unsafe for the aircraft to lift off at the time. I do not recollect that a specific aircraft was delayed or its availability was delayed in the rotation.

I have said that it would be fantastic to have it, but we have to be able to explain to the taxpayers of Ireland the reason we are getting it. It is not as simple as going out, buying an aircraft, parking it down at Baldonnell and using it specifically for the Defence Forces. We have to look at dual use by Departments, including Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade humanitarian work and so on. We will have that discussion at a later date. I presume the next Government will be making that decision.

I only had one European Council meeting last week. I can come back to the Deputy on the specific issue he raised.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I was not here when the House had its minute of silence but I bowed my head in memory of, and in sorrow at, the shocking murder of George Floyd. We all have to do two things. First, we have to look inside ourselves at our unconscious racism. Second, as legislators, we have to ensure that racism is stamped out in Ireland.

Like many other colleagues, I wish to thank the Defence Forces for their highly valuable contribution to the nation during the Covid-19 crisis.

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My first question relates to Finner Camp. The Minister of State will be aware that prior to the 2012 reorganisation of the Defence Forces, soldiers could access training in Athlone. For example, if a corporal wanted to train to become a captain, she could go there. Now, they have to travel to Dublin for that training.

For operational matters, soldiers must also come from Finner Camp, Athlone and Dundalk on rotation to Dublin. This is a complete waste of time and has a serious impact on people's daily lives and work-life balance.

In the context of strengthening our Defence Forces, arguments for which have been made strongly today, will the Minister of State consider the re-establishment of the Western Command in Athlone now that we are eight years on?

My second question relates to the current situation in the Defence Forces. I do not need to reiterate the figures that many Deputies have cited concerning the number of vacancies at the level of junior NCO, captain, etc. Instead, I wish to discuss how we have no military airlift capacity. In this, we stand alone in Europe. Many pilots in the airline industry have lost their jobs. In that context, will the Minister of State look to establishing an airlift capacity and employing some of those pilots, who would now be available?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** On that, a number of pilots have shown an interest in returning to the Air Corps. I introduced re-enlistment for pilots. That measure has been successful, with five re-enlisting in the past number of months from the end of 2019 when I recommissioned the first two officers to the end of March or some time in April. I believe five have re-enlisted, although it could be six. A number of other people have also shown an interest in returning to the Air Corps as pilots.

There are challenges, specifically in respect of sergeant, corporal and private ranks. The same obtains in the Air Corps and Naval Service. It is in respect of that core of people that we face significant challenges. There are a number of reasons for this in the various organisations.

*2 o'clock* For example, I have already referenced the Naval Service. The next Government will have to take its particular challenges seriously, including the ability to put ships to sea and further challenges that will arise later this year. That Government will have major decisions to make when it comes to the negotiation of the next round of public sector pay. The Naval Service is a specific and difficult job, with people spending days and days on end at sea. We must be able to make that job more attractive.

Strengthening the Defence Forces has always been a priority of mine.

I will revert to Deputy Harkin regarding the amount of travel involved. Deputy Troy asked about the health and safety of people travelling. I understand from the Chief of Staff that all health and safety measures are taken into account when people travel.

On the specific issue of an airlift carrier, we must be able to demonstrate to the taxpayer the reasons for having one. We must have good and tangible reasons. It would cost a substantial amount of money, so we would need to demonstrate to the taxpayer what use we would make of it and that we would get the best use possible out of it if the Government decided to buy one. The next Government will face some very difficult economic challenges. If that decision is made, we will need to be able to demonstrate to the taxpayer why we need one.

*Sitting suspended at 2.05 p.m. and resumed at 2.25 p.m.*

## **Covid-19 (Rural and Community Development): Statements**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I call the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, for questions and answers on Covid-19. The Minister has ten minutes. Fianna Fáil will have 15 minutes, as will Sinn Féin. We then revert to ten minute slots for everybody.

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring):** I welcome the opportunity to address the Chamber today to update Deputies on the work of my Department as part of the national efforts to address the challenges presented by Covid-19.

Community organisations, charities, social enterprises and the volunteers who assisted them have been an integral part of our country's response to the pandemic. While elements of our society and economy are now beginning to reopen, the reality is that community and the voluntary sector never closed. In recent weeks, when other sectors have been unable to operate, the community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises have stepped up to the plate in their local communities, delivering vital service to those most in need. While a whole-of-Government co-ordinated approach is the backbone in planning and managing the effects of this emergency, solutions are ultimately implemented at a community level. Recent weeks have demonstrated as never before the benefits of having a robust community structure in place. It is vital that we continue to support our communities as our country moves into recovery phase.

From the outset of the crisis, my Department has played a central role in supporting the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities. As a result of the partnership approach developed by my Department with the community and voluntary sector, we were well placed to respond quickly and effectively to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 crisis. Due to our expertise in the area, my Department was represented on the NPHET subgroup on vulnerable people and was instrumental in planning the Government's response to the needs of vulnerable people in our communities.

As an immediate response to the crisis, I published a Covid-19 action plan as the first step to support the community response. Its three key initiatives were: letting people know how and where to volunteer; increasing community supports for older people through a partnership with ALONE; and launching an email helpdesk supporting smaller community groups. At the same time, my Department produced a Covid-19 communication pack for communities. Following the launch of our action plan, my Department developed proposals for a whole-of-Government response to the needs of vulnerable people in our communities. This ultimately became the Government's Community Call initiative, an unprecedented mobilisation of national Government, local government and the community and voluntary sector to support vulnerable people in our community during the Covid-19 emergency.

The Community Call is managed locally by local authorities, led by chief executives who chaired a dedicated community forum in their local authority areas to respond to the needs of people cocooning in their homes. Crucially, the community forums included all of the State and community and voluntary organisations responding locally to the Covid-19 crisis. The Community Call initiative has ushered in a new way of working, a shared purpose and a significant level of collaboration between local and national Government, community and local develop-

ment and the volunteer sector.

My Department has played a central role in the Community Call from its inception, sitting on the national oversight committee and providing funding and support for many elements of the community response. Last month, in response to the urgent need for equipment and other supports, I announced a €2.5 million Covid-19 emergency fund for community and voluntary groups taking part in the Community Call. Local authorities are distributing the funding to community groups supporting vulnerable people in getting through the crisis.

Volunteers have been very much to the forefront of the community response. Volunteer Ireland and local volunteer centres participated fully in the Community Call structures. With their help and advice, many pressing issues in relation to the community response, such as safe volunteering, volunteer management and Garda vetting, were dealt with efficiently and professionally. In response to the significant extra demand on their services, my Department provided additional financial support to our volunteer centres.

The Covid-19 community outreach scheme, run by The Wheel and Irish Rural Link, was another important element of the Community Call fund provided by my Department. Community champions are now in place in all local authority areas and are represented on local community response forums.

In addition, our public participation networks are currently playing a central role in the community response to the Covid-19 emergency, as evident by initiatives at local level throughout the country. The response by the 49 local development companies to Covid-19 has been rapid and widespread, with many of their 170,000 service users reached in the early days and weeks of the crisis. Local development companies played a key role in the Community Call, participating on all of the community forums and helping to co-ordinate the community response. Through the national social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, local development companies continue to work with the most disadvantaged in our society. This is more important than ever during the crisis.

In addition to the Community Call, we supported our public libraries, which were quick off the mark to expand and adapt to the digital service once the Covid-19 restrictions were imposed. Branches had to close, but our libraries are now delivering more services online and it is possible for new members to register online to avail of them. Over the last three months, I have provided an extra €400,000 to the library service to meet the demand for online services.

My Department has also responded to the urgent needs of the community and voluntary organisations, charities, and social enterprises that are suffering financial difficulties as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions. A few weeks ago, I announced a €40 million package of supports consisting on two key elements. First, a €35 million Covid-19 stability fund to assist organisations experiencing severe financial difficulties due to the reduction in fundraising and traded income as a direct result of the Covid-19 epidemic. The second part of the package is the €5 million Government contribution to the Innovate Together fund, which is also supported by charitable donations.

As well as developing the new funding schemes, existing supports provided by my Department have been enhanced in response to the epidemic. An example of this is the adoption of the seniors alert scheme to link with ALONE national helpline, offering a befriending service to participants. My Department and Pobal are allowing the maximum level of flexibility possible

to community services programme, CSP, supported organisations to ensure they can continue to employ their staff and support their communities. We have also put in place a support fund which is providing an additional one-off payment to eligible CSP-supported organisations to assist with staffing costs in the short-term.

My Department also recognises the challenges being faced by local action groups in delivering the LEADER programme 2014-2020, and swiftly moved to introduce additional flexibility to support the ongoing operations.

Despite the cancellation of this year's Tidy Towns competition, I have committed that funding allocated to groups throughout the country this year will still be available to continue the great work in making our towns and villages attractive and welcoming.

I have outlined to Deputies my Department's work in responding to the Covid-19 crisis since the middle of March. As we are now beginning to ease the restrictions, it also has an important role to play in the recovery. Last week, I announced a package of measures under my Department's rural development investment programme to help rural economies and communities in the post-Covid recovery. This package includes €15 million for the town and village renewal scheme, €10 million for the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme, and €5 million for the CLÁR programme. Each of these schemes has been adjusted this year to help rural towns and villages to adapt to how to do business and to how people can socialise within the context of the public health guidelines.

The rural regeneration and development fund will also be instrumental in supporting the economic recovery of rural areas following Covid-19. To date, funding of €148 million has been approved for 110 projects under the fund, and a budget of €53 million has been allocated to the fund for 2020.

A significant factor in the economic recovery of rural areas will be the availability of access to high-speed broadband. Broadband connection points will be opened across the State in the coming weeks and months, allowing many communities without reliable broadband an opportunity to work remotely and to conduct their business online from local facilities.

Social enterprises are also an important part of the local economy in rural areas and are well-placed to address our priorities in the Covid-19 recovery phase by creating jobs, generating local economic activity and addressing broader policy priorities relating to the environment and local services. Above all, as we head into a new phase of the economic recovery it is important that no region is left behind, and that no person is left behind. We need to ensure we bring all of society with us. Covid-19 has brought about a shift in our values as a society, with greater emphasis placed on the value of our neighbours, our communities, and of being in this together. We have always known in Ireland that our communities-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I thank the Minister. His time has expired. He may refer to the rest of his speech in the course of his questions and answers. Is that okay?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** That is grand.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Is there a copy of the speech?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** It is being circulated. Fianna Fáil is next

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with 15 minutes. Who is Deputy Calleary sharing with?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I am sharing with Deputies Cahill, Moynihan and Ó Cuiv. There are a couple of others in the slot. We will manage the time.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** It is going to be very difficult to manage the multiplicity of interventions. I ask everybody to keep to the time as much as possible.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank the Acting Chairman.

I join the Minister in acknowledging the huge effort that has been put in over the past number of weeks in the first phase of Covid by the local development sector, local authorities, organisations such as LocalLink, RSS and Tús, CE workers, and sports organisations in communities across the country. Truly meitheal was part of our defence against the first phase of Covid, and meitheal will be the essential part of the ongoing response to it.

One of the questions I would like to ask the Minister concerns these organisations. Many of them are facing huge pressure as a consequence of the restrictions. The Minister mentioned the stability fund for community, charity and social organisations. When will he be in a position to make announcements about awarding that funding. He surely understands the urgency of that funding for their cash flow, and the importance of that cash flow to many providing essential services.

The Minister mentioned the community services programme, CSP, and I welcome the flexibility he has shown to CSP companies in the past number of weeks. However, as we move on, their commercial income will be affected by the ongoing restrictions. What flexibility will continue to be there as the various phases of our response to coronavirus are rolled out? Will there be flexibility when looking at their income, and looking at their inability to generate commercial income?

The Minister mentioned rebuilding rural Ireland, and that is the phase we must move to. The town and village renewal scheme and the various capital programmes are essential and it is particularly important that we now recalibrate the town and village renewal scheme to take account of social distancing and of the extra space, and to use it as an opportunity to make our towns and villages even more attractive places to come to and socialise in.

On the overall recovery plan, it is reported the Minister has views on travel restrictions. Does he think it is fair that the 20 km restriction, which in my county, and which is also the county of the Minister and Deputy Conway-Walsh, would not bring one far, should be left as is, or should there be some sort of flexibility given for inter-county travel and travel within counties? That too would allow our towns and villages to catch a breath, even if it is kept to within the county.

There are issues around rates. Our rural businesses, communities and clubs will not survive unless there is a break given on rates, and unless there is some sort of continuing reform in the temporary employee subsidy programme around seasonal workers.

I suspect many private companies are making plans to take services out of rural Ireland and use Covid as a cover to do that. I refer specifically to banks. As Minister for Rural and Community Development, has he taken a stand against banks which have used Covid as a cover to close branches, and are delaying reopening them? That is a disgraceful way to treat rural Ire-

land, given that it helped pay the bills that those banks left behind. This House needs to make it very clear today that we will not stand for withdrawal of any services from rural Ireland using Covid-19 as a cover.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I call Deputy Michael Moynihan. We will take all the answers at the end, otherwise the last speaker will have no time at all.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I will make my contribution and the Minister can reply to me in writing afterwards. I want to make a few points in the limited time we have. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I want to pick up on Deputy Calleary's point regarding the 5 km limit. For many urban dwellers, this limit does not impede them at all because they can do all of their business within a 5 km radius of their home. However, for people in rural communities, even the 20 km limit is problematic and for places like north Cork, we really need more flexibility. There must be a sense in the discussions that are held tomorrow and the announcements that will be made over the next while that we take the concerns of rural people into consideration in terms of what they and everyone else, both urban and rural dwellers, have endured in the context of the Covid-19 crisis over the last number of weeks.

There is an opportunity here. The Minister said in his opening statement that there has been a shift in values and there is no doubt about that. People are talking to other people and have met their neighbours more over the last while and there has been a shift in values. We should use the opportunity that is facing us now to make sure that we can renew and write a new chapter for rural Ireland. We have seen an increase in "smart working" over the last number of weeks. The term "remote working" is being used by many but Cork County Council is quite right to describe it as "smart working", with people working from home and taking advantage of connectivity, whether they are in rural or urban communities. People can have a choice as to where they work. We must refocus and use every policy instrument available to the Department of Rural and Community Development to repopulate rural Ireland. This can be very good for rural Ireland and society as a whole. We have seen the benefits right across the spectrum in the context of Covid-19 and how the disease is spread. As we move into the next phase, there can be an economic benefit from rural living. I appeal to the Minister and his Department not to lose this opportunity.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I wish to focus on three areas, namely, the community and voluntary sector, transport and mobility and broadband. Broadband is a major issue for so many rural communities and has been thus for many years. The recent increase in working and studying from home has further intensified the problems and has highlighted the broadband black spots. While additional bandwidth has been made available and wireless connections have improved, the black spots remain where wireless coverage is not available. Is there any way that the Minister can highlight this with the national broadband plan? There must be a focus on the already-identified black spots so that they can be prioritised in the roll out of rural broadband. This is a hugely significant issue.

On transport and mobility, the point has been well made already with regard to the 5 km and 20 km limits which are very restrictive in rural communities. To put it into perspective, one can travel for up to 20 km in Dublin and engage with anything up to 1 million people, thus potentially driving on Covid-19 at a super-spreader rate whereas in a rural community if one travels 20 km, one may not meet anything more than a handful of people. In terms of people being able to drive around and do their business in rural communities, the limits are very restrictive. Has the Minister raised this matter with the Minister for Health and the Taoiseach? Is there

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some way of doing away with that limit or having flexibility within it to make it more realistic for rural communities? If we attempt to enforce an unrealistic limit on people, it will bring the whole thing into disrepute and will not be practical.

According to CSO figures from 2016, 25% of people in my own area covering north and west Cork commute for well over 45 minutes every day. This includes people travelling to Cork and Limerick for college or for work. Travelling is a big issue for people and in the absence of public transport, the car is essential. In that context, having a driver's licence is a big issue for a great many people. Is there some way whereby newer drivers who are ready to take the test can do so? The issue has been resolved or contained for those who are seeking renewals but is there some way for newer drivers who have taken driving lessons to get tests as this would thereby give them the opportunity to obtain driving licences, reduce their insurance costs and have the mobility they need in rural communities?

Regarding community and voluntary groups, while the stability fund initially focused on Covid-related activities, there needs to be some way that the wider community groups, whether they are involved in Ionad Cultúrtha in Ballyvourney or Independence Museum Kilmurry, are able to avail of that funding to support their local communities.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I agree with Deputy Calleary about the significant work that community and voluntary organisations have done throughout the Covid-19 crisis. We must welcome the €40 million package of support for these organisations, charities and social enterprises announced on 8 May 2020. Many of these community and voluntary organisations have seen their incomes decimated because of the Covid-19 restrictions. This emergency package includes a stability fund of €35 million and an Innovate Together fund of €5 million for these organisations. The stability fund will provide important support to sectors, including health and social care, child and family services, housing, homelessness and community services such as meals on wheels and old age supports. While the deadline for the first round of applications for the Innovate Together fund has passed, two further application rounds are planned for June and September of this year. Could the Minister bring forward details of these immediately?

Regarding rural regeneration and development and town and village renewal programmes, which I know the Minister values, as do I, Tipperary town in my constituency is in the very early stages of developing a long-term and sustainable development plan. It is envisaged that infrastructure, job creation, commercial service provision, provision of housing and enhancement of heritage and other community assets will all form part of the plan. However, one piece of the jigsaw is required to make it possible for all the others to fall into place and that is the need for a ring road for Tipperary town. There have been reports that what is now being discussed in this regard is an inner relief road. What is needed is a road that routes traffic around the town rather than one that would simply reroute traffic through other parts of the town. An inner relief road would clearly hamper the overall ambition for the town and merely relocate rather than solve existing problems. The Department and others will be required to invest significant funding in the coming years if we are to make the vision for Tipperary town a reality. It is critical that the main infrastructure provision is done properly because it will impact on all other plans. Will the Minister put on the record within the Department that a ring road is what is required for Tipperary town rather than an inner relief road?

I will talk about Tús and community employment, CE, schemes in the limited time I have left. I know that these matters do not fall directly within the remit of the Department but they are hugely important for rural communities. I ask that restrictions in place at the moment be

reviewed in line with Covid. In the case of Tús, the existence of 12-month-only placements pertaining to many of the current participants means that they have missed out on actual working time due to the lockdown. Could their time be extended beyond their finishing date? If it was possible, could the option of a second year on a scheme be introduced and possibly longer for those aged over 55? Could the waiting time between placements be reduced from the current three years to one year? Could mandatory retirement at 66 be abolished because the schemes are particularly useful for people who may be of retirement age but who still wish to work within their community? There are Tús and CE schemes that cannot recruit employees because of social distancing. If it can be proved that social distancing can be observed without difficulty, as many of these participants work on their own, could these schemes be resumed as quickly as possible? It would obviously be of great value to rural communities.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I will not be able to answer all of the questions in one minute, but I will do my best to answer some of them. Deputy Calleary raised the issue of the stability fund. The Deputy is correct. My plan is to roll it out as quickly as possible. The funding is in place and more than 1,000 applications have been received. I want the funding to be paid out as quickly as possible. We did have to engage with some of the groups in regard to the manner in which they filled out their applications. I want to ensure equality between the groups in terms of applications. It is important we are all singing from the same hymn sheet. Pobal will make the decisions. As I said, my plan is to roll out the funding as quickly as possible.

On the issue of services in rural Ireland, if any of the banks or public services are using this opportunity to shut down services, I would condemn them. I call on Bank of Ireland to ensure that all of its branches which closed during the crisis are reopened immediately, because if the business existed prior to the crisis, it should be there after it. I hope that they will be reopened.

On the rates and other facilities, schemes have been put in place and the Government has announced a package. I hope that the local authorities will show flexibility to businesses. What we need now is business to reopen. The local authorities need to assist them in their hour of need. I do not want local authorities or any other service putting pressure on businesses that need to open quickly and commence re-employment of people as quickly as possible.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Unfortunately, time has caught up with us. Every effort is being made to facilitate everybody. The time allocation is in members' hands. If members want full answers, the time is available for that. The next tranche of speakers is Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh, Martin Browne and Pauline Tully of Sinn Féin, who are sharing 15 minutes.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the Minister, Deputy Ring, and this opportunity to get answers to some questions. I thank the Minister for the funding that has been made available to the community and voluntary sector and I commend the meitheal of volunteers that have done Trojan work throughout the country. We need to examine the value of the community and voluntary sector. I refer the Minister to the community employment supervisors and their pension entitlements, which issue has been through the many mechanisms of the State. When can they expect to get justice?

I know the Minister will want to join me and Deputy Calleary in sending sympathy and solidarity to the parents and family of five-year-old Ben Duffy from Tourmakeady who lost his life earlier this week in a tragic accident. I know also that the Minister will be as horrified as all right-minded people by the killing of George Floyd in America. I take this opportunity to send

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solidarity and sympathy to his family and friends. This is not enough. We need to listen and to act with humanity. Community development, which is under the remit of the Minister, Deputy Ring, is about building capacity in people and empowering people and communities, providing equality of opportunity and ensuring that everyone is included and treated with respect. Is the Minister committed to stamping out racism? This commitment can be demonstrated by ending the direct provision system and introducing hate crime legislation. As Minister for Rural and Community Development, what has Deputy Ring done to advance these two actions and what can he commit to do in the future under the rural Ireland and community development remit to ensure that everybody is included? I welcome the Minister's earlier statement that nobody would be left behind because we are leaving whole cohorts of people behind. The Minister also referenced vulnerable people and their not being left behind. There is nobody more vulnerable than the people who are locked up in the direct provision centres. I ask the Minister to speak to that issue.

I also want to raise the issue of the community and voluntary stability scheme and the operational fund. Will the Minister indicate if it will be paid out at the end of July or the end of August? This is what the community groups want to know. I appreciate there were a large number of applications for funding but the community groups would like to know when they can expect it.

As regards the LEADER programme, what provision has the Minister made for community and enterprise projects that have been allocated money which cannot now be drawn down? For example, communities are unable to fundraise the matching funds because of the restrictions on them at the moment, and some businesses that had planned to expand are now fighting for their very survival. Will the Minister give assurances that businesses that have drawn down funding in the current programme and cannot meet the employment targets or may even have to close will be exempt from any of the penalties to which they would be subject in normal times?

What provision has the Minister made to cover the interim period between the end of the current LEADER programme and the beginning of the next one? As regards the structure of the LEADER programme, is he giving consideration to returning to a community-led programme? It was a major mistake under the last programme, as the EU Commission agreed. We had a model of very good practice that was commended throughout the EU and it was brought under the local authorities against the wishes of the people who gathered in community centres throughout this country to tell the Government it was a mistake. There is an opportunity now to review and revise that.

I welcome the request for the revision of the TEN-T core network to include Ireland's western arc region, which was made on 19 August last year. The Minister will agree that it was a major mistake to take it out in the first place. It should never have been taken out. It was acknowledged that without the required infrastructure, not least the transport infrastructure, our potential for economic growth will stall, and the lack of high-quality connectivity within the Atlantic economic corridor has been a major impediment to its development and potential to act as a counterbalance to Dublin and the east. I welcome the response and the letter received from the EU Commission on 10 October giving assurance that the Commission is ready to co-operate very closely with the Irish authorities and that the concerns and specifics of the Irish situation will be fully taken into account in the review process. Will the Minister confirm that his Department will push ahead with the development of the Atlantic economic corridor and that the critical infrastructure projects will be delivered in the lifetime of the next Government if his party is part of it? The opportunities identified by the Atlantic economic corridor to drive the

low-carbon, high-value strategy are game-changing. Will the Minister ensure it is supported at an EU level by leveraging all funds available through the EU as well as at a national level?

It is deeply concerning to me and Sinn Féin that the west and north west have been downgraded from a more developed region to a region in transition. The fact of the matter is that all key economic indicators show that we are at best standing still and at worst in decline. I will leave my contribution at that to allow some answers and will hand over to my colleagues.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** There will only be time for written replies, unless we have space at the end. I call Deputy Browne.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I will concentrate on three things, though I would love to have time to do more. I raise the issue of the N24 which connects Limerick and Waterford and passes through several towns in Tipperary. This route is vital to the connectivity of the region and to regional development as it is the link between Shannon Airport and Rosslare Harbour. However, past Governments from both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have neglected the route. The lack of a bypass for Tipperary town means there is an unacceptable level of traffic in the town and the air pollution is twice the level recommended by the World Health Organization. The bypass was first mooted 40 years ago and it is a damning indictment of Ministers and Ministers of State down through the years that they have let this situation continue. Immediate work is needed to upgrade this route both to improve the living conditions of the people of Tipperary and ensure the necessary infrastructure for economic development, particularly post Brexit with any increased demand for shipping through Rosslare. Plans need to be enacted straight away to put in a ring road, as was suggested by Deputy Cahill, and not an inner relief road, which will not work.

Cashel is a perfect example of where a ring road was built and then linked to the bypass afterwards. I would like to ask the Minister when a bypass will be provided for Tipperary town and if his Department will commit to providing the necessary investment to upgrade the route in light of Brexit.

I want to raise the issue of community resource centres. While many aspects of their funding fall under the remit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the services provided by these centres play a key role in community development through the provision of supports for families, resources for those seeking jobs and supports for the more vulnerable members of our communities. I am involved in the resource centre in Cashel and I know how important it is to the community. Given the uncertainty around the country's economic future post Covid-19, I ask the Minister to outline what supports will be made available to these resource centres as many are already struggling with insignificant funding, yet are to the forefront in supporting people during the current crisis. I ask the Minister to ring-fence the current money available and commit to providing extra funding when required. I also ask that a Cabinet Minister with responsibility for community development be retained.

While I am sure the Minister shares the concerns expressed by me and everybody else about the ongoing anti-racism Black Lives Matter protests in America, support for the protesters from Irish people is also to be commended. Ireland, like every other country, has its own challenges in achieving equality and maximising social inclusion in our communities. Among such barriers is unsustainable accommodation for asylum seekers. This creates barriers to maximising the benefit of community development in Ireland. What measures is the Department taking to encourage the participation of minority groups in community development initiatives?

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I ask that communication be kept open with community groups. As Deputy Conway-Walsh stated, this is not just about those in direct provision. Several communities are being left behind because of decisions made by Government.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** As there are four minutes left in the slot, it is up to Deputies whether to leave time for replies or get written responses.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** One of the biggest problems facing rural Ireland has been the lack of investment in our towns and villages that over decades has resulted in the depopulation of once vibrant communities. My county, Cavan, has, like most of the Border region, endured an unprecedented level of decline, not least in those towns and villages where several empty, and sometimes derelict, buildings blight the main streets. These decaying structures dishearten and demoralise the people who reside in these towns and villages, as well as anyone living in the neighbouring hinterlands. The buildings in question are usually a mixture of residential and business premises, and sometimes a combination of both. Many are older structures that in the past were an intrinsic part of a uniquely Irish rural streetscape but now these same buildings have, because of years of neglect, become run down. They are unwanted eyesores and a blight on the landscape, and illustrate the failure of successive Governments to support rural Ireland.

The cost of renovating these buildings is frequently excessive. In some cases, the buildings are in an appallingly dangerous condition and are potential deathtraps that are easily accessible, especially for children whose natural inclination is to explore such structures. The years of rural neglect that these crumbling structures represent remind us of the failure of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-led Governments to implement the type of policies and vision that would have sustained rural communities into the future.

In recent years, the level of decline has accelerated at an alarming rate. Towns and villages have lost vital services such as post offices, banks or Garda stations. This has, in turn, impacted on the viability of other businesses such as small shops, pubs, cafes and hardware stores, all of which are vital to ensuring social cohesion. In the small village of Kilnaleck, where I am from, I can easily count ten properties which are lying vacant, some of which are in a terrible state of disrepair. In the neighbouring town of Ballyjamesduff, the Percy French Hotel was once a renowned establishment. Now it lies derelict and is an eyesore.

When I canvassed in Swanlinbar in February, I asked the local man accompanying me why we were not canvassing a certain row of houses, only for him to tell me they were all empty. The same story could be told about towns and villages all over Cavan, Monaghan, Meath and, indeed, Ireland. The roll-out of rural broadband would help to keep people in rural Ireland instead of forcing large numbers of our population to gravitate towards large urban centres, especially Dublin. Better road infrastructure is also essential, especially in the Border region. However, it is 20 years since I, as a councillor on Cavan County Council, considered plans to upgrade the M3 from Dublin to Meath to extend into Cavan and bypass Virginia. The work to extend this busy road failed to materialise. The M3 still stops at Cavan and with the county council still considering plans and routes, we continue to live with bottlenecks in places like Virginia.

I acknowledge that there are several schemes such as the rural regeneration scheme and the national vacant housing reuse scheme. However, the uptake on the latter scheme has been pathetic with less than a third of its target achieved. The rural regeneration and development fund is badly needed but there are doubts that it will achieve its aims of pumping life back into

smaller towns and villages. Bureaucracy will make it difficult to access as with so many previous schemes.

There needs to be a straightforward process in place when administering this scheme so that it can be easily accessed and of benefit to the community. It should not be so inaccessible that it can only be exploited by some greedy developer who sees an opportunity to buy up property cheaply, renovate using funding and sell on at a large profit. Schemes such as these need to be properly funded and carefully planned if the Government is serious about reversing rural neglect.

There is also a need for an immediate time-limited review of these schemes with a view to setting ambitious targets for the return of vacant homes back into use and for the regeneration of our towns and villages from empty shells to vibrant communities. This must be part of a wider vision for rural areas which if implemented can, I believe, go some way to reversing the serious decline of rural counties such as Cavan and the resulting depopulation and restore once-thriving communities which are now struggling to survive.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** The Minister has 21 seconds. I doubt if he will have time for much.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** We will need to get written responses to the issues Deputy Conway-Walsh and others raised because I do not have the time. I want to be associated with her words of sympathy to Alan Duffy and his family.

Regarding what happened in America, the Deputy asked me what I had done on racism. My Department funds national organisations that fight against racism. I am totally appalled at what happened in America. My Department has a fantastic record in supporting groups fighting racism in this country. The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, is there to help people in disadvantaged areas to give them the opportunity to get back to education or get into work or an apprenticeship. SICAP does not get the credit it deserves. I was out-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** The Minister's time has concluded. We are doing our best to try to include everybody, but if time is not given for the reply, we cannot do anything about it and so we will have to do it the other way. It is beneficial to the Members to get a reply if they can make time for that. Incidentally, this interruption does not in any way shorten the speeches of those waiting to speak.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I am sharing time with Deputy Peter Burke.

The Minister is very welcome here today. I grew up over a newsagent shop in Boyle. In the last ten years when the recession came, I saw how small towns like that were deeply impacted. When I was growing up, there were at least one or two football teams in our own street. Maybe 150 people lived over shops on our street, but now it is down to one or two. That is the same in every town and village around the country. Now is the time to address those serious situations. The Minister has made a significant difference. His Department and its budget have given hope and funding to towns and villages around the country, which needs to be continued.

Deputy Tully is right in pointing out the many over-shop dwellings that were once a good house. Maybe we all in our haste to get out of town into new houses have left good properties. People say there is a housing crisis and yet towns and villages have many vacant houses and places over shops in which many families were raised. I know standards have improved, but

we need to look at it again and address it.

I will be a bit parochial. My town of Boyle has received significant funding in recent years. Nearly €1 million was allocated to knock down a hotel and make it look better. We also have a cycleway between Lough Key Forest Park and the town. Much more funding has come into that town as with every town and village. No Opposition Deputy can deny that. The past four or five years have seen generosity and help extended to these towns. The Minister referred to the rural regeneration fund and I have a few related issues. Lough Key Forest Park is near the town where I live, and I was involved with that 20 years ago in politics. It is absolutely brilliant. The local authority is working with Coillte. We do not have a hotel, however. We had two hotels, but they are now closed.

It is a tourist area and a tourist town, but we do not have a hotel. Nobody will build a hotel because, unfortunately, it is possible and cheaper to buy a hotel in every town and village around the country than to build one. There are only five or six towns like this throughout the country and we need some mechanism in place. Perhaps the local authority could build a hotel and lease it out to a hotelier. A hotel is now a part of the social infrastructure, because it is where people go for coffee, weddings, communions, etc. It is embarrassing that we have the King House, Boyle Abbey and Lough Key Forest Park but we do not have a hotel. We need assistance and help in trying to get something like that. Does the Minister have any views on how we can address that serious situation? There are only five or six towns in the country with this unique problem. Nobody will build a hotel in this climate unless the local authority were to get funding and then lease it out.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I would like to bring to the Minister's attention a project in Multyfarnham which, under the town and village scheme, was awarded €100,000. I was working with Councillor Emily Wallace and Councillor Frank McDermott regarding revising the project. The local authority has asked the Department for an extension to April 2021 because several environmental studies will have to be carried out to revise the project. We met with residents and discussed the different issues and because the project requires the bridge to be narrowed, it would not be feasible due to heavy agricultural machinery operating in the area. It is a big farming area and a tourism hotspot. We want to look at a different revised project that will not impact on the width of the bridge. I would be grateful if the Minister would look into the request to grant an extension, because it is a good and worthwhile project.

I acknowledge the great work the Minister has done in his Department. I refer to major schemes such as CLÁR, the rural regeneration scheme, local improvement scheme, town and village renewal scheme and urban regeneration scheme. If I look in my constituency, the footprint the Minister has created is evident from Kinnegad to Moate and from Emper into Mullingar. Those various schemes have delivered in every corner of the constituency. They are much appreciated by communities. As I recall, in the most recent budget the Minister was one of the only members of Cabinet who received an increase in his allocation. That money will allow him to get projects of this type, which really deliver for people and improve their quality of life, off the ground. We are working very hard in Kinnegad in trying to get the exciting project in question up and running. The initial design fee was approved by the Minister's Department. When I look at the smaller projects, I always think of Mullingar Sub Aqua Club, which got funding for its first responder vehicle under CLÁR. That was hugely appreciated by the club. The club does great voluntary work and that was a way of thanking its members and showing them we value their input into and work for our community.

I really appreciate the good work the Minister has done and I hope he will be given the opportunity to continue with it. It is important to have a Minister *in situ* who understands the Department and what is required in rural Ireland. Despite some of the criticisms that can be heard in this House, the Minister really has rural Ireland at heart. He delivered in spades on the ground, if people look at the figures and the projects and talk to the communities.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** The Minister has four minutes. It is the first opportunity he has got.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank Deputy Feighan for his kind comments regarding his town of Boyle. I was glad to hear him speaking about the schemes, including the town and village scheme and the rural regeneration scheme, because it annoys me sometimes when I hear people knocking rural Ireland, not being factual about rural Ireland and not being truthful about the previous Government regarding the investment of funds and the amount of money that went into towns, villages and counties throughout the country. Every town and county got funding from my Department in the last budget. People have short memories.

The Department will be only three years in existence this month. We had a small bit of resistance in the Dáil when I was setting up the Department. I had a bit of difficulty getting the Bill through the House. I must compliment the Seanad, which passed it very quickly, but certain Deputies tried to hold up the Bill. We were here at 11 o'clock one night, and if we did not get it done before 12 a.m., we would have run into difficulty as it would not have been possible to pass it until October, after the summer recess. We got the Department up and running. I say this openly and honestly: we have the finest Department. I want to put this on the record, and I should not but I will, whoever comes into Government, I will see it as a slight on rural Ireland if the Department of Rural and Community Development is not continued. I do not care who goes into Government; that Department must continue.

That Department has a budget for 2020 of €308 million for current spending and €150 million in capital funding. It is responsible for the town and village renewal scheme, the rural regeneration scheme, the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme and the CLÁR programme. I was glad to hear Deputy Peter Burke talk about those schemes and the difference they have made in towns and villages.

Deputy Tully criticised the amount of funding received by County Cavan. That county got substantial funding from the Government under all those schemes. The Deputy should check the record in that regard. It received substantial funding under the town and village renewal scheme. I was not expecting to get parochial today but, as the Deputy has raised this issue, I will do so. I remember allocating funding for a scheme to open the county up for IDA Ireland. I dealt with several schemes, including the rural regeneration scheme. Under the Government, County Cavan did very well on the rural regeneration scheme, the town and village renewal scheme and the CLÁR programme, and rightly so. Every town in every county got an opportunity under the town and village renewal scheme. In some cases, the local authorities received the funding. In fairness to them, they submitted more applications than the Department could fund.

The town and village renewal scheme and the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme have changed the face of rural Ireland. Let nobody tell me that rural Ireland is not a better place since the Department was set up. It has done a tremendous job in the public realm through the rural regeneration scheme.

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It did fantastic work through the broadband scheme that has been the subject of much discussion. Do Deputies remember the difficulties in that regard and that the Government was threatened with elections and that we would not get support if we went ahead with the rural broadband scheme? I, along with others, put the pressure on in Cabinet to ensure that scheme was rolled out. It has worked so well that people are saying that if it had been rolled out sooner, more people could work in rural Ireland. I wish to put on the record that there are now more people living and working in rural Ireland than at any other time since the foundation of the State. It is not me saying it. It is not the Government saying it. That is the case according to figures produced by the Central Statistics Office.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I will try to leave the Minister plenty of time to reply. I thank him and his Department for their vital work and the support they have provided to rural and urban communities in recent months. As we watched the pandemic sweep across the world, it was telling that Ireland had something unique in its toolkit: the innate sense of community knitted within the fabric of our land. It has stood us well. The challenge of staying together while forced to be apart was and continues to be met with defiance, determination and creativity. It falls on the Department the Minister was instrumental in creating to ensure that adequate supports are in place for the community and voluntary sector and for rural Ireland to trade through these dark times and continue to support communities as it is tasked.

As we look with horror across the miles at what is unfolding following the murder of George Floyd and the disgraceful response of the Trump Administration, it is important to support the Black Lives Matter movement and to challenge racism and discrimination at every turn. It is important for the US to rally and become, as P.J. Harvey calls it, a “community of hope” and not be dragged down by fear, hatred or bigotry. It is equally important to note that although we are fortunate not to have such deep-rooted division in Irish society and no far right civil or political movements, we cannot and must not take for granted the notion that as a nation we are free of discrimination towards minorities. Ireland has a job of work to do here. The Irish Network Against Racism reported a number of weeks ago that reported incidents of racism in Ireland had more than doubled in the first quarter of 2020 compared with the same period last year. Much of this increase can be accounted for by online racist abuse or hate speech directed towards certain minorities due to the coronavirus. It is a worrying trend.

In December of last year, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination made some useful recommendations to the Irish State as to future actions that needed to be taken to tackle discrimination against minorities. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission is tasked with taking these recommendations back here to ensure that all who have a role in fostering greater inclusion and combating discrimination do so in a co-ordinated way. The UN committee expressed its concern about the “increasing incidence of racist hate speech against Travellers, Roma, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants” and echoed the commission’s recommendation for the State to develop a comprehensive regulatory framework to combat hate speech online, including measures to encourage reporting of racist hate crime. Commission member, Salome Mbugua, said:

The State must step up and show leadership across its political and public institutions to proactively combat racial discrimination and tackle issues which can fuel its growth. We need as a society to ensure that in our communities and country racism has no safe harbour, no resting place.

It should be of deep concern to us in this House that racism and hate speech have a safe

harbour when it comes to discrimination towards the Traveller community. At times, it seems there is a tolerance and an acceptance of discriminatory language directed at Travellers both politically and socially. It is reflected too in the continuing deterioration of health, educational attainment and employment opportunities of Travellers. Women of African descent were highlighted as experiencing a high level of discrimination in Ireland, which is very worrying. I know from talking to my African, Traveller and Muslim friends that while they feel at home here, many have experienced some level of verbal abuse, been refused entry to premises or have felt threatened or intimidated in recent times.

The Minister's Department has a key role in this regard. Direct and sustained funding of community development groups working with minorities, refugees, asylum seekers and the Traveller community has a direct correlation with well-being outcomes for these vulnerable groups. Traveller development and advocacy groups, in particular, had their funding disproportionately cut during the last downturn. The impact of such cuts is reflected in health and well-being outcomes but also, importantly, in advocacy and campaigning ability, that transformative and emergent work which is hard to quantify.

I welcome the fact the Government has committed to extra funding for community development work for groups whose income streams dropped due to Covid. These groups will be vital to chartering an alternative vision for a post-Covid Ireland and the Minister's support is most welcome. What input has the Department of Rural and Community Development had in the implementation of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, led by the Department of Justice and Equality? Is the Minister aware of a review of this strategy and planning for a new plan period and a collaborative process?

In the midst of the general election, an important document was lost in the mix, namely, "Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019-2024", the Government's roadmap for community development which was launched in February. It is our view that this important work needs to be updated to fit a post-Covid framework and that a collaborative process to take on board the views of the sector in this new reality needs to happen. Can the Department of Rural and Community Development initiate this work as a matter of urgency? Does the Minister think it is feasible that his Department might lead and support stand-alone county integration and inclusion strategies, supported by the LCDC network? It would seem like a natural fit for such community-based work.

I believe that such strategies are vital to ensure that actions towards inclusion and integration happen at a local, community level. County Carlow produced a wonderful integration strategy a number of months ago and I was also deeply involved in the process to develop County Kilkenny's first integration strategy. I also had the privilege to attend a launch a number of months ago at which the Minister's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy John Paul Phelan, spoke well of the need for support for community-led integration work. Indeed, Carlow can be held in high regard for the collaborative work with the Rohingya community there, work that I feel could act as a template for inclusion and integration planning.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank the Deputy for his comments about the Department, in particular with regard to funding for community groups. Deputy Noonan has given me an opportunity, for which I have waited a long time, to compliment a colleague of mine, the Minister of State, Deputy David Stanton. He has shown great bravery, courage and commitment to the role in the Department of Justice and Equality. Particularly in the context of equality, he has

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certainly fought the case for our new citizens coming into the country and for the rights of Travellers and other communities. He has never been afraid to stand up and be counted. He has worked hard and has taken a lot of personal abuse. He is certainly somebody who has worked very hard in the Department. I want to take this opportunity to compliment him on and thank him for the great work he has done and for the courage and guts he has shown over the years. I met him on many occasions when he was under a lot of stress and pressure from groups antagonised by people calling protest meetings about various issues. He dealt in a very sensitive way with a lot of sensitive problems. I saw him bringing people to the Department and speaking to them, explaining to them and working with them. He might not always have brought them around to his point of view but at least he listened.

My Department supports the Department of Justice and Equality, particularly with regard to equality. We support groups under the community services programme and we fund a lot of the national organisations of these groups. I would love to be in the next Government because the Department has a great understanding of voluntary groups. The Department has networks. People speak about all of the funds established and how we could respond to the crisis so quickly. I will tell the House why we responded to the crisis so quickly. It was because the Department has had a working relationship with many of these groups over the years and has built up contacts and the confidence of some of these groups. We do not get everything right. The groups will look for extra funding and supports and in every way we can help them we will do so. We have the contacts and we speak to the various groups and listen to them, including Father Sean Healy and other such people who have done great work over the years. These groups certainly have not been afraid to take on social issues. Sometimes people come in to criticise the Government and state we are not doing enough. Sometimes they are not there to stand up when an injustice is done against these people. There are times we have to stand up and say this is the right thing to do, whether it is for new people coming into the country or Travellers.

The Department is on interdepartmental groups with the Department of Justice and Equality. We always listen to views and provide the necessary funding to groups. Whenever they have needed the funding we are there. In the context of Travellers, I have allocated some funding for various issues over recent years but we never hear people say, read in the newspapers or see RTÉ covering the funding we have put in place to support these groups and help them to ensure that they have the facilities they need and want. There has been a crisis in certain areas.

There is one matter I must take up with other Departments. Sometimes when there is an issue, various Departments throw it to the Department of Rural and Community Development to be dealt with. I do not mind them throwing over the issue but they never throw over the funding, and we have to take that funding out of the existing budget. Everything can be resolved. It is a bit like today as I listen to people speak about issues for which I do not have direct responsibility. I have direct responsibility as a Cabinet Minister and I highlight these issues. When I am there everything must be rural proofed and urban proofed to ensure in particular that the vulnerable in society are looked after.

I have been in disadvantaged areas in Tallaght, Limerick and throughout the country and SICAP is probably one of the best programmes out there. The problem is that many people in the Dáil and outside it do not know what the programme does. It deals with the most vulnerable in society. It assists the most vulnerable and gives them an opportunity. We can deal with groups and individuals and we must give them the same chance and opportunity as everybody else. The one great thing about the Department is that it is the Department of Rural and Community Development and, as far as I am concerned, community is the most important part of it.

That has proven to be right in recent weeks.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I believe the Minister is a very fair-minded person. By any objective analysis, he has always been distributional in terms of his ethos and of funding across the State. A point was made earlier about urban renewal. There needs to be new thinking around tackling the level of degradation of buildings, particularly in urban areas, villages and towns where there is a rural hinterland. I refer to areas in which buildings have been left abandoned, there are absentee landlords, and there is an absolute need for a coherent policy around incentivising people to come back to live again in the main streets in our towns and villages. We have all witnessed the level of degradation of certain buildings within towns. It seems we are powerless to intervene with a local authority or with the owners of these buildings to place an onus on them to ensure they can enhance the public realm to which the Minister referred. To be fair, by any objective analysis, the town and village renewal schemes have proven to be quite successful. Credit is due there. The point Deputy Tully was making was around that level of degradation of certain parts of towns and streets. I support her contention.

I also share the concerns that were raised by Deputies Michael and Aindrias Moynihan from Cork North-West in respect of the 5 km rule. In urban areas, we have all witnessed people congregating, young people in particular. It is hard to blame them in certain respects, but let us be honest that the social distancing rules are being flouted. It is self-evident. I am not going to argue against a bunch of young people if they want to get together. There are rules in place and the relevant authority to enforce them is An Garda Síochána. However, it is also the case that somebody cannot visit somebody else in a rural area such as a grandmother or grandfather. Grandparents are not able to see their grandchildren at the moment by dint of the fact that they live more than 5 km away. There is an inequity there. It is unfair. I ask that the Minister use his very influential and strong voice at Cabinet to articulate these viewpoints, as I am sure he has. It is having an effect in rural communities in particular or, for example, where a son or daughter lives with his or her children in an urban area but wants to travel beyond the 20 km to visit a grandparent. Perhaps the Cabinet could take a look at that again.

I also wish to raise the scheme for mná tí in Gaeltacht areas. I know it is not the Minister's line Department but I am sure he will have a view on the scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge, which provides for up to 27,000 students. It is a *per diem* payment for the bean an tí for students who are learning in Irish colleges. We know that the Irish colleges are not going to be operational this summer. Will the Minister give us a sense of whether the Government has given any consideration to providing some degree of compensation to the mná tí who host these students every year and who will have lost a significant amount of income? They are in our rural communities and Gaeltacht areas. We know there is a massive multiplier effect as a result of these payments to mná tí in their local communities. Have the Minister or his colleagues given any consideration to providing some sort of compensation to the mná tí for the loss of income they will incur during the summer period?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The Deputy is correct. I did not get the chance to publish the new policy on rural Ireland, although I have it ready and I want to put on the record that I am hopeful that I will publish it in the next fortnight. When I was drawing up that new policy, one of the big issues I looked at was the pilot scheme I carried out for towns and villages. We picked six towns and villages and we gave €100,000 to each local authority. We asked them to have consultations with the chambers of commerce, the community groups and anybody who was involved in any kind of commercial activity or in the community and to come back with some ideas to see what we could do about the public realm and the dereliction we have in some towns

and villages. Two big issues came back.

Governments never like to hear about grants, but whether we like it or not, whoever comes into government will have to provide a grant scheme for people to do up derelict buildings in a town to make the buildings available. I know some people talk about the importance of renting, but it does not matter if these buildings are made available for sale or for renting, once somebody is in these properties. I was proposing to the Government that we should try to get a grant scheme through to do that. Local authorities will have to use the Derelict Sites Act 1990 and they will have to use it more often. There are properties in towns and villages that the local authorities know are there and nobody knows who owns them. Those properties have to be taken in and used by the local authorities.

The Deputy talked about the 5 km limit and I cannot disagree with him. I have spoken about this issue and raised it. There is a difference between 5 km in an urban area and 5 km in a rural area. I hope that now that we are coming into phase 2 of the lockdown, we will see changes, but the Deputy is quite correct. The whole lockdown has been hard on people, particularly on elderly people who have been cocooning and have not been able to get out of their homes. Even walking 3 km or 5 km is not simple and it is something the Government is looking at. We have a Cabinet meeting this week, I have already highlighted that issue and I hope decisions will be made to help that situation. There has been a lot more movement in the past week. People have been good and patient and it has been difficult on people. There is no point in pretending otherwise and I do not mind saying that I found it difficult. What I miss most is meeting and talking to people. It is difficult, as the Acting Chairman knows, when one has spent one's whole life going around talking to people and meeting people and all of a sudden that stops.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** LEADER delivery contracts with the local development companies will expire in December of this year. Will the Department notify the development companies that the Minister will be extending their contracts after December 2020? What is the Minister's view on the extension of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP? What are the Department's intentions on the LEADER timeframe and the budget for LEADER in the context of CAP? The Minister has not referred to that in his speech but I would welcome a written reply on that matter if he does not have time to elaborate on it.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I refer to the mná tí in the Gaeltacht areas. I know my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Senator Kyne, has been talking to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, to see if anything can be done. I will respond to Deputies Sherlock and Conway-Walsh about this. Deputy Conway-Walsh raised LEADER as well but she has the same problem in the Gaeltacht areas. The work of the mná tí has been a way of life for people in the Gaeltacht and people have made a living out of it. We want to assist them in that. I know the Minister of State, Senator Kyne, is looking at that matter. I am not saying he will get results but he is looking at it.

The matter of LEADER is simple. LEADER finishes in 2020. The CAP negotiations will take place, but in the meantime a decision will have to be made. Funding will have to come from either Europe or central government to continue the LEADER programme. My officials are having discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and with Europe to see what we can do about the new round of LEADER because it is a very important question. I have been talking for the past two years in my Department about trying to continue the LEADER programme. That is a matter for the next Government. Let the next Minister decide who will administer it and how it will be administered.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I have a brief statement to make and then three questions for the Minister. Like many, I am outraged at the killing of George Floyd and the treatment of Black Lives Matter protesters in the US. As public representatives, it is important we respond to these events and listen to and amplify the voices of those affected. We cannot ignore this; that is how racism thrives. We also need, however, to reflect on racism in Ireland. This includes the inhumane direct provision system, attitudes towards Travellers, and everyday racism suffered by black people and other people of colour.

Covid-19 has revealed and heightened inequalities. It has disproportionately impacted the vulnerable. Poorer and disadvantaged communities have vastly higher contraction and death rates. We can see this in our nursing homes, direct provision centres and meat processing plants. The elderly, people with disabilities, migrants and low-paid workers are too easily overlooked. The pandemic has highlighted these neglected areas; it did not create them. As public representatives, we must rise to these circumstances and meet racism with equality, disadvantage with justice, and fear with hope. This crisis is an opportunity for deep reflection. It has forced us to rethink what really matters. Our society needs to change to reflect the hard-learned lessons of this pandemic. We need a new social contract. The State needs to fulfil its responsibility. Neither the voluntary sector nor the market is there to relieve that responsibility.

At the beginning of this emergency, three things we were told could not happen were achieved: a single-tier health service, rent freezes and a reduction in emissions. In the midst of a global tragedy, we put people first. This needs to continue. As restrictions lift we need to be cognisant of the dangers of going back to “business as usual”. “Business as usual” was thousands on hospital trolleys, rapidly rising homelessness, hours spent in traffic and a crumbling ecosystem. If we have not learned that we need to prioritise people, families and communities now, when will we? A rights-based approach is essential for progression: the right to a home, healthcare and equality and, with that, no regression of our existing hard-earned rights. For example, next year we will review our termination of pregnancy law, and we need only look at last night’s debate on abortion legislation in Stormont to realise we cannot be complacent. We all want to live in a more just society. The community and rural development sector is crucial to helping bring about a better, fairer and more just Ireland.

I have three questions. Community and voluntary organisations have been severely impacted by the pandemic. At the same time, these groups have done incredible work in supporting vulnerable people. While the Covid-19 stability fund provided support for charities and social enterprises, it also highlighted their precarious position. An effective community sector should not be relying on fundraising to provide essential services. There is an abdication of responsibility to properly fund disadvantaged communities and vulnerable groups. The State outsources the provision of services to overstretched organisations, dedicated volunteers and people’s generosity. Despite the coronavirus, there has been incredible creativity in fundraising, but mental health charities, people with disabilities and older people should not have to rely on sponsored runs, coffee mornings and Instagram challenges for funding. Will the Minister ensure that his Department will move towards a properly resourced community sector with multi-annual funding, enabling these groups to operate with greater security? Furthermore, many smaller local groups did not have the capacity to demonstrate how they met the requirements of the Covid-19 stability fund. Groups such as parenting support programmes, family resource centres and youth clubs will have to incur substantial additional costs if they are to reopen following the Government guidelines. These costs are not provided for by the stability fund. Will the Minister expand the scope of the fund, widen the definition relating to it to

include costs associated with Covid-19 reopening and provide a more suitable process to facilitate smaller groups in applying?

As rural Deputies, we know there is a desperate need to invest in our communities as we emerge from Covid-19. While I welcome the rural development investment programme, I am keen to see more ambitious funding. The funding of €30 million will not cover the amount required to ensure social infrastructure in all towns and villages. Covid-19 has shown that in Ireland community comes first. Government needs to respond appropriately. We need a new community-led initiative to create inclusive social infrastructure and public spaces. We need projects that will foster community well-being while helping local businesses and encouraging tourism. Biodiverse parks can create opportunities, educate children and provide space for exercise and socialising. Inclusive design of streets will enable older people and people with disabilities to feel safer and more welcome. We need to move away from the matched funding model. The Department needs to invest and put trust in communities, who know what is best for their areas. Participative decision-making and subsidiarity will enhance active communities and local democracy. Will the Minister expand current rural and community funding streams, with a focus on inclusive public spaces? Will the Department take a more participative approach in the context of operating these programmes?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank Deputy Cairns for her comments. As I said earlier, my Department is represented on several groups, along with the Department of Justice and Equality, that address migrant, immigration and Traveller rights issues. All of the issues that Deputy Cairns has raised arise at these forums. We have the Roma strategy and strategies for the different groups. We fund these from my Department.

The Deputy asked about charities. She is quite correct to state that charities have gone through a difficult time since this crisis. The Charities Regulator gave me a briefing on how charities are responding and what is happening. I will give the House some pointers. The impact has been severe on all charities. A total of 55% of respondents indicated that their finances were uncertain and that they were in difficulty. Some 45% stated that their funding would barely be okay between now and the end of the year. There is no doubt about it. They all said that fundraising activities had to be stopped because of the crisis. To be fair to some of the charities, they have looked at new ways and new initiatives. RTÉ, including via “The Late Late Show” and shows like it, has highlighted some of the charities whose funding has been cut. I must say another thing that I cannot put on the record often enough: we have a wonderful country. Sometimes people knock this country but it is a fantastic country. We have a fantastic mindset. A great many people support charities every Friday night and every day of the week.

Deputy Cairns is right about social enterprises. Most of these have been able to operate. We did not cut back on any of our funding channels for these groups. In fact, we have been very lenient to them, and rightly so, because we learned one thing in this crisis: but for the voluntary and community sectors we would have serious problems in this country. People talk about volunteers and people giving of their time. We have volunteers in this country. When we had the community call a total of 17,000 people put their hands up and said they were ready to volunteer. People did not know what volunteer centres were or what they did and what we were funding. We gave them extra funding. These volunteer centres have been in operation and have matched up people with organisations that needed support and help. The one word I must say is “volunteers”. I thank them on behalf of the Government and the country for the way they have responded, the way they have put their lives at risk and the way they have responded to the community call. I cannot thank them enough, but I can say “Well done” to them. What

a great country this is.

My Department has the €40 million-----

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I am pleased that the Minister has acknowledged the extent of our reliance on those voluntary sectors. This highlights one of my questions. Does the Minister acknowledge that maybe there is an over-reliance on these organisations having to fundraise? The State should not abdicate responsibility in that sense.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The State will not be able to fund everything and there is no point in pretending. We have a great many organisations and groups. Let us consider the community services programme and the funding that my Department provides. We can see all the groups. People would be amazed with all the groups. Maybe that is one of the things we should be looking at. We have a €5 million innovation fund. Perhaps we should be looking at ways and means of doing business differently. Perhaps we should consider whether some of these groups could amalgamate with other groups to work together on providing the same services. There are many groups and services. In saying that, I will never be critical of the voluntary groups or other groups that we support. It is only in a time of crisis that we see how some of them actually work.

The Deputy asked a question. No, the State will not be able to fund every single group in the country. We would have new groups every day. The minute they were set up, they would want to become national organisations, have CEOs and employ staff. We cannot do that. We have to set limits. In fact, I had to make decisions last year regarding groups' funding. They were to receive funding over a number of years and then become self-sufficient, but that did not happen. I then had to come along and fund some of them because they were providing essential services. When groups get funding from the State, it is very difficult to take it away from them.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Next is Solidarity-People Before Profit. Is Deputy Bríd Smith sharing time?

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Yes, with Deputy Paul Murphy.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I wish to raise the recent CSO statistics with the Minister. The CSO identified a slight decline in cases of the virus in cities but an increase in the number of cases in urban towns. It examined the figures for counties like Cavan and Monaghan. The number of cases hit its peak in April when Cavan had a high of 182 cases per week and Monaghan recorded 176 new cases per week. According to the CSO, this may have reflected "the move out of the cities and into independent urban towns".

Obviously, there could have been a number of reasons for these numbers. Cavan and Monaghan are near the Border and there are different protocols on the other side. Nevertheless, there is a possible link with meat processing plants, but we lack a study or information on this possibility that is in any way meaningful. There are 45 meat processing plants in rural Ireland, up to 16 of which have clusters. Recently, the Department of Health reported a further 100 confirmed cases in meat plants. SIPTU's Mr. Greg Ennis labelled these figures "absolutely shocking and most disturbing".

Despite protestations from the Ministers involved whom we questioned about this mat-

ter, there are high degrees of exploitation of workers in these plants. There has been a lack of concern for their health. In a strong interview by *The Guardian* of some of the workers, one said: "If the disease was in the animals, they'd have closed the place." Not so with the workers, though, most of whom are migrants.

We have been given assurances that this situation will change or has changed, but we are not convinced that any such change will be adequate. It is still difficult to find out whether any meat plant has been inspected by the HSE, where the inspected plants are and how many they number. Our concern is that we are blind to what is happening and could happen, not just in those plants but in the communities surrounding them.

I was slagged about quoting a piece of research and was told that it came from Trump's America, but it actually comes from an internationally renowned university called Johns Hopkins University and the Government should take it seriously. The research showed that counties within 15 miles of meat packaging plants had twice the national average rate of Covid-19 cases. This was explained as owing to the interaction between workers and communities and the high incidence of Covid within the plants.

Will the Minister raise this concern at Cabinet? Will he seek for the Cabinet or the State to investigate the pattern of outbreaks around the 45 meat plants? This morning, I heard a Monaghan GP raise this very concern on radio. She did not raise a concern about the meat plants, but she said that she had seen a level of reportage of Covid within her clinic that was as high as when the outbreak started. She is concerned about it.

We have been told repeatedly since the start of the crisis how important the industry is and how important the plants are to rural communities, but those communities themselves are important and they need to know whether the level of infection in the plants is spilling over into their communities and how that will impact on them. Will the Minister reassure them that this concern will be taken seriously by the Cabinet and there will be an investigation into the statistics on all 45 sites and the level of infection in the communities surrounding them?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Does the Deputy want a reply now?

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Yes, please. I have a minute and a bit left.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I do not have responsibility. I will raise the issue at Cabinet and ask the relevant Minister to respond to the Deputy. All I can do is raise the matter at Cabinet. I must say that meat plants are important to rural Ireland and to the agricultural sector. It is very important that we have meat plants but it is equally important that they operate in a safe manner. I will raise the Deputy's concerns at the Cabinet meeting tomorrow and ask the Ministers for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Health to respond to her.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** In the few seconds remaining I would like to ask if the case I have made about the study in the US and the statistics coming from the CSO are a cause of concern to the Minister given his responsibility for rural affairs, if not for meat.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I am always concerned about what is happening in rural Ireland and I can stand over my record. The investment made by this Department in rural Ireland has been substantial over the last number of years. There is no doubt about the fact that my Department has helped to create jobs in the context of the rural regeneration scheme. One can go to many parts of rural Ireland where people would not be working today were it not for my Department.

Whether the Deputy likes it or not-----

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** That is not the case.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I can use the same statistics as the Deputy. There are more people working and living in rural Ireland now than since the foundation of the State.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I wish to raise three issues with the Minister, the first of which is not an area under his direct responsibility. However, it is an urgent issue so I will raise it with him now. I have written to the Minister for Justice and Equality about it and ask the Minister for Rural and Community Development to raise it with him as well. I refer to the conditions inside the direct provision centre in the Central Hostel in Miltown Malbay, County Clare. A series of very worrying reports about conditions inside the centre were relayed to the Minister last week. These include leaks in ceilings and water running down the walls of bedrooms. In a bedroom shared by two men there is no door to the en suite bathroom, with the toilet and shower visible from the bedroom and no privacy for the occupants. Rodents were spotted in the bedrooms and there was a lack of adequate heating or hot water during the winter months, with only one hour made available per day. Two former residents have alleged that they were assaulted by the owner of the hostel. They complained that the food was consistently substandard, with fried chicken, rice and chips served every day, as well as a lack of clean drinking water. I could go on. In response, the International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, has arranged for a Zoom call to take place tomorrow but incredibly, the service has asked the owner of the hostel to arrange that call and to arrange for the men to speak with the IPAS about their experiences. Given that there are significant and serious allegations against the owner of the centre by residents, including allegations of assault, it is clearly completely inappropriate for the owner to act in such a role. Those who are acting in solidarity with the residents have asked that the Zoom call be called off and that the IPAS would intervene directly with the residents and have confidential discussions with them so that they are able to talk freely about their experiences. I ask the Minister to raise this with the Minister for Justice and Equality.

The second issue relates to the Free Legal Advice Centres, FLAC, which have experienced a significant increase in demand for their services, particularly for employment-related advice in the context of the coronavirus. A range of different questions have been reported with women being asked to go on maternity leave early, people being told that they must return to work despite underlying health conditions or being told that they must take annual leave and so on. Effectively employers are not following the rules, are trying to take short cuts and maximise their profits at the expense of workers' health and safety. This has demonstrated the need for FLAC services, with employment-related queries doubling in recent times. FLAC receives funding from the Department of Rural and Community Affairs through Pobal. Will that funding be increased as necessary?

The third issue relates to libraries. While our libraries have largely been shut during the coronavirus pandemic, there has been a huge expansion in the number of people using library services such as Borrow Box and so forth. Thankfully, this serves to demonstrate to people the importance of public spaces.

At a time when so much public space is being privatised and people have to pay to spend time in it, libraries, be it remotely or on site, are incredibly important. They constitute a service that has been underfunded, that will be increasingly important, that may need extra space in the context of coronavirus and social distancing and that may well need extra staff, so I ask

whether, linked to that, the Minister is considering increasing funding for libraries.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** We do not fund free legal aid. That is a matter for the Department of Justice and Equality. I have overall responsibility with regard to Pobal, but it deals directly with the Department of Justice and Equality. The Deputy wrote to the Minister for Justice and Equality. I will ask my officials to raise the Deputy's concerns with the Minister again.

I am glad the Deputy raised the issue of libraries. This has been one of the success stories with regard to this virus. More people have joined the online service. I put an extra €400,000 into it since we had the virus and I must say that the number of people using libraries now is fantastic. A number of new libraries are being built around the country. I want to seek libraries spoken about the way people talk about post offices. If people do not use libraries, it will be like what happened with post offices: they will close. Libraries must become community centres where people can come in and fill out their application forms for jobs and use the facilities. With regard to broadband and rural libraries in particular, there will be a number of points where people can come in and use that service. The library service has been a great success and I am very proud of the work my Department has done with regard with libraries in recent years.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I am deputising for a colleague at short notice so I apologise in advance if I am not fully *au fait* with the Minister's brief. Regarding the town and village renewal scheme, I think everybody would agree that it is a great opportunity to develop towns and cities, but I wonder about the idea of drawing up the strategic plans around it, particularly for community groups. Has the Minister's office considered providing funding through LEADER or local area partnership groups to bring in strategic mentors to write these plans and applications? I have some experience in this area and I think it can be difficult to navigate. A large amount of the time, it can be difficult to get the key points across, so that is something the Minister might have a look at.

To reflect what one of my other colleagues said earlier about community organisations, one of our colleagues in the regional group received an email from the Drum Heritage Group in Roscommon. This is a very small heritage visitor centre. It flagged that its operating costs were rising by €6,000, taken up with insurance, electricity and additional maintenance. No grant aid is on offer to a grouping like that. It had contacted the Department, but as a tourist cultural centre it does not qualify. As the Minister knows, these are very important initiatives in small rural towns and it is a pity they are left out of some opportunity to get support.

Everybody welcomes the stability fund but I notice that the fund has been closed since 20 May. One thousand applications were received, yet there are 10,000 registered charities in the country. I know the fund is focusing on health and well-being and, obviously, is being administered through Pobal, the Department of Health and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, but it was based on an income loss of 25%, so people are effectively saying that they are not in a position to raise money with the Covid situation. Was there any opportunity to accommodate organisations that have seen a rise in expenditure? I am thinking of people who are basically facilitating travel in particular where they now have minibuses where they have to take one patient at a time. I think some organisations felt closed out. In respect of 10% of all charities applying to that fund, is the application process too onerous and rigorous? Has the Minister had a chance to look at that again?

In respect of schools and community safety, given the recent tragedies around the country and indeed the near misses of the last week, could we look again at some specific initiative

for community and schools safety, particularly water safety, around children's inflatables and signage around inland waterways? It is very important and has, unfortunately, come into sharp relief in recent weeks.

On the Minister's comments regarding the grant scheme for refurbishment of urban properties and the derelict site tax, I know from the just over 13 months I was a member of Waterford City and County Council that in Waterford there are problems in both areas. I support the Minister's comments but perhaps he would outline how the grant scheme for the refurbishment of urban properties will be administered? There is need for simplification of the application process.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** On the town and village renewal scheme, on this occasion I am examining the scheme in the context of social distancing in public realms. In light of the rules around social distancing we need to introduce new rules and regulations. I have asked the local authorities to make provision for this when submitting their plans.

The Deputy raised the issue of the stability package. He is correct that some groups submitted a number of applications under different headings. Pobal is currently streamlining these applications. To ensure the system is fair and all applications are adjudicated fairly the guidelines must be applied to each application. Pobal will make its recommendations and I will make the decisions. I do not want this funding targeted at groups that have savings and other funding. I want it targeted at those groups that are in real need of funding, particularly front-line services such as, for example, meals on wheels which continued to operate throughout this crisis, took on additional clientele and worked very hard within already limited resources and has now had its funding curtailed. I am examining this area.

The Deputy spoke about safety outside schools and water safety, which issues I will respond to together. There is a scheme in place under the CLÁR programme to which schools can apply for funding to make school facilities safe. This is a scheme that I reintroduced and it is working well. The Deputy and I are well aware of the number of accidents that have happened outside of schools down through the years. I have provided funding for warning signs and the construction of safe car parks to ensure the safety of children entering and leaving school. This programme has worked very well. There have been more applications than funding but I propose to continue the programme this year because it is a very important programme.

Water safety also comes under the remit of my Department. The number of people who die each year from water accidents is almost as high as the number of people who die each year from road accidents. Irish Water Safety is now known as Water Safety Ireland. The title of the organisation had to be changed because it was inundated with calls from people who thought they were contacting Irish Water. The name change was made by statute. The organisation does a very good job. It has run a number of safety campaigns, including in the run up to the June bank holiday weekend. The local authorities have responsibility for lifeguard provision on our beaches. These lifeguards operate part-time from June to September. People must be careful and obey the warning signs in regard to water safety. Deputy Conway-Walsh referred earlier to the recent serious tragedy in County Mayo. I again offer my condolences to the family. Water Safety Ireland is doing a good job and I have allocated extra funding to it for various strategies. It is calling on people to be careful, to heed the signage and to do what they are told. It is certainly performing the role with which I tasked it. I know that it will be running a further warning campaign over the next number of weeks because when the weather is good people want to go to the beaches and use other facilities.

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**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** In terms of outdoor recreational infrastructure, I think the specific brief is around cycleways and walkways. I may be on the wrong track but I am also thinking of waterways. We had two initiatives in Waterford, one on a blueway and another on amalgamating old houses and river walks. This is an area for future tourism development throughout the country around which a separate initiative could be built. Perhaps someone in the Department could try to advance that.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** The Deputy is referring to the outdoor recreational scheme. I have worked with Waterways Ireland and I must compliment it on fantastic projects in Leitrim and in the Border counties with which we have collaborated. That has worked out very well. This is a fantastic scheme. One thing that has worked very well in the past few months when people have been restricted to 2 km and 5 km is the walkways and other amenities throughout the country. I have received emails complimenting the Government on its schemes. There are some fantastic walks throughout the country and we have put significant funding into the outdoor recreational scheme. Some local authorities are drawing down funding all the time. We must remember these amenities are free and people can go out into the fresh air to enjoy them.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I acknowledge at the outset the launch of a €40 million support package for community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises, which I wholeheartedly welcome. I also acknowledge this includes €35 million Covid-19 stability funding to qualifying organisations most in need which have seen their trading or fundraising income drop significantly during the crisis. I am aware applications for this funding closed on 21 May. How many applications were received and how much funding has been drawn down?

My concern is that like other Departments offering great schemes and initiatives, the uptake might be poor. Is that the case here? I highlighted last week that the approval rates for loans and supports under various Covid-19 support schemes appears to be very low. We need to assess why there are difficulties in local traders and SMEs accessing many of the necessary support schemes. For example, regarding Microfinance Ireland loans, the latest data available to Oireachtas Members indicates that only three businesses in Laois and four in Offaly have inquired about funding under this scheme. I would be worried there are barriers to funding.

On the Covid-19 business continuity voucher, 131 inquiries have come from Offaly but only 81 applications have been approved. In Laois, there were 63 inquiries with only 36 approvals. Is there a similar pattern here as elsewhere? I would like any problems to be rectified immediately so that it is easier for people to access the vital supports they need at this time.

Will the Minister put on record his view or the Department's view on the protests that took place over the weekend? I clearly state I condemn all racism and violence. I ask the question only in the context of the ongoing restrictions that remain actively in force in many parts of rural Ireland, in particular the restrictions around marts and small regional agricultural shows, which have been adversely affected and cancelled because of legitimate social distancing fears. If a charity, community or voluntary organisation that was supported by Minister's Department were to hold such an event, where hundreds of people gathered, there would be condemnation on all sides and even the possibility of funding being withdrawn. This has been brought to my attention by many rural people who are very frustrated at what they are seeing and the double standards we are witnessing. Is there one rule for rural Ireland and another for urban Ireland? Is this fair?

As the Minister alluded to, there are many issues facing rural Ireland, from impending cuts

to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, to accessing appropriate levels of LEADER funding, to ensuring a just transition occurs in the midlands, particularly in counties such as Offaly and Laois where the demise of Bord na Móna will result in the loss of up to 1,000 jobs by the end of this year. On that just transition, have the Minister or his Department engaged with the just transition commissioner in any capacity on the recommendations of his first internal report? If so, what role does the Minister envisage his Department playing in the roll-out of the just transition strategy?

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** First, I thank the Minister and the people working in the Department for the excellent work they have been doing. The Minister is a very strong advocate for rural Ireland and I appreciate that, as he knows. I have no problem in acknowledging that. I want to highlight the concerns I and many others have about rural businesses. The Minister knows of the difficulties we were having already, and the pandemic has now meant further complications for our rural way of life and our small businesses, publicans, hardware shops and grocery shops. I have concerns about the way all these traders are being affected and am trying to get as many of those businesses as possible up and running again. Sadly, I am genuinely worried and fearful that many of them may not be able to open. I want the Minister and the people in his Department to keep working with those businesses in mind and to try to loosen up the red tape in the best way possible when it comes to running a small business in a rural location. They must encourage people to do this awfully important thing, which is, first, to create the one job for themselves and then create the environment to expand and employ a neighbour, a friend or another family member. That is how business works and how businesses grow.

I compliment the community groups that have played such a vital role during this crisis. We are going to lose so much of the business of the summer, including our agricultural shows, the likes of Puck Fair and all the excellent events that go on during the year, especially during the summer time. All these events have been cancelled. That is going to be an awful and detrimental economic blow for rural Ireland in particular. I want the Minister to have that at the forefront of his mind at all times because it is so important to keep the local economy going.

I compliment our farming organisations and the farmers who have been there throughout every crisis going back to the last economic crisis and financial crash. The one group we could always rely on to keep the wheels rolling was our farming community. It is no harm to remind people of that. The Minister does not have to be reminded, but it is no harm to wake up some of the other people in the Government now and then and let them know that we are an agriculture-based economy.

We very much appreciate our tourism sector and how important it is, but at the end of the day, agriculture and fisheries are our backbone. They are what we have always had. That is where we came from and that is what we have to nurture and protect. It is so important, for this Government and the incoming one, that those things are recognised, and when a programme for Government is being drawn up, I want the new Government to remember rural Ireland and the important role it has to play.

I again thank the Minister for his particular interest in our local improvement schemes. As the Minister knows, I fought very hard to ensure they were contained in the previous programme for Government. The Minister kicked the ball into the back of the net by ensuring he kept that going. He delivered every penny he could. He certainly was not found wanting when it came to County Kerry and I always acknowledged that. I ask that, in light of the current economic crisis, the Government recognises how important that funding is and continues

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to provide it because there are roads leading into a house or houses. A Minister once said the funding was not important because a road was the last road, but it is the first road for a person who needs to exit onto it no matter where he or she is going.

I know the Minister recognises that, but I ask him if he can to show commitment to protecting funding for local improvement schemes. Our local authority makes a great job of delivering funding in a very cost effective way and a timely fashion. The scheme provides employment for local authorities in terms of seasonal and part-time workers, especially at the end of the year. I ask that the funding be announced as early as possible because that helps us to get through the work. I do not want to eat into the Minister's time.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I will try to answer the Deputy's questions as quickly as I can. In regard to the stability fund, all I can say is that Pobal is dealing with the applications. Over 1,000 applications were received and it is going through them at the moment. These organisations are in difficulty and I want to try to get the funding out as quickly as possible. I have asked Pobal to prioritise this and deal with the applications. As soon as Pobal has assessed the applications, I will make the announcements. I will make sure that the funding is delivered to where it should be delivered. All I can do is make sure the funding is announced and the organisations that want it get it. Nothing will be held back. The Departments of Health and of Education and Skills and other Departments will also draw from that fund. I can assure the Deputy that, for my part, whatever funding I can get will be delivered as quickly as possible.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We now move to the Independent group.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** The independent Independents.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** The independent Independent group.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I will share time, five minutes and five minutes. I thank the Minister for his initiative and pay tribute to the work done by his Department. More particularly, I want to pay tribute to community and voluntary groups. As my time is limited, I will limit my gratitude to those few words. I fully appreciate the work being done.

Today I want to zone in on one particular scheme. I ask for an update on the town and village pilot residential occupancy scheme, which I have followed up assiduously for the past two years. I took the trouble of reading the debates of the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development. Some fabulous words were used, just like in the Minister's speech. I could not argue with him about the words used. We can move towards a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable future for everyone. That is what we want. The committee published an extremely interesting report. Mr. Hynes, who recently retired as the chief executive of Mayo County Council, used fantastic words such as "sustainable", "inclusive", "prosperous" and "proud" in respect of rural communities. He talked about community engagement and empowerment.

Unfortunately, that is not what we have in rural Ireland. As the Minister knows, I come from Galway West. My constituency stretches from the Aran Islands to Inishbofin, all of Connemara, both Irish and English speaking regions, and right up to the Minister's county of Mayo including Kilmaine and Shrulc. I am fully aware of the variation. One thing which struck me about the former chief executive of Mayo County Council was that he asked us to change the narrative around towns and villages and the decline. He was absolutely right. There is no getting away from the fact that they are in decline, but we need to change the narrative behind these lovely sweet words to actually mean what we say.

The Minister started that, and I pay tribute to him for that. One of his particularly good initiatives was to increase occupancy. He picked six towns for that, one of which, it turned out, was in his constituency. If we learn from that I do not mind. I and other Deputies have followed up on this because it is the bridge to the future. The data from six towns, how the scheme worked and what we learned from it can be used as the bridge to rolling out the scheme to every county, in particular counties with Gaeltacht regions which we should not forget.

In my remaining two and a half minutes, maybe we could have a little interchange. Where are we at? Replies to parliamentary questions tabled by me and other Deputies indicated the report was to be published at the end of last year or certainly by the beginning of this year. Have all the reports come in from the six local authorities? Is the report available? Has it been published and, if so, have I missed it? I want the Minister to reply either “Yes” or “No”. We have done all our praising and I have heard the whole debate. I just want the replies to the specific questions.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** On that report, as the Deputy knows six towns were picked. I looked for one in Galway and one in the Gaeltacht. We got an initial report back. We sent it back because we wanted them to find what they were actually seeking. I hope to have the report published in the next two weeks. I did not want to publish it; I was waiting for the new Government to come in and do so. I will publish it now because I commissioned it. The local authorities discussed it with the community groups and came back with their findings. I was a bit disappointed with the first report and I sent it back to clarify some of the detail in it.

Two big issues came up and the Deputy raised one of them, namely, the dereliction of properties in towns and villages. It is an issue we need to address. They want the local authorities to use their powers under the Derelict Sites Act to deal with it. The Deputy and many other Deputies have an opportunity now with the programme for Government. People can say what they like and do what they like. There is a lot of dereliction in towns and villages. Many owners of such properties do not have the resources to be able to do anything with them.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I agree with the Minister on that, but that is not my question. He has partially answered it: he is going to publish the report in the next two weeks, which I welcome because the report is vital. At the beginning there was a delay in rolling this out. This concept goes back to 2017 and we are now in 2020. I call on the Minister to publish the report. Let us all see it and let us all be part of it.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** It might have been talked about, but nobody did anything. It was me who did it last year. I put the funding in place. I gave €100,000 each to the local authorities. A lot of people talk over there and over here, but I did it.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** It is my first time to speak to the Minister on the floor of the House. Many people have congratulated him and I would like to add my voice. I did not always agree with him, but rural Ireland was at the heart of his policy and that suited me.

I have two questions. The €40 million package to community groups is really important and valuable. However, there are many community groups that run community centres. They may contain crèches, language schools and enterprise centres or they might just run card games, etc. However, they would not qualify for the Minister’s new scheme. Those groups have no day-to-day income. They have increasing costs such as utility bills, insurance and so on. It is all run by volunteers meaning they have nothing to keep them going. They also know that when these

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centres start to open it will take time for whatever little businesses were there to get up on their feet again. Could the Minister give some direct help - some small grant aid - to keep these community groups on life support? As the Minister and I both know, with the closure of schools, post offices, etc. - I will not give a long list - very often the GAA pitch and the community centre are all that remain in rural Ireland and if they close, that is a disaster.

My second question relates to LEADER and the importance of transition funding. LEADER should be returned to community-led local development. As the Minister has said, that is for the incoming Minister. I ask for the Minister's support in allowing LEADER to increase its grant aid from 50% to 75% for the SME sector. As the Minister knows, some of the programmes were delayed. LEADER companies have money to spend and the Covid pandemic delayed the spending further. Many SMEs cannot avail of 50% grant aid. It is not high enough with Covid-19. This money is there but it cannot be used by the SMEs that need it most. I know there can be issues concerning state aid, but the European Commission has said it is very flexible. Will the Minister, therefore, look at making changes to give higher levels of grant aid so that LEADER money is spent within the rules of state aid and the flexibility allowed by the European Commission?

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I thank Deputy Harkin for her comments. I will make two points regarding community centres. We tried to fund them, where possible, through the Dormant Accounts Fund. That was not so much for the day-to-day running, because the community services programme does that where we pay for the manager and staffing. That is already there and we did not cut that back in any way. We have actually been very lenient concerning that scheme. Turning to repairs to community centres, a small fund exists. I came under pressure in this regard. It should not be me because it is the local authorities in some cases and voluntary groups in 90% of cases who own these centres. Some of these centres got into difficulty last year. I set up a small fund under dormant accounts where applications can be made for repairs but not for day-to-day running of the centres.

Regarding drawing down funding from the Covid-19 stability fund, I wanted to get an immediate reaction for groups in difficulty, particularly where their funding had been cut because they were not able to raise the funding as they did previously. That fund has now been set up and I am waiting for it to be adjudicated on. Regarding all of the other services, including the community enhancement programme, I gave €2.5 million to the local authorities so they could deal with local problems and especially with local services. There was one direction, and that was that any front-line services were to get priority. I let the local authorities make their own decisions regarding the community and I got that money out and delivered to them for that scheme and all the other schemes.

Regarding LEADER, the next Minister can make the decision as to how it will be administered. My concern now is that we get some funding, from Europe or central government, to cover the gap between the closing of this scheme and the opening of a new scheme. That is very important. Negotiations have been put on again for another year, and something has to be done in the meantime concerning getting some funding for those companies to continue. I will not get into the row. I think-----

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I refer to grant aid moving from 50% to 75%.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I thank the Minister. We are over time, unfortunately.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I have to be honest.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** The time has expired.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** I ask the Acting Chairman for just one second. If one scheme has caused me nothing but trouble in my Department, it has been LEADER. I have done everything in my power to make it easier for the LEADER companies to operate. I have changed every rule they asked to have changed. If a change is within the rules and it can be made at central government, I would not be afraid to make it. I cannot break European rules, however.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** That concludes the statement by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, on Covid-19 and questions and answers on Covid-19.

*Sitting suspended at 4.35 p.m. and resumed at 4.55 p.m.*

### **Covid-19 (Foreign Affairs and Trade): Statements**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Tosóimid i dtús báire mar sin leis an ráiteas ón Tánaiste. We begin with a statement from the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I welcome this opportunity to discuss my Department's role in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, including our immediate consular response to the crisis, our wider contribution to the whole-of-Government response, the impact on the passport service and our plans for the coming months.

The scale of the consular challenge caused by the Covid-19 pandemic saw an unprecedented number of Irish citizens stranded across the world. The Department quickly developed a comprehensive approach to the repatriation of citizens who wished to return home, prioritising those most vulnerable while taking account of the best interests of our citizens everywhere, including from a public health perspective. By the end of May, my Department had helped well over 6,000 citizens to return from 126 different countries, including many healthcare workers returning to assist in the Covid-19 response here at home.

From the outset, priority was given to helping those citizens who are normally resident in Ireland to return home safely on commercial flights wherever possible and, where that was not possible, on flights chartered by the EU or other partners, including the UK. In exceptional cases where these options were not available, the Department directly chartered flights to bring citizens home, notably from Peru, India and Nigeria. In arranging these flights, we worked in close co-operation with EU partners and were able to repatriate citizens from many other EU member states also. We made use for the first time ever of the EU Union Civil Protection Mechanism, UCPM, which reimburses countries required to repatriate citizens by chartering flights. The reimbursement is about 75% of the cost of the flights.

Once the gravity of the pandemic became apparent, my Department activated a dedicated Covid-19 phonenumber to provide direct support and advice to Irish citizens abroad, as well as their families here at home. During the peak of the crisis, the Department handled up to 2,000 calls

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every day. I am glad to say the figure is now around 200 per day but it is still significant enough. Our latest information is that more than 1,000 of our citizens overseas still want to return. Some of these are located in remote regions with poor health infrastructure and in many instances severe travel restrictions remain in place. We continue to explore all solutions possible in close co-operation with our EU and international partners to assist these citizens in returning home.

My Department co-operated closely with the HSE to ensure that all Irish citizens were given appropriate advice for the protection of both their own health and public health on their return to Ireland. In mid-March, my Department issued a general advisory notice which remains in place for the public to avoid all non-essential travel overseas. The security status assigned to all countries was amended to reflect this general advice. It is worth noting for this House's knowledge that in the first four months of this year, we updated or changed our travel advice almost 1,400 times, which is an extraordinary figure. Normally, in a whole year that number would not be reached. It is a reminder of how quickly things were changing and the pace of the movement of information that we were trying to provide to people. This advice will remain under constant review as the situation evolves over the coming months. In providing this travel advice, the protection of public health has, of course, been to the fore at all times.

My Department has also contributed to the wider whole-of-Government response to the Covid-19 crisis in a number of different ways. Personnel from the Passport Office have been redeployed into other essential public service roles, such as Covid-19 contact tracing for the HSE and working with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to facilitate the processing of Covid-related benefits. We have a very large number of people  
*5 o'clock* who are normally involved in passport work. Passport applications virtually stopped because there was no travel, so it made a great deal of sense to get people who were used to dealing with people's queries on the phone to work with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the HSE in other areas that were under significant pressure.

Since the start of the crisis, more than 2,500 reports have been prepared by the diplomatic mission network on international responses to Covid-19. This information feeds directly into the policymaking process here and has helped shape Ireland's response, drawing from international best practice so that Ireland can learn in real time from what other countries are doing, both their successes and their mistakes.

Our missions in Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, Berlin and at headquarters have been working closely with the IDA, the HSE, and the Departments of Health and Transport, Tourism and Sport to secure essential equipment, including ventilators, test kits and personal protective equipment. I want to acknowledge the excellent co-operation of the Chinese, Japanese, Korean and German authorities, and of their embassies in Dublin.

I also want to pay tribute to Michael Hurley, who was the deputy ambassador in Beijing and who tragically passed away last week. Michael made an immense contribution to Ireland's response to this pandemic, helping many Irish citizens and saving Irish lives throughout his work, working, of course, alongside Eoin O'Leary, our ambassador in Beijing.

As the scale of the impact of the pandemic on our diaspora communities became clear, the Government established a dedicated Covid-19 response fund for Irish communities abroad. This supports projects for the elderly, mental health, bereavement counselling and innovative ways to provide services online and meet the needs of those made vulnerable by the crisis and respond to cases of hardship, in particular in the United States where many people remain un-

documented and therefore are unable to access support services for Covid-19. Our networks there have done extraordinary work in cities like New York that have been under huge pressure. To date, 58 projects have been approved worldwide amounting to almost €1 million.

The Covid-19 pandemic knows no borders, and until each country has contained the virus, no country is safe in truth. At an EU level, Ireland has played an important part in shaping and delivering on a co-ordinated and ambitious EU collective response to the pandemic, and has so far allocated €86.8 million in fresh, reprogrammed and fast-tracked financial support for the Covid-19 response globally. Ireland is promoting a co-ordinated multilateral response in partnership with the United Nations, international financial institutions and others. We have contributed more than €17 million in direct funding to the UN's global humanitarian response plan to Covid-19, and our funding for the WHO this year has quadrupled.

In our response to Covid-19, we are keenly aware that we must consider the shared geography of the island of Ireland and the cross-Border mobility of people through close and ongoing contact North-South and east-west. The Government is engaged in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Executive and with the UK Government with the intention of delivering an effective response to the threat of Covid-19 on behalf of all of the people of this island. I have jointly chaired, with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a number of conference calls with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the health Ministers, North and South, Robin Swann and Deputy Simon Harris, to discuss the ongoing response to Covid-19 to ensure as much co-ordination as possible, North and South.

I will now address the impact of the crisis on the passport service. Once the potential impact of Covid-19 became obvious, contingency planning commenced to minimise the impact of restrictions on the delivery of services. In particular, plans were put in place to ensure that we continued to provide an emergency service for the issuance of passports in cases of serious illness or death abroad. The passport service is also assisting those whose applications are regarded as urgent. While staff have been on site carrying out this necessary work, they have also produced approximately 6,000 additional passports during the time of this pandemic. These were all adult passport renewal applications received online which required minimum staff intervention. As these applications represent approximately 20% of all applicants currently in our system, this will reduce the work carried out when the full operations resume.

The Passport Office is at an advanced stage of planning for the return to full operation. This planning is in line with the wider Government plan to reopen in phases. From next week, processing non-essential online applications will start. The passport service has a great deal of experience in dealing with peaks in demand, and we believe that we are well-placed to ensure the online service will be meeting its usual turnaround times of approximately two weeks by phase 3 in July.

I encourage all applicants for passports to apply online if they want to get that kind of service. I am very proud of the dedication and commitment of colleagues across my Department-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I am almost finished.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** We will be in trouble at the end. Sorry about that, but we really will be in trouble with the two-hour limit.

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**Deputy Simon Coveney:** No problem. I can deal with it in questions.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Ag bog ar aghaidh go dtí Fianna Fáil. Cúig nóimead.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** Recent events in the USA are very sad and very disturbing. Both I and my party condemn discrimination and racism of any kind. People must have the right to protest peacefully, and the use of violence and force must be condemned. Government at all times must act democratically and in the best interests of all its people.

I wish to take up the points the Tánaiste made concerning passport service. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs website, public offices dealing with provision of passport services are closed until further notice. Applicants can apply online, but applications will not be processed until normal services are resumed. The post office facility is not operational. The phonelines are closed, but the website states that genuine emergency cases can be dealt with using web chat services. The Tánaiste outlined when normal services will resume. Will there be a backlog of passport applications? Does he have any figures on how many passport applications are awaiting processing, and will additional resources be given to the passport service to deal with the inevitable backlog of passport applications?

I would also like to raise an EU matter at this point. I refer to the multi-annual financial framework 2021-2027, and the European Commission's proposals for a recovery package for the EU economy, a €750 billion fund, including €500 billion in grants and €250 billion in loans. Ireland is set to receive €1.9 billion from this package. The EU will be borrowing the money. This is an unprecedented response by the EU, but the borrowing will have to be paid back eventually, and suggestions for this include climate change taxes, plastic taxes and a digital sales tax. The latter of course would have implications for Google and Facebook. Is the package likely to be agreed by the European Council? What is the Irish position on it? Will we have to increase our contributions to the EU down the line to pay for it? What own resources would Ireland consider in this context? Is our corporate tax rate under threat in this regard?

I welcome what the Tánaiste had to say on the repatriation of Irish citizens. I also want to pay tribute to our embassies and consulates overseas which have done Trojan work. I know from my experience in my constituency of the work they have done. I have a specific question on the Canary Islands. Are there many Irish citizens there trying to get home? I understand some of them are in poor health. I am interested because it is such a popular destination for Irish citizens.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Does the Deputy want the replies now?

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** I would like them now.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** You are keeping your own time.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** Yes.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** Five minutes maximum.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** This is just to help me here.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** I will come in at ten minutes.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I join the Deputy in condemning racism in all its forms and I am sure that is reflected across this House. Many of us are pretty disturbed and shocked by the images we are seeing coming out of the United States for what I think is the eighth day in a row. What everybody wants to ensure is that peaceful protest is part of any democracy, as is the need for robust and independent journalism. Violence is not the way to bring about change. What is needed is leadership at both community and political level. The undercurrent of anger and discontent that has come from concerns around racism and discrimination has created a significant wave of protest, some of it violent, across US cities.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** It is most unsatisfactory to have to stop the Tánaiste, but I must do so because there are three more speakers for Fianna Fáil.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I am answering the question I was asked.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I understand that, but I must ensure that speakers stay within the time, unless the other Fianna Fáil speakers wish to give up their time.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** I ask that written replies be issued to me in due course.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I ask for clarity on the rules.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I ask that the clock be stopped. There was a total of 15 minutes for the Fianna Fáil speakers.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I presume the distribution of the time is up to those asking the questions.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Deputy Fleming indicated that he wished to speak when there were ten minutes remaining. I asked for clarity on the distribution of the time but the Tánaiste was not aware of that.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** There are ten minutes remaining for the Fianna Fáil Deputies.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Deputy Fleming indicated that he wished to come in with ten minutes remaining. I have tried to elicit the best way to do it. If the questioners do not leave enough time for the Tánaiste to reply, I will be forced to interrupt him mid-sentence. If I do not do so, other speakers will not have a chance to contribute. I will ensure that all speakers get their time.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** I ask the Tánaiste to take note of my questions and issue written replies to me in due course.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Deputy Haughey already asked for that to be done. We will restart the clock. I ask the Deputies to provide clarity on how they wish to divide the remaining time.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** The four remaining Fianna Fáil speakers will have two and a half minutes each, including time for the Tánaiste to respond. We may choose not to ask a question of him. He must complete any response within the two and a half minutes allotted to each speaker.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I will stop Deputy Fleming when there are seven and a half minutes remaining.

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**Deputy Simon Coveney:** To be helpful, I will focus on trying to answer specific questions, rather than making general comments.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** I appreciate the clarification by the Acting Chair and I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue of foreign affairs. I wish to acknowledge and thank the Ceann Comhairle for organising a minute's silence in support of all those affected by racism. There will be a debate in the House on racism next week. We must all take a stand against racism in Ireland and abroad. The issue has been highlighted by the murder of George Floyd by US police. The rule of law and order applies to everybody. All those who participated in or were accomplices to this heinous act must be brought to justice. Nothing less will do. There have been many protests against racism. These are important and to be welcomed and should be allowed to take place. Black lives matter. The vast majority of the protests have been peaceful and respectful and should not be met with brutality.

On another matter relating to the Tánaiste's Department, I am sure he is fully aware of the serious consequences of Covid-19 in Ireland and abroad, particularly in the European Union. To date, it has impacted hardest on Europe. Nine of the ten countries with the highest death rates *per capita* are in Europe. Understandably, each country rightly looked after its own people first. It is clear that the European Union did not act in unison in the largest crisis to have faced Europe in recent generations. I reiterate that it is only right that governments looked after their own people first. It is obvious that although we were all in this together in Ireland, that was not the case at EU level. One of the big lessons to be learned for the Tánaiste's Department is the importance of ensuring that European institutions and countries work more closely together in the interests of all EU citizens in any similar crisis in the future. That did not happen on this occasion.

**Deputy John Lahart:** Yesterday, I welcomed on Twitter the general comments tweeted by the Taoiseach regarding racism. The Tánaiste repeated those comments today. He has condemned racism and I welcome that he has done so, but surely our Government has more to say about the appalling use of Tasers, rubber bullets, tear gas and brute force on streets in the United States. The paramilitary style of policing has been truly stomach-turning for any reasonable person watching it. Has the Government any comment to make on that issue? The Tánaiste did not specifically advert to it. We are squeezed for time and I thank the Acting Chairman for managing it so well.

On a second and completely different issue, the Tánaiste mentioned that the travel advisory from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade had to be updated and amended 1,400 times, which is a tribute to the staff and which I appreciate. More travel advice will be needed. A significant issue arises for constituents who have booked holidays abroad. They will have paid their deposit or, in some cases, paid for the holiday in full, the flights are booked, the flight carriers are still willing to carry them and the country of destination is still willing, in some cases, to welcome them and accommodate them, so long as they give details of their accommodation. Therefore, they need a travel advisory specifically in regard to when they return. Is a fortnight of quarantine essential for them? For example, will a normal working couple with a family or an individual who has used up some of his or her annual leave for holidays continue to be required to quarantine for a further two weeks when they return home from these holidays? What general and specific advice can the Tánaiste give to travellers? The Tánaiste has about half a minute to come back to me on those questions.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** If I do not come back on all of the questions, I can try to supply

written information by email to Members. On the EU institutions, I think there were some failings at the start but I also think there has been a lot of co-ordination since then. People talk about a recovery fund, which is a huge new approach by the EU and which is significant-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** The time is up. I cannot help it. These are the rules. Two speakers are indicating they wish to speak. They have made that decision. It is not the fault of the Tánaiste.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** There is not much point asking questions if we cannot answer them.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Members will have to take that up afterwards. I am not wasting any more time. I call Deputy Robert Troy or Deputy James Browne, whoever wishes to go first.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Last week, we witnessed the brutal killing of George Floyd in the US. The response of President Trump's Administration to the subsequent rallies against racism is nothing short of appalling and certainly not action in keeping with the leader of a democratic country. What action is the Irish Government going to take to show that we stand in solidarity with those who demonstrate legitimately against racism?

Has the Tánaiste or his Department had any input into the 14-day quarantine that has been initiated by the Government for travellers coming into Ireland? Does he think it is right and proper that Ireland has introduced a 14-day quarantine at a time when the rest of Europe is opening up from a travel perspective? Spain will open up travel from 1 July; in Poland, it will be done on 21 June; in Greece, 4 June; in France, 18 June; in Italy, 6 June; and in Germany, 21 June. The only country we seem to be absolving from the 14-day quarantine is the UK, which some might argue has made the greatest hames of its reply to Covid-19. We seem to be out of sync. I would welcome the Tánaiste's opinion on that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** The Tánaiste has 30 seconds.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I would really like to answer because there are a lot of inaccuracies in that contribution, I am afraid. First, we require everybody who comes into Ireland, whether they are Irish people coming home, UK citizens coming from the UK or people coming from anywhere else across the EU or the world, to self-isolate for 14 days. That has been in place for quite some time and we are not just introducing it now. Spain today requires people to quarantine for 14 days, the same as Ireland does. People should deal with the facts.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** It is changing on 1 July.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Yes. We have not yet made decisions on a post-July timescale.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Gabh mo leithscéal. The time is up.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Our position is as it has been, which is to advise people not to travel abroad.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Seo iad na rialacha. Gabh mo leithscéal. I call Deputy James Browne.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** It is a nonsense if we cannot answer.

**Deputy John Lahart:** It is a nonsense we have so little time to ask the questions.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** We are wasting time. Can we let the speaker speak?

**Deputy James Browne:** The brutal killing of George Floyd by a US police force must be condemned. It and the brutal response to legitimate protests by some US police forces and state powers are clear evidence of the institutionalised nature of racism and hatred. The violent attacks on members of the press who are reporting are shocking. Has the Tánaiste spoken to the US ambassador, Mr. Crawford, to condemn the violent response to legitimate protests, the acts of racism and the attacks on the press, and to express that Ireland too says that black lives matter?

The establishment of LGBT exclusion zones in Poland is horrific. The attempt to legitimise hatred and violence against LGBT communities is reminiscent of a darker European past. EU funding should be linked to upholding and protecting the rule of law. Does the Tánaiste support this call? When was the last time he communicated to the Polish ambassador on the disgraceful actions of the Polish Government?

The situation in Hong Kong has been described as the latter's last stand for freedom. In May, the Chinese Government passed a national security law that gives powers to the mainland to bypass Hong Kong democracy with security forces. There is a very real fear this is the end of free speech, assembly and freedom of the press. Does the Tánaiste lend his voice to the international outrage? Has he spoken to the Chinese ambassador about the attempts to usurp democracy in Hong Kong by its Government?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** There are 45 seconds remaining for the three questions.

**Deputy James Browne:** They are questions that require "Yes" or "No" answers from the Tánaiste .

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I know that but the whole point of this debate is to answer questions on Covid-19 and what the Department is doing about it. I am happy to take all of these questions and I look forward to a time when we will be able to answer them in the appropriate timelines. I share the concerns the Deputy has outlined. We will have an opportunity to have a comprehensive debate on racism next week, and I hope I will be part of it. I share the concerns about Hong Kong. I have not spoken to the US ambassador, Mr. Crawford. This does not mean I will not do so but I have not yet. The EU view with regard to ensuring protection for the LGBT community is very clear.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The public health crisis has been tough on various sectors throughout the country, with many small businesses and those in tourism, hospitality and retail in my county particularly hard hit. Our inshore fishermen were struggling long before this crisis arose, with herring quotas and scientific quotas reduced and boats tied up. Our small fishermen were on their knees. I have been speaking to those working in inshore fishing in Donegal and they are crying out for help. It is not an exaggeration to state that many of them will not be fishing this time next year if the proper supports and protections are not forthcoming. I have been in correspondence with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, on this subject to let him know that the tie-up aid announced and the funding that is EU-backed will not even cover the monthly cost of insurance for many fishermen with smaller vessels, let

alone cover the loans and other commitments they have. What further supports are expected from the EU in terms of funding for inshore fisheries should the current crisis continue? All of that to which I refer comes at a time when super-trawlers from other member states continue to fish in Irish waters and when there are rumblings of disagreement on fishing rights in the Brexit negotiations.

It has been reported that Michel Barnier of the EU Commission's task force was prepared to accede to British demands on fisheries against the mandate given to him by member states in the interests of the Irish fishing sector. On 26 May, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine stated that Mr. Barnier had reiterated his commitment to the mandate he was given by the member states, including continued access to waters for Irish fishers. Uncertainty surrounds the position of the EU task force on fisheries and whether it plans to use fisheries as a bargaining chip in negotiations and whether it is prepared to accept Britain's quota grab to secure better terms in other sectors. What progress has been made in the Brexit negotiations to ensure that the livelihoods of small fishermen in Ireland are protected? What guarantees, if any, can the Tánaiste give to these fishermen? Is any leeway being considered on the easing of quotas for small fishermen to help sustain them during this crisis?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** This time the Tánaiste has a full three minutes.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Three minutes. I could not have been more kind to the Tánaiste.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Deputy Doherty is always generous in the House. I understand the concerns in the fishery sector, particularly those linked to Brexit. Let me be very clear. Michel Barnier reiterated in advance of negotiations this week that he has a very clear mandate regarding the fisheries sector and that there will not be a trade deal between the EU and the UK without a deal on fishing and a level playing field. He also stated that there must be a governance model which ensures that said level playing field is monitored and enforced, with a dispute resolution infrastructure in place. That has been the EU position from the outset of these negotiations and is also consistent with what the UK committed to in writing in the political declaration which was agreed in parallel with the withdrawal agreement. That is what we intend on holding both sides to in the negotiations. This does not mean that the outcome for fishing is predetermined; of course it is not. The UK position on fishing is very different from what the EU is looking for. That is why we need fishing negotiated in the context of a trade deal and all of the other issues that are part of that negotiation, as opposed to hiving off different negotiations independent of each other. That was never intended to be the approach and it is not going to be. In doing so, we are seeking to protect the interests of the Irish fleet in terms of both access and the quota share it currently enjoys in British waters.

I expect that the fisheries element of this negotiation is going to get very difficult. We need to keep our fishing fleet informed and, if necessary, supported with assistance packages as we await what we hope will be a fair outcome for all sides in terms of the fisheries element of a Brexit deal at some point in the autumn. I do not have a readout on how the negotiations have gone this week. This is the fourth round of negotiations on a future relationship. The first three rounds failed to make any progress. In fact, if anything, they went backwards because the two sides are looking for different outcomes from the negotiations, which makes it particularly difficult to make progress, including on fishing. That is the position. I keep in very close contact with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine regarding the fisheries issue.

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**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I received a communication from an Irish citizen who is living in Lanzarote. It is reflective of many Irish citizens in that area but also, I am told, of other Irish and EU citizens living in other parts of the EU. I will cite extracts from the letter, with the writer's permission:

My name is Joe Bracken. I am a 56 year old musician living on the island of Lanzarote. I am also an ex soldier, having served at home and abroad. As you may or may not be aware, we are currently in the 10th week of lockdown. [This was two weeks ago.] We have lost all our work, I have not worked since March 14th. When the lockdown was put in place, we were assured by the Spanish government that measures would be put in place to make sure nobody went without. They assured us that rent, mortgages, and bills would be put on hold during the state of alarm.

[...] After all the promises of the Spanish government, I myself after 8 weeks in lockdown, having no savings and completely penniless, received €129 for unemployment. Some of the workers out here [...] have received nothing at all and this is week 10.

[...] To summarize, we have been basically hung out to dry by the Spanish government. I state my case again here, I would like to know why the Irish government does not put pressure on the Spanish government to ensure that [Irish citizens receive] similar benefits to EU citizens of all nationalities residing in the EU country of Ireland. This is a crisis, folks, let there be no misinterpretation of this. Some people living on the island of Lanzarote and all the other tourists hotspots in Spain have been hung out to dry and are receiving little or no help. €17 a week, I ask you, "Could you live on that?" with the constant stress also of [when will we get or] will we get rent relief."

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Is that citizen seeking to come back to Ireland? Is that the position, or is he looking to get social protection benefits in Spain?

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The question is if the Minister will raise the matter directly with the Spanish Government at European Council level in order to ensure that citizens of EU countries are protected from destitution within the EU, in this case in Lanzarote. They want to stay there, they are Irish citizens and they are made destitute by the Spanish Government, which has not lived up to its promises.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** If we can get that individual's details, I will make sure that our consular team talks to him. We are speaking on a daily basis to many Irish citizens abroad and trying to help them in any way we can. My understanding is that long-term residents in Spain and elsewhere receive supports that are available there, not the equivalent that would be delivered here. Within different countries people get different support levels in terms of social protection and so on. We will certainly make contact in order to ensure that the individual the Deputy spoke about is getting all of the available supports he should be able to get from the Spanish Government.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I will pass the information on. The problem is not specific to that man alone. Many others have contacted me about this matter. He has been in contact with the Irish Embassy and it cut and pasted advice to him concurrent with what the Spanish authorities have already promised but have not delivered. The problem is that 12 weeks later, he and his wife combined have received a sum of €129. Others have received nothing. They are Irish citizens who are living off whatever savings they have and who are not in receipt of

any other payments because their only income was work when the tourist season was up and running. That is gone and it is likely to be gone for a good while. The key action is to request that the Spanish authorities provide some kind of help, even if it is the help they have already promised. The argument is that there is too much bureaucracy and that is the problem these people face. They are musicians and they have raised hundreds of euro, even in the dire straits they are in, for those who are non-EU citizens, who are living in Lanzarote and who are penniless. This specific case relates to an Irish citizen. Many others like him are reaching out and asking us to put pressure on the Spanish Government to help them. They are not looking for the same supports that are available here, they are looking for what is available to Spanish citizens.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** We will follow up on that matter.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I want to take these questions over and back and I beg forgiveness in respect of the first one. A place the Tánaiste might know well is the Border area around the Cooley Peninsula, particularly as he has attended many Brexit events in recent years. Unfortunately, this area has been hammered in recent days with fires in Annaloughan. A huge number of people in the Jenkinstown and Lordship areas are worried. The forests in the area are owned by Coillte, which has helicopters in the area. The problem is that Louth County Council submitted a request today for the Air Corps to assist but there was a technical difficulty which meant that it could not provide support. This area is first on the list but the Air Corps might not end up getting there until tomorrow. In fairness to Louth County Council, it has followed up on the issue and tried to get a commercial helicopter from the same company that Coillte uses. However, the people to whom I spoke were not too hopeful that the council would be able to get the helicopter when I was in contact with them.. The difficulty is that the fire is still burning and the other problem is that it is moving upwards. Therefore, helicopters are required. I commend the great work that has been done by the fire services. I have been kept updated on the matter by Councillor Antóin Watters. Can the Tánaiste make contact with the Minister of State with responsibility for defence in respect of what is happening? Can we have State resources brought to bear and a State response? That is what is needed because an awful lot of people are worried.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I presume Coillte has also asked for that. Has it done so?

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Coillte has its own contract and its own helicopter so at least that is in play at the minute. However, Louth County Council has submitted a request to the Air Corps. There is a technical difficulty but I hope we can get the matter sorted as quickly as possible. It is probably something that needs to be looked at into the future so that this problem does not arise again.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I will follow up on that and check with the Minister of State at the Department of Defence, Deputy Kehoe, as to what the delay is and we will see if we can fast-track the response.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I appreciate that. A number of Members have already asked the Tánaiste whether he has had contact with the US Embassy. Does the Government have plans to talk to the Trump Administration? Everybody was shocked and sickened by what happened to George Floyd. Ireland knows about the huge difficulty and anguish that can be caused for communities by the use of tear gas and rubber and plastic bullets. This is not something we want to see. I am sure everyone would be in agreement that there has been poor leadership, which has exacerbated this situation. Are there any plans to make contact with the Trump Administration? I am not saying that it will change tack but we should put on record where the Irish people stand

on this matter.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I think it is pretty clear where the Irish people stand on this issue. I speak to the ambassador, Mr. Crawford, quite regularly. I do not have a scheduled call with him, but I would not be surprised if I were to speak to him in the next week or so. What Irish people want is an appropriate political response to the outrage on the back of this awful killing and the protests that have erupted since. However, they also want to see a country that historically has given a lot of global leadership on democratic values facilitating peaceful protest in an appropriate way. I recognise that managing the ferocity of some of the protests in US cities at the moment is putting authorities under huge pressure, but the-----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that. I think it was-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I ask Deputy Ó Murchú to let the Minister-----

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I have not finished.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Is féidir leis an Teachta Ó Murchú suí síos.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The overriding message from the Irish Government, but also, I think, from Irish people, is a complete rejection of racism and a determination to combat it in all its forms. We need to focus on ourselves as well as looking critically at others.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We are back into Brexit deadlines. We have the withdrawal agreement, the Irish protocol and the difficulty with the June deadline, which will be followed up by the 31 December deadline. I think the belief is out there that the British Government is not willing to extend. An awful lot of the supports we had for businesses have now been repurposed for Brexit. While that was right, what are the plans into the future as to what can be done? Then we have the possibility again of a no deal. What is the Government willing to do to ensure no hard border?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I do not think the Minister will get to answer that in six seconds but-----

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** How long do I have? Six seconds?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Two seconds.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I am on the record on Brexit. There will be no extension to transition, in our view, and we are planning accordingly.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I apologise but I will not allow the Minister to continue. Other speakers will not get in.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** I thank the Tánaiste and his Department for their heroic efforts to return Irish citizens home safely as we prepared for lockdown. I have friends and former colleagues in Australia and Egypt and constituents in Peru and India who turned to me for help, and I could only help them because the Tánaiste and his staff helped me. I thank him and his team for ensuring they and thousands of others made it home safely to Ireland.

We have come a long way since then. We have gone from preparing for lockdown to pre-

paring for reopening. People are following Government advice and staying at home, but many are eagerly awaiting their holidays abroad once restrictions are lifted. Holidays are always a special time of year, even more so this year. People have been locked up in their homes for months on end, only travelling 5 km from home. One thing is for sure: people have definitely earned their holidays this year.

However, many are now fearful they will miss out on this well-earned reward because their passports will expire before they are scheduled to leave or because their children need passports for the very first time. Despite applying in plenty of time, they have yet to receive their new passports because of backlogs in the Passport Office due to staff being redeployed to assist in contact tracing. I would welcome the Tánaiste's update on this. Will he clarify the plan to resume a full service in the Passport Office so people can enjoy their well-earned holidays?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Regarding well-earned holidays, the travel advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as of today is not to travel abroad, and I want to be very clear on that. Despite advertisements for flights to Italy, Spain and elsewhere that we hear on our radios, the travel advice today is that people should not be planning to go abroad. Those who go abroad, when they come back, will be asked to self-isolate for 14 days. That is the travel advice and those are the restrictions being applied unless and until the Government decides to change them on the back of public health advice and consultation with our colleagues, friends and partners across the European Union. Of course we are keeping that under review. Having said that, under the five-stage opening-up period, there will be an opportunity to take well-earned breaks and holidays, we hope, in late June and in August, or before then if it is safe to speed up the pace of the opening-up period. If people want to travel abroad, and the advice allows it, later on in the summer or later in the year, we have to ensure they have passports.

The truth is that because there was little or no demand for passports during the Covid-19 period, we have allocated staff to other essential jobs across the public sector. This is now changing and the demand is increasing. If people want to get a fast turnaround time from next week on, they should apply online. Even if an applicant has applied by post in recent weeks or months and has received no response, assuming he wants to get a quick turnaround time, he should reapply online. We will talk applicants through that process and reimburse them the cost of the paper application. It is far easier for us to turn around passports quicker with online applications. I hope that is clear. We are trying to be helpful. Later on in the summer we will get to resuming a normal process of postal applications, but if an applicant wants a fast turnaround time he should pick up the telephone and talk to us. We will talk the applicant through how an online application works. It is straightforward and we can get a far faster turnaround time from next week onwards.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I am delighted to have this opportunity to thank the Tánaiste, his Department and all the various Government elements on the Covid-19 response. I have had many telephone calls from parents, relations and even people in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Well in excess of 6,000 citizens have returned. I have no doubt that many of those 6,000 may not go back to where they came from. They will be the vanguard of a new Ireland. They could be the vanguard with their finances as well as their work and life experience. I believe they are the new vanguard post Covid-19. I look forward to seeing what will happen in ten years. I genuinely believe that.

There are 1,000 citizens overseas who want to return. Deputy Ó Snodaigh rightly said that many people in Lanzarote and other areas who are retired want to come back for medical ex-

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aminations etc. I believe that much could be done there.

I pay tribute to Michael Hurley, who was deputy ambassador in Beijing. His contribution was incredible. I met him several times. I am keen to put on the record my thanks to him for the work he did and indeed my thanks to everyone in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Irish people are proud everywhere they go, whether to London, the United States, Germany or wherever. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade represents our country well. I know from talking to people in other embassies. They tell us how effective and efficient our representatives are as well as how they are able to work the network, including the diaspora of up to 40 million throughout the world. They have done that well indeed.

I thank the Tánaiste for the €17 million in direct funding to the global humanitarian response and for World Health Organization funding this year, which has quadrupled. That was a wonderful signal that Ireland is beginning to take its place as a leader for good in the world. When another leader decided he was not going to give his funding to the WHO, the Tánaiste stepped in. He had one or two detractors but to me it was significant. I was proud that we were able to stand up and be counted in this difficult time.

People talk about the Passport Office. We saw where 900,000 or 1 million passports were allocated last year. Many of the diaspora are availing of those passports. We saw with Brexit how people are proud of their Irish heritage and of their passports. What people do not realise is that the Irish passport is a powerful document. It is probably the seventh most powerful passport in the world. One can get into 185 countries with it. People talk about their credit cards and mobile phones. Those can be replaced, but a passport is probably one of the most valuable documents that someone can have. In this country, however, we treat it like it is just a bit of paper. How do we get people to understand that it is probably one of the most important documents they can have? They can use it to travel hassle free around Europe and the rest of the world. How can we get people to realise that applying for or replacing a passport is not just like, for example, replacing a birth cert? When I travelled to Australia, New Zealand and around the world in the early 1980s, I had that ambivalence towards my Irish passport, but people told me that it was the most important document I could have. We need to highlight that even more.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** An efficient and secure Passport Service is important. Our team does a good job. Last year, we saw an extraordinary increase in the number of applications. This year is a surreal one in many ways, but we will during the summer and into the autumn get back to dealing with significant numbers of people who need their passports renewed and others who are getting passports for the first time. We will have systems in place to do that.

Regarding WHO funding, I believe that the role of the WHO in the context of this pandemic is incredibly important globally. Less so perhaps for countries like Ireland that have good public health advice and, in relative terms, well-resourced public health systems and infrastructure, but in many parts of the world where we have development partnerships and the kind of health infrastructure that is necessary to respond to Covid-19 is non-existent, the input of and trust in the WHO are important. As such, I was concerned about and critical of the deliberate attempts to undermine the credibility of the WHO and the pulling of funding at this time. I remain so. Not because of that but because of our support of the WHO generally and the pressures of the pandemic-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Ní féidir-----

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** -----we agreed to quadruple our funding for the organisation this year.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** We agreed to stick to time. Next is Deputy Matthews of An Comhaontas Glas.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I have a number of questions for the Tánaiste regarding the EU, foreign affairs, trade and Covid-19. Before that, I would like to mention the ongoing situation in the US and the societal implications of racism at home and abroad.

The Green Party stands in solidarity with all those who have experienced racism and oppression. The horrific killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis brought into the light an ugly truth that people of colour know all too well, namely, that racism is alive and well in the world in which we live, not just in America, but at home here in Ireland.

In light of this terrible event and others like it, we must examine our own words and actions towards minority communities. We must not accept conditions for those in direct provision or members of the Traveller community that are less than those we would accept for our own families. Everyday casual racism has led to an othering of these communities, a dehumanisation that leads to violent incidents and, in some cases, killings just like that of George Floyd.

I thank the many groups across this country who have come forward with words of support and education, showing us how best to become allies to migrants and people of colour. It is not enough to pay lip-service. Where we see racism, we must call it out. Those in a position to effect change must do so.

I wish to ask about the EU and trade matters. Yesterday, a briefing from Mr. Andreas Schwarz of the Directorate-General for Budget outlined the agreement and direction for a substantial budget comprising a €540 billion package for pandemic support and €750 billion for crisis repair and recovery. Given the urgent liquidity needs of the SME sector throughout Ireland, the shutdown costs that have depleted capital in that sector and the need to support the more than 1 million people employed throughout, to what extent has Ireland availed of the EU pandemic support package and what is proposed to support SMEs during this crisis? The sector needs urgent and decisive action on liquidity and solvency support. Has the Government assessed the scale of support needed to reflect the serious issues facing SMEs and their employees?

In the context of the €750 billion budget for the EU recovery plan, known as Next Generation EU, has the Government undertaken research into potential uses of this funding for large-scale projects that focus on decarbonising our society, the digital economy, transport, housing, health, research and development, and energy, which can create long-term sustainable jobs and offer superior economic characteristics? Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, sought to develop housing, promote climate action and respond to Brexit. Has the pandemic stabilisation and recovery fund compromised the achievement of these goals? Has Covid-19 expenditure had an impact on or depleted the Brexit-related financial supports for business?

The EU Commission announced recently that it will introduce legislation next year on mandatory human rights and environment due diligence in EU companies' global supply chains. How can we ensure that Ireland lives up to its obligations in this regard? In light of the recent discoveries of human rights abuses surrounding global supply chains, for example, in the manu-

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facture of personal protective equipment, PPE, I ask the Minister to confirm that he is committed to exploring ways to ensure that businesses will carry out checks on international supply chains and commit to responsible and sustainable practices.

While the next issue I wish to raise is not directly related to Covid-19, it is related to oppression. Does the Minister agree that China's latest national security legislation threatens the autonomy and freedoms of Hong Kong? Does he condemn this latest move by the Chinese Government? Has he in any way expressed concern to the Chinese authorities about how this legislation will undermine the one country, two systems framework, and will he make a statement on the matter?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** That is a lot of questions for the Minister.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Yes, there are lots of questions there. I will start with the last one. How much time do I have?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** The Minister has five and a half minutes.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** On Hong Kong, what is developing there is very concerning. Many in the population see it in the same way as Deputy Matthews - compromising the independence of Hong Kong and the one country, two systems policy that had led to a lot of stability and had a lot of international support.

On human rights and international business, we have a business and human rights committee that is doing very good work. In fact, enhancing the work of that committee has been one of the topics for discussion in the programme for Government talks, Deputy Matthews will be glad to hear. On the question of ISIF and the role it plays in investing strategically to help to rebuild our economy in a post-Covid-19 environment, we are already using ISIF to make funding available for strategic investment in businesses. The Ministers for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and for Finance announced details in that regard a couple of weeks ago.

In terms of the challenges for business from Brexit and Covid-19 combined, having a budget in place from last year that anticipated the worst possible outcome from Brexit, that is, a no-deal Brexit, was undoubtedly helpful in the context of what followed, which nobody could have predicted. The prospect of a no-deal Brexit and the economic fallout from that in some ways helped to prepare the Government in terms of the availability of resources for the extraordinary disruption to the Irish economy caused by Covid-19. That begs the question as to whether we would be ready to deal with a no-trade deal Brexit on top of the post-Covid-19 pressures in the Irish economy. That would be hugely challenging. However, we have indicated that we think the appropriate form of economic management in the coming months and years is not to cut expenditure dramatically to close deficits but to borrow prudently to ensure we are investing in creating the stimulus necessary to re-ignite the Irish economy in a post-Covid environment and to ensure we have protections in place for vulnerable sectors should a worse-case scenario transpire, a no-trade deal Brexit and, therefore, the default position of trading to World Trade Organization rules for 2021 and beyond and the consequences that would flow from that. That said, we also need to be realistic about what is credible in terms of borrowing and deficits. I certainly believe that over time we need to show that through economic growth we can close deficits and ensure we bring our financial management back to equilibrium again and, ulti-

mately, into surplus.

An enormous amount of work is going on with regard to how best to support SMEs from a policy and taxation perspective. An SME in Ireland that has been closed because of Covid-19 will have its rates waived for at least three months, the taxes it owes can be warehoused for the moment within Revenue, the rates it paid last year can be claimed back as a grant to re-open and there are multiple low-cost loan opportunities for it. If it is a larger company, it can seek that the State would take an equity stake in the company if that would help keep it alive. The State can pay 75% or up to 85% of the wages of the people employed by the SME. There are multiple supports there, which is hugely expensive for the State but absolutely justified. We will continue to support SMEs through this disruption and out the other side to try to ensure that as many businesses as possible survive and we keep the connection between employers and employees.

Regarding the EU pandemic support funds, we will look to see how we can access that funding in a strategic way. Having said that, I am glad to say that Ireland has the trust and faith of global financial markets. We can borrow money at very low interest rates so we will do that when it makes sense to do that and try to tap into EU support programmes when that is appropriate. This money does not come from nowhere and we will have to contribute to the raising of the funds as well as drawing them down.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Go raibh maith agat a Aire. Bogfaimid ar aghaidh. I call an Teachta Howlin.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** As most people confine themselves to their homes or least to their home areas, major issues are unfolding across our world. The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, which was seen by all of us, seen by the world, opened up yet again the unresolved cancer of racism. I think we have all run out of words to express our dismay at the reaction of the US President to these events but we must find new words. We must also look to ourselves, our own nation and the inherent racism that exists here. I am not making equivalence but we cannot with a clear conscience criticise others if we do not resolve problems here, including the unresolved issue of direct provision. I believe we as a Parliament and as a people must be heard crystal clear on this issue. The obscene assault on peaceful protesters and the hijacking of symbols of religion for a photo-op demand that we respond to it. The Tánaiste said he does not have a scheduled conversation with the US ambassador, Edward Crawford. Will he schedule one?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I think I have said a number times today that I share the concerns and outrage in this House in the context of what has unfolded in recent days in the US.

I have also said that the most appropriate way for Ireland to respond to these issues is to look at itself and make sure that we are credible when we criticise internationally. We should be vocal internationally, but we do have to take a look at ourselves and seek to identify where racism is still an issue that marginalises people in Ireland. We must work hard to resolve issues that result in marginalisation and racism in our own country.

I was asked a straight question as to whether I had spoken to Ambassador Crawford and I gave a straight answer.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I have asked a straight question. Will the Tánaiste schedule a telephone call with him?

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**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I do not have a scheduled telephone call with him but I said I would be surprised if I did not speak to him in the next few days. I have a very good relationship with him and these are issues that I think are likely to result in a conversation.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I think the Tánaiste should have that conversation.

I refer to the unfolding and seeming inevitability of a hard Brexit as a further crucial fourth round of talks begins this week and no progress made, as the Tánaiste has acknowledged to the House. To use the Tánaiste's words, "we have gone backwards". It has always been understood in the Brexit fora that I have attended that fisheries was to be an integrated part of the trade discussions, not a separate part of it. The Tánaiste has just reiterated this. The hardline taken by the United Kingdom in regard to fisheries is obviously for ideological reasons because fisheries is 0.1% of the UK economy. This is part of its rhetoric of taking back control, so it is ideological. I want to get a sense from the Tánaiste of where we are in terms of the discussions. The Tánaiste has indicated that there will be no extension. Mr. Michael Gove has told the House of Commons and House of Lords committees that even if the EU asks for an extension it will not be conceded by Britain. Where does the Tánaiste see these discussions going? The *Financial Times* headlines focus on the crunch talks between Boris Johnson and Ursula von der Leyen, stating that UK negotiators are expecting no breakthrough in the Barnier discussions and that they are instead expecting this high level discussion to thrash out a way forward. Is it the Tánaiste's view that the impasse will not be resolved at the negotiating table with the mandate of the Barnier team but at some sort of high level forum?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I hope I have enough time to answer the questions on Brexit.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** The Deputy would like an opportunity to put a further question.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** There are essentially three different considerations for Ireland on Brexit, the first of which is the progress or non-progress on the future relationship. The first three rounds of negotiations got nowhere. This is hugely frustrating for Michel Barnier. I am sure it is equally frustrating for David Frost as well but when two sides are looking for different outcomes from the same negotiation it is hard to expect progress. As far as I can see, what the UK is looking for is something quite different from what it signed up to in the political declaration only a few months ago. That is the problem. Michel Barnier's mandate is very consistent with that political declaration. For example, in that political declaration there is a section entitled "level playing field", which goes through, in some detail, why an agreement on level playing field issues is required and a governance model to ensure that that functions in the future. The UK is now saying it cannot accept a level playing field at all. It will not even discuss using the term. There is a fundamental issue as to the UK's willingness to follow through on what it has already committed to doing. This is resulting in huge frustration across the European Union. That said, Ireland's only agenda is to try to get an outcome that is good for everybody - the UK, the EU and the island of Ireland as a whole. We want to be trading next year on the basis of new tariffs, no quotas, a fair fisheries agreement and equivalence in terms of standards, cost base and regulation.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** That is unlikely to happen.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I do not think it is unlikely to happen.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** That is my question.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I do not think we are going to get a breakthrough on this by mid summer, which was the hope, at the end of this month. I do not think there will be a request for an extension of the transition period. As has previously been the case in Brexit negotiations, when decisions and leaps forward were made, we arrived at hugely pressurised crisis points and negotiators found a way through. It looks like we are going to see those kind of pressure points again in the future. I hope that this time we will be able to find a way through, but I do not know if that will happen. I expect that progress will be made through Michel Barnier and his task force. Some use the negotiating strategy of taking the matter out of a task force and away from an agreed mandate and trying to get an agreement between heads of state, but I do not think that is the approach the EU will go for.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** There is a view that the Johnson ideology is such that he wants to fold the crisis of a hard Brexit into the crisis of coronavirus and fudge the difference, but that is a different matter.

My final, brief question relates to quarantine. As the Minister explained, we are going to have a quarantine of 14 days for people coming into the country.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** We already have that.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Many European countries are now talking about links, land bridges or air bridges. I heard the Portuguese foreign minister talk about that in relation to Britain today. Are we negotiating, either within the EU or outside it, for land bridges between bilateral countries where there is very limited Covid infection? Will that help to give some sort of allowance of internal or external movement?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** That was a brief question. I ask the Minister to give a brief reply.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The Deputy's last comment about Brexit suggested that he does not believe that Boris Johnson and his Government want a deal and that they would essentially hide that in the-----

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Look at the terms they have already agreed.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** ----fallout of Brexit. My view is that the British Government does want a deal, that it is committed to the protocol on Northern Ireland and that it wants a trade deal. Finding a way to get us there is going to be very difficult, but I believe both sides want a deal.

To be clear, we have had a requirement on people coming into Ireland to self-isolate for 14 days for some time, and that remains the case today. Of course, we are going to continue to assess that. Despite some people involved in the airline industry saying that every other country in the European Union is now moving away and opening up its borders and airports with no quarantine requirements, that is not true. Many countries require restricted movement in and out of airports or quarantine in some cases, but they are giving indications that they will change that approach later in the summer. Of course, we are keeping the matter under review. We speak to other EU countries all the time. For example, I spoke to two of the three ministers from the Baltic states, which have created a Baltic bubble to allow free travel between their three states. I have asked them what the threshold to join is if we wanted to do so, and I got a pretty clear answer. We would potentially qualify under that threshold, but-----

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**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I am going to have to stop the Minister and his Baltic bubble now, because we have to move on. I am sorry, but the speaker chose not to allow enough time for an answer. I am moving on because-----

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The Acting Chairman does not need to apologise.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** -----other Deputies will be deprived. If they want answers, they must leave enough time for the Minister to answer. If they do not, that is okay too. I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I will leave plenty of time for answers. I welcome the Minister's statement that to combat racism we need to look at ourselves. I hope he will agree with me that one of the best ways we can tackle institutional racism in Ireland is to end the practice of direct provision, which is dehumanising for people.

Regarding the events in the United States, the Minister first told the House that we should not be surprised if he speaks to the US ambassador in the next week or so. He then revised that in his previous contribution to say it would be within the next few days. Given the urgency of the situation in the United States and the very forceful and shocking attacks on peaceful protests, democracy and the media, will the Minister give a commitment that he will urgently contact the US ambassador to give the view of this House and the Irish people that black lives matter?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I have answered that question a number of times and the US ambassador is in no doubt as to the Irish Government's position on this issue. I speak to him regularly and have a very good relationship with him. I expect that I will speak to him in respect of these and other matters in the coming days. I would not like that to be confused with the view which some people may have that the US Administration does not understand the Government's position. The Government's position is very clear.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Has the Tánaiste made contact with the Polish ambassador regarding the views of the Government on the issue of LGBT exclusion zones in Poland?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I have not. If the Deputy wants to send me details of the concerns about that matter, he can do so. I speak to my Polish counterpart on a fairly regular basis about FAC meetings, although that has been somewhat limited in recent months because we have not been meeting in person. I know him very well. If there are LGBT exclusion zones in Poland, as the Deputy said, I expect that European institutions would have a real issue with that, as would we. I have not had a conversation with the Polish ambassador about that matter.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I welcome the fact that the Tánaiste has indicated that he will raise this issue. I will send him information on it. It is not a new development; it has been ongoing for some time. It is very serious from a human rights point of view. I welcome the fact that the Minister is willing to take information on it.

I refer to the proposed €750 billion stimulus package from the European Union and the measures relating thereto. What is the view of the Government on those proposals? Will we support them?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** There will be a conversation about the multi-annual financial framework and the position the Government takes on it at Friday's Cabinet meeting. On the

€750 stimulus fund, which has not yet been signed off on by EU leaders, Ireland was one of eight countries which advocated for the equivalent of a corona bond so that we could essentially create a collective borrowing strength across the EU in order to make funding available for countries that otherwise may struggle to be able to get competitive rates of borrowing to provide much needed stimuli in their economies, which have been devastated by Covid-19. We now have a proposal which is not a million miles away from that. The Government has welcomed it in principle. We think providing grant aid to countries is appropriate, but let us not forget that this is money that will be borrowed and all countries in the EU and its institutions will have to find a way of repaying it over time. We believe that the EU can service it quite comfortably and factor that into the EMF process over time. The barrier to that was, of course, a number of countries in the EU that did not want to create a collective borrowing responsibility and, therefore, increase their own exposure. We are going to get over that political obstacle, which is a good thing, and be able to provide significant grant aid to countries that desperately need significant injections of cash into their economies.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** I thank the Tánaiste for that answer. I refer to the part of the proposals for new EU-wide taxes to cover the cost of servicing the borrowing, including a potential plastics tax, a digital tax on large tech multinationals, a tax on carbon-intensive industrial imports and levying larger companies which benefit from the Single Market. What is the view of the Government on those proposed taxes to fund what is envisaged?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** As already stated, the Government will discuss the matter on Friday. I am not going to predetermine the outcome of that discussion. The view of the Government on digital taxation within the EU without getting an agreement on an approach to digital taxation globally is that it would be a mistake. We will consider any proposals that come forward with an open mind and try to be constructive. We believe that taxing the digital economy is something we should try to do across the developed world at the same time. Otherwise we will create perverse incentives to relocate companies and investment potentially outside the EU which does not make sense.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** Does the Tánaiste believe the €750 billion package is sufficient? State aid rules are being suspended with about €2 trillion going in from governments in state aid, and half of that - €1 trillion - going in from the German Government. This entire €750 billion spread across the EU would be less than the state aid by one country, Germany. Does the Tánaiste have concerns about how that affects economically weaker countries in the EU? In the Irish case compared with the €1 trillion in state aid that Germany is putting in, given the level of stimulus we need and the level of support we need to give small and larger businesses, is €2 billion from this fund sufficient?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Nobody should pretend that the €750 billion solves the problem for the EU. Every individual country needs to make decisions for itself. We have extraordinary challenges in the next couple of years to budget appropriately and get the balance right between managing deficits, providing stimulus, getting people back to work, and ensuring we retain the trust and faith of international markets from which we will be borrowing enormous sums of money in the next couple of years. EU-provided funding is part of the overall mix, but that is all it is. As a result of many of the difficult decisions we have taken over the past decade or so to rebuild our economy and strengthen it, unlike some other countries Ireland is in the fortunate position to be able to borrow a considerable amount of money at competitive interest rates and very low servicing costs. We will be using that.

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We want to maintain the confidence of those markets so that we can continue to do it in the future if we need to. We will look to supplement the money we will borrow for ourselves with accessing the appropriate resources as they become available in different sectors from EU funds as well. Like the example the Deputy highlighted, countries need to make their own decisions to manage their own economies given the circumstances in which they find themselves. Unfortunately, some countries may not have the capacity we have and will rely more than we will on collective EU funds. Of course, we need to try to access funds that we have been part of raising.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I will be sharing my time with Deputy Paul Murphy. I and my party express sorrow over George Floyd's death and our solidarity with his family in the United States. Nobody had heard of George Floyd until a number of days ago. His name is now attached to brutality of racism in the United States. We also send our solidarity to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, which is confronting the poison of racism and the police brutality protesters are confronted with. Obviously, these protests are spreading across the world.

Today we rightly condemned oppression and racism that go on across the world. When it comes to racism and oppression in another part of the world, namely, Israel, we have a different tone to it. We criticise it, but there are no consequences for Israeli racism. The Israeli Government has said that in July it will annex a part of land it has already robbed, namely the Jordan Valley. The consequence of this could be the spread of serious disruption and violence across the Middle East. The Tánaiste can do something as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, through the Control of Economic Activities (Occupied Territories) Bill. He can send a message to the world and the EU, and to Israel, the purveyor of oppression and racism, that we will make a stand against that. Will the Tánaiste make provision in respect of the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 in the new programme for Government?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** No, I will not. I have explained many times in much detail why I do not believe we can do that. I explained it to Senator Frances Black, who brought the legislation forward and for whom I have much time. I understand what she wants to achieve with the legislation, but, from a legal perspective, I do not believe that we can do what she is asking us to do. My view on the issue is backed up by the Attorney General. I have explained my position on this many times.

It is also important for me to tell this House that I have probably spent more time on the Israeli-Palestinian Middle East peace process than virtually anything else outside of Northern Ireland and British-Irish relations since I became the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Even in the past few weeks, working with the foreign minister of Luxembourg, we got 25 of the 27 EU member states to agree a stated position regarding annexation at a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council. We have made it very clear that the EU would regard the extension of Israeli sovereignty over any Palestinian lands as an illegal act under international law. We would have to recognise it as that, and there are consequences that would have to flow as a result. The Government and I, as Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, are doing all we can to try to impress on a new Israeli Government, with which we want to have a good relationship, that this would be a real mistake in the context of Israel's relationship with the EU and with the rest of the world. What we want to try to do instead is to encourage a dialogue that can get a peace process discussion back on track. I am of the view that Palestinians and Israelis want to see a peace settlement that is good for both sides in respect of security and nationhood. That is what I will continue to work for if I am privileged to continue to be in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for much longer.

As already stated, we have been responsible for bringing forward resolutions at UN level and multiple initiatives at EU level. I have visited the region many times in the past three years or so. We will continue to try to build relationships with key decision-makers in the Palestinian Authority, in the Israeli Government, in Washington, in Brussels and in countries such as Jordan and Egypt in order to try to find a way forward that protects a two-state solution as a possibility for Palestinians and for Israelis who want that as well.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, Charlene Lyles, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant and Amadou Diallo; I could recite the names of black men, women and children murdered by racist vigilantes and racist police in the United States for my full five minutes, and I could go on for much longer than that. I stand with those in the US and around the world rising up against systemic racism, and against racist policing in particular. In the US, protesters have been met with extremely violent and brutal repression. I refer to the use of rubber bullets and tear gas, cavalry charges, hit-and-run attacks, arbitrary arrests, protesters shot, journalists shot, medics gassed and brutalised and much more. At least two people have been killed, and more than 10,000 protesters have been arrested. People are being maimed by the police and many have lost eyes or more. Even children are being shot, gassed and pepper sprayed. Trump's authoritarianism is deepening by the hour. He has declared that anti-fascists are terrorists and that he will deploy "heavily armed soldiers" against protesters. It is repression on a scale comparable to that under a dictatorship. He has invited white supremacists to respond to protests with violence, tweeting "when the looting starts, the shooting starts". A man responded to the tweet, pulling out a bow and arrow and aiming it at protesters before he was subdued by them.

We need a clear and unequivocal message to be sent to the Trump regime and those on the streets. Will the Tánaiste state that black lives matter and that we stand with the Black Lives Matter protests? Will he state that we stand against the violence and racism of the Trump regime and US capitalism? He has not even committed to discussing the issue with the US ambassador, Edward Crawford, by telephone. That is pathetic. Not only is it time to phone the ambassador and explain people's horror about what is happening, it is also time to inform him that for as long as the US police forces are brutalising protesters, he, as a representative of Donald Trump, is not welcome here. We need to send a clear signal internationally. What the Government says and does will be seen as indicating which side it is on; whether it is on the side of Trump, authoritarianism, racism, brutality and so on, or on the side of the majority of Americans, who support the protests, oppose what Trump is doing and are standing up against injustice and oppression. We need a strong stand to be taken and that involves sending a signal to the US Government, to the protesters and around the world.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I am unsure that what is needed now is to link US capitalism with the protests taking place across America. What is needed is for political and community leadership to stand up against racism and reassure those who feel they are victims of it that things will change for them. As I stated, I have a very good relationship with the US ambassador. We have the kind of relationship whereby we can speak very bluntly to each other. I also stated that, in my view, the US Government is in no doubt as to the position of the Irish Government. The Taoiseach made that clear yesterday in his statement. This is not about trying to demonise people, although that is the kind of language the Deputy seems to be using. Rather, it needs to be about clarity of comment regarding racism and repression such that we can move on as well as learning lessons from many of the very unfortunate images we have seen coming out of the

United States in recent days.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I wish to start by expressing revulsion on behalf of the Regional Independents Group at the death of George Floyd as a result of police brutality. I agree with the Tánaiste's comments to the effect that we must look at our record of racism in this country.

I thank the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and our ambassador to the United States, Mr. Dan Mulhall, for their assistance with my representations on behalf of Mr. Peter Smyth, a Waterford graduate who was repatriated two weeks ago after several weeks in isolation on a cruise ship in Florida. It was wonderful to welcome him home. He spent 46 days in isolation, 26 of them without reprieve while confined to a cabin.

The previous Independent Deputy who represented Waterford took a tremendous interest in world affairs while in the House. I have more modest interests, regarding our place in Europe. It goes without saying that Europe matters enormously to our well-being and future. Being part of the European Union has lifted Ireland out of poverty. We are the most pro-European nation but we are rarely at the centre of things in Europe. The European Union was forged in crises, but our relationship with it must be more than a series of tactics for solving such crises. From the euro crisis to the migration crisis, the Brexit crisis and now the Covid crisis, we have not shown any meitheat. It tends to be the begging bowl or tactical NIMBYism. We are now a net contributor to Europe. In so many ways, we are an example of the positive influence of Europe - a small, open trading economy, engaged in the world, with an unbroken historic record of peacekeeping and an instinct for giving, for empathy and for charity.

We have European dilemmas coming at us and we want to be on the front foot in these family discussions. The common corporation tax lurks, threatening our multinational subsidiaries. We have let the misapprehension go unchecked that these are not real and substantial Irish businesses, with deep roots. Pfizer bought a field in Cork in 1969 to become one of our largest pharma companies, Steve Jobs set up in 1980 and games maker Cartamundi, formerly Hasbro and Milton Bradley, has been based in Waterford since 1978. These companies employ thousands of people and are the hard dogs for the long road. They are not brass plate operations.

We expect robust defence of European and Irish interests in Brexit negotiations on fishing, tourism and trade. We recognise the unflinching support of our Commissioner, Phil Hogan, and Michel Barnier in these discussions. Indeed, our Commissioner is to be supported in reaching for a greater impact in dealing with trade matters. A matter for attention in regard to fisheries is that of currently registered, foreign owned trawlers in the UK being allowed to re-register as European post-Brexit and, therefore, continuing to access Irish fishing waters and Irish stocks. This goes against the principles of fair trade.

Europe is changing under our feet, no longer held back by the UK. We have lost our greatest European ally at the European Council. We are unsure now if we are southerners or northerners. Ireland needs to find its feet so we can be at the centre of this ongoing change. The stakes are massive for us. My concern is that Brexit has taken up so much bandwidth that we are not tending to the other parts of the European relationship. When our MEPs head off to Europe, it is difficult for them to be heard from again. We have a tiny handful of Irish journalists working the European beat - only two, as far I know, Naomi O'Leary for *The Irish Times* and Tony Connelly for RTÉ. They are both doing a tremendous job but they need reinforcements. Many of our embassies - I hate to say this - are not fit for an ambassador's reception. Internships in the EU for bright students during and after college are very low profile and are largely a closed

shop for those in the know.

This House, and those of us privileged to sit in it, need to develop a deeper engagement with EU politics and policy. More connections need to be made, although we have good points to reflect on. We note that Phillip Lane sits on the ECB, Emily O'Reilly holds the position of European Ombudsman and the Tánaiste's party colleague, Mairead McGuinness, MEP, retains the position of Vice-President of the European Parliament. We need more of that. As a country, we punch above our weight but we need to bulk up. We need more connection, more engagement and more influence. We need to be, and we must place ourselves, at the centre of things. Europe was not an election issue on the doorsteps when I was campaigning, nor in the debates, yet a defining issue for the next Government is how Ireland moves to the centre of Europe. If we take the future seriously, we need to get serious about resourcing a deeper institutional engagement.

We also need to round out the infrastructure piece. Ferry connections from Rosslare and Cork are an imperative for regional and national economic development. The welcome launch of Irish Ferries' Brexit-busting ships, supported by EIB loans, actually weakened the ferry schedules from Rosslare, resulting in services being withdrawn. Once the Covid crisis clears, airports will still be needed. Investment in Waterford Airport, a commitment in the last programme for Government, remains unactioned. We need to press on with that and the other developments that aid national and regional connectivity. These are strategic priorities. I encourage the Minister to address the core challenge of bringing Ireland to the centre of Europe in a bold and expansionary way in his Department and in the politics of this new Dáil. We must press our case resolutely and with purpose because we know that, for Ireland and its people, failure is not an option.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I thank the Deputy for the compliments in regard to repatriation, particularly through our embassy in Washington, which got involved in a huge number of cases. With regard to his comments on the EU, the Deputy is right. While at election time we do not often get asked detailed EU institutional questions the truth is that many decisions that impact the lives of people in Ireland, whether fishermen, farmers or business people, are taken in Brussels as well as here. We need to have people in positions of influence and a Government that is connected and resourced to build relationships and alliances to ensure we win the arguments in the key policy forming debates that shape the European Union and its future. We are investing in this.

The EU without Britain will be a very different European Union for Ireland. We have created new alliances, particularly with the Nordic and Baltic states, reinforced many of the traditional alliances with France, Germany, the Mediterranean states and the Benelux countries as well as developed new relationships with some of the newer member states of the European Union. I assure the Deputy we are absolutely doing this. We are also investing in our physical diplomatic footprint. We have an embassy in every EU capital. We have opened up a new series of consulates throughout the European Union. For example, we have opened one in Frankfurt. We have done a strategic review of our relationship with Germany and France to invest in a more targeted way to ensure our systems are fit for purpose.

I reassure the House that we have been planning not only to get a good outcome on Brexit but also for Ireland's place in the European Union post Brexit, without the UK at the negotiating table with us doing some of the heavy lifting in some of the areas that are very important for Ireland, particularly taxation. I reassure people on this.

We need to be careful not to try to label ourselves with northern Europe or southern Europe. We have strategic interests in alliances with countries in various parts of Europe on various policy areas. For example, we have a very strong relationship with France on agriculture. We have a very strong relationship with a number of countries on fishing interests. We have a very similar approach to a group of countries on economic management, financial management, banking and taxation. This, of course, is a crucial debate from an Irish perspective. I reassure the House that medium-term planning for Ireland's place at the heart of the European Union is very much under way.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I will begin by commending the work of all of the employees of the passport offices who have been redeployed to assist in public service delivery during this health crisis. As I understand it, the number of passport applications in Ireland has fallen by more than 150,000 in the past three months. Figures released to the *Irish Examiner* by the Department showed that in April only 13,820 applications were received for new and renewed passports. This is just 13% of the 103,482 applications received in April last year. In light of this, I do not understand why our post offices are still not accepting applications made via the Passport Express system during this time. It is vital that post office services are not curtailed any further than they have been over the past number of years. This is an issue of real concern to many rural communities. I would like some assurance that once this crisis is over local post offices will be allowed to resume the Passport Express service and that it will be retained in the online and postal format. As the Minister is no doubt aware, last year An Post announced the closure of 159 post offices as part of a restructuring plan. This has had a significant impact, especially in remote areas where access to services is already extremely limited. It damages the local economy and makes it more difficult for businesses, as opposed to having a post office that operates a financial service. This is a proposal I have put forward in the House. The Kiwibank system or another community banking system should be looked at. I believe there is a lot there. I would like a response specifically to the Passport Express issue.

In terms of travel restrictions, I would like some clarification on the number of those who have entered the State through our ports or airports but have refused to sign the legal documentation around the self-isolation procedures. It is now law that those who arrive in Ireland from any other country will need to fill in a form called the Covid-19 passenger locator form. They will also be asked to self-isolate for 14 days. Will the Tánaiste provide details or an update on the effectiveness of the monitoring of this process? As I understand it, we already have a wide-ranging and enhanced customs infrastructure that was initially put in place to deal with the post-Brexit customs checks at Rosslare Europort. This has involved Revenue appointing more than 400 additional staff nationally to customs and related roles for Brexit, with 30 of these additional 400 staff assigned to Rosslare Europort. Have any of those staff and that customs check infrastructure been reopened or repurposed to ensure that people entering the State through our ports are here for reasons of absolute necessity? There is a growing sense among many people that the rules are being applied more heavily to some while they are not being applied at all to others in terms of travel restrictions. I would appreciate the Tánaiste's response to those questions, including a written response to any he cannot answer this evening.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I thank the Deputy. They are all good questions. On passports, we essentially have not had the Passport Express system working. Decisions were made on the basis of a significant reduction in applications and because we needed to ensure the protection of our own staff in passport offices. That is why the focus has been on getting the online process back up and running. If somebody has put in an application under Passport Express and if they

want to get their passport back quickly, they should apply online. From next week on they will get a response very quickly. We are going to put the Passport Express service in place again in time but it is going to take a little bit longer because of the staffing challenges, social distancing requirements and so on. We will get back to normal on passports in the coming weeks and months, but from next week on, we should have fast turnaround times again on the online applications. For those who have made an application through Passport Express, the way to get their passports done quickly is to apply now online and we will reimburse the money they have put into Passport Express.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** The rest will have to be replied to in writing. I call Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I want to put on the record of the House my gratitude to the Tánaiste and his Department officials for their assistance with very serious issues over the past weeks and months. As always, the Tánaiste was very proactive and work-person-like in carrying out his duties.

I also want to raise the issue of post offices. I want to declare an interest in this as I am a postmaster of a very small post office in a rural area. I wish to highlight the fact that it is detrimental to those post offices that our transactions have been further cut by not being able to process passports. I remind the Tánaiste that people are getting their payments for two weeks in the one payment, while post offices are paid on a per transaction basis. As the Tánaiste knows, post offices were struggling enough already before any of this ever happened. It was difficult enough for them to make ends meet. Now they are after losing half their business. For example, if a pensioner was collecting the pension every week, the post office was getting paid on that transaction every week. Now that is halved because they are getting paid for one transaction per fortnight, as there are two payments in the one week. Post offices have seen a massive decline in the revenue that they are getting. They have their costs to meet and wages to pay. It is very difficult at present.

I do not just want to see passport processing being given back to the post offices through Passport Express. We must also try to enhance the services we already have and allow for further business to be channelled through our post offices. This can be done. Every post office is set up with computers and there are excellent staff working in every post office up and down the length and breadth of this country. It is not just rural offices that are affected. Urban post offices are also affected. I know of post offices in built up areas that are struggling to earn a week's wages. I want to put my shoulder to the wheel on that.

I refer to the emergency passport service, which was always excellent, was never misused and was used only by people who had urgent accidents, personal issues or deaths abroad where people found themselves without a passport. The people in the Passport Office out the back of Merrion Square could not be praised or complimented enough for the excellent service they provided when people were genuinely in urgent need of a passport. I also want to see that service opened up as soon as possible in compliance with all regulations and when it is safe to do so.

We need to get our legs under ourselves again with the matter of travel. The song "Flight of Earls" says: "Those big aeroplanes go both ways" and I am talking about people being able to come to Ireland and to leave Ireland in order to get the economy moving, to get people moving and to get money spent again as soon as possible. We need to give clear direction on that. I

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raised the issue of the Black Lives Matter campaign earlier on. That is such an important issue and it is important for the Tánaiste, the Government and all of us to be able to say loudly and clearly that we are shocked and horrified at what happened in America. Things are happening at protests that should not happen. There is an awful difference between protesting and rioting and using the situation as an opportunity but that is not what the majority of people are doing. The majority of people are genuinely driven to come out and protest and as I said earlier, to do so in a safe fashion. I want the Government to support that campaign because it is so important.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** I am going to stop the Tánaiste in 15 seconds. I am sorry.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** We will do everything we can to support the post offices.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I am sharing time with Deputy Harkin and we will have five minutes each. I want to ask a question and I would like the Tánaiste to respond before Deputy Harkin takes over.

I want to talk about the murder of George Floyd, which has been mentioned already by a number of Members. It is a serious situation that has struck an awful lot of people, as the Tánaiste knows and as has been seen in recent days. George Floyd was one of more than 1,000 people who were killed by police in America since 2015. It is not an isolated situation either, unfortunately. The Irish people want to hear the Government's view on this. While the Irish ambassador to the USA in Washington DC is well aware of what it is and maybe the US Administration is aware of what it is, the Irish people would like to know and that is vitally important. In saying that, I was looking for a statement from the Government on all the Government websites etc. and I could not find anything but I should have looked in the place where probably everybody gets their news now, namely on Twitter. I saw that the Taoiseach tweeted on Monday that he is against racism and so on. Perhaps that is the platform where it will be seen by the President of America, who is well used to using Twitter as well. He might see that message there so it might sink in. However, it is important that the Taoiseach comes into the House and puts across the views of the Irish Government on that.

I want to link this matter through. The emails I have been getting about what has happened in America and the killing of George Floyd are from Irish people who have been linking it back to things that have happened in Ireland, such as direct provision, which has been mentioned, and the use of Shannon Airport by the American military to go on expeditions around the world carrying out the military equivalent of the killing of George Floyd in nations around the world. How does this Government look on the use of Shannon by the US military and the fact that the airport is now open only for US military usage? What is the Government's view on this arrangement and its continuation?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The arrangement regarding Shannon Airport has been in place for decades between both countries. It operates to a pretty clear protocol in terms of the conditions of the use of the airport. The Government does not have any proposals to change that.

Regarding racism, the Taoiseach made comments yesterday and I made comments today. We will have an opportunity to have what I hope will be quite a lengthy debate on the matter next week in the House. I hope I will be able to speak to make very clear the Irish Government's position, which I think will mirror the position of the vast majority of Irish people, who have been shocked by the images they have seen coming out of the US in recent days. These

are dangerous times and they have been triggered by the brutal killing of an unarmed individual, an image that has, I think, shocked many people, not just in the US but in other parts of the world as well. That is why we will, I hope, provide clarity in political leadership terms as to how we should be responding as a country. We should take a look at ourselves and make sure we are credible in how we respond to issues of racism and marginalisation in Ireland. We should also be clear and blunt in our criticism of what is happening in the US. I do not think Deputy Pringle will find any problem getting clarity from the Taoiseach or me on these issues.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** The unspeakable murder of George Floyd has, I think, shocked us but it must not shock us into silence because racism unchallenged is racism encouraged. We as a State have to make sure that our words, our public statements, challenge and condemn racism and all who perpetrate it. Otherwise, our silence is encouragement. While I recognise the matter is delicate and there can be a fine line, nonetheless, as a sovereign State, we have a responsibility to make our position crystal clear because the words we use speak not only to the world but also to ourselves.

I wish to take the opportunity many Deputies have taken today to thank the Minister and his Department for their genuine and, as far as I know, successful efforts to bring home all those who were stranded due to the Covid-19 crisis. I am happy to say that it has been my experience over many years when I was in the European Parliament that Irish embassies, consulates and staff here in Dublin and various Ministers worked tirelessly to help Irish citizens abroad. Sometimes I do not think that is fully recognised here and I would just like to put it on the record.

I have two questions. The first concerns passports. I think the Minister said earlier that online applications will resume next week. I just want to check something with the Minister. I note the case of two people, a couple, who put in online applications at the same time. One of the passports has been delivered; the application process for the other is finished but the passport sits in the Passport Office. From next week can one expect that that passport will be sent to the applicant?

The Minister spoke earlier of Brexit and the huge challenge of a no-deal Brexit. Today we heard about our €6 billion overall deficit and 750,000 people unemployed. Major challenges face us, but in the context of Brexit there is a real possibility - I will not go stronger than that - that we may default to World Trade Organization trading rules. Perhaps the most vulnerable sector is agriculture. What forward planning is in preparation at national and European level to protect agriculture from the shocks of WTO rules? The Tánaiste may be unable to answer me today. Perhaps he might also tell me what differences there would be between east-west trade and cross-border trade in the event of WTO rules applying.

Finally, the European Commission has relaxed rules around state aid. This has the possibility of benefiting larger countries and larger companies disproportionately. Has the Tánaiste any concerns around that?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** Several questions were raised there. There is a minute and a half.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The state aid issue is a probing and good question in terms of how states use new flexibility around state aid. Some countries have far more available resources than others to spend in the absence of strict state aid rules. Therefore, they could potentially create competitive advantage within the Single Market. That is a concern and something we

need to watch closely.

I can give Deputy Harkin a quick answer on the passport question. From next week on we should have the online passport application process working as normal and people should be getting passports back within two or three days. If there is an application stuck in the system, it should be released from next week on.

Deputy Harkin asked about no-deal planning. We are of course planning for a worst-case scenario. We will be putting in place a new communications strategy to reach out to businesses as we did before. The truth is that we have to do this in a clever way. This is because many businesses are so caught up with focusing on Covid-19 and post Covid-19 as well as trying to survive and reopen in the coming months that Brexit is not even on their minds. We have to find a way of getting that conversation going again, even though many people do not want to hear it, to ensure that our economy as a whole is as Brexit-ready as it possibly can be for all scenarios, including a no trade deal Brexit. We will be as ready as we can be. That does not mean it is not going to be difficult. It will be very difficult for some sectors. In the agrifood sector alone under WTO rules in excess of €1 billion in tariffs would apply to the beef and dairy trade between these two islands, which is highly significant. We will do everything we can to avoid that eventuality through negotiation.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly):** That concludes the statement by the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade in respect of the Covid-19 crisis, especially in respect of travel and passports, and questions and answers. Sorry for cutting across you, Tánaiste.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** That is fine. You were right to do it, Acting Chairman.

*Sitting suspended at 6.58 p.m. and resumed at 7.18 p.m.*

### **Covid-19 (Transport, Tourism and Sport): Statements**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now move to No. 7, statement by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and questions and answers on Covid-19 as it relates to the aviation sector. We will go to the Minister first. He is welcome. He has ten minutes for his opening address.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to address the House on the aviation sector. While there are a number of structures through which my Department engages with industry stakeholders on a collective basis, I am acutely conscious that today's unprecedented challenges require that all options be considered and that we be open to novel approaches. For that reason, I am proposing to establish a task force for aviation recovery, which will be challenged with developing and advising on the framework for restarting aviation. I will appoint key stakeholders from the industry to this task force within the next week and will ask it to report back to me within four weeks with a plan ready to relaunch the aviation industry in Ireland. As an island nation, we must ensure that we staunchly fight for and protect our connectivity.

The Covid-19 crisis has brought new challenges in varying degrees to practically all sectors of our society and economy. We are all living and, in many cases, working in a manner that

would have been unimaginable a mere three months ago. The crisis continues to have profound impacts on our society and devastating financial implications for the world economy, the Irish economy and the aviation and tourism industries at home and abroad.

The aviation industry is one of the most affected by the global pandemic. In Europe, air traffic movements fell to as low as 10% of the levels in the comparable period last year and were mainly buoyed up by cargo flights. Passenger traffic has fallen to a trickle and stands at approximately 1% of what might be expected. Various businesses right through the aviation value chain, with the sole exception of dedicated cargo operators, have experienced a severe depletion of revenue and are facing various degrees of financial challenge. In an industry that has always been cyclical in nature and highly susceptible to external shock, the scale of setback now being experienced is unprecedented. Aircraft have never before been grounded in the way we are seeing. The future remains highly uncertain and because of the inevitable employment impact, the human cost will be high.

Ireland has historically had a huge dependence on aviation. As an island economy built largely on international trade and foreign direct investment, aviation is the lifeline that connects us to the global economy. We do not have the advantage of international road and rail connections that predominate for other countries to support the international movement of people for business, tourism or social purposes. The process of economic recovery as we emerge from this crisis will depend on the recovery of the aviation sector. Throughout the industry, the collapse in revenue streams has, with very limited exceptions, necessitated a swift and painful response. The main airlines serving Ireland and the airports have applied major pay cuts and laid off staff. While some companies were, at the outset of the crisis, in a very strong financial position in comparison with industry peers, none is immune from the need to reduce costs and restructure business. We have all heard the public announcements about reduced employment. There is a broad consensus that the recovery of the industry will take time. While there were hopes at earlier stages in the crisis that next year might see a return to business as usual, there is an increasing consensus that the recovery will be slow, with some predicting that 2019 levels of traffic will not be achieved again until 2023.

The Government has already announced a suite of measures to help mitigate the effects of the crisis on our citizens and businesses. These include the temporary wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment benefit, a three-month commercial rates waiver, the pandemic stabilisation and recovery fund for medium and large enterprises, a credit guarantee scheme to support lending to SMEs and the warehousing of tax liabilities for a defined period. Airports and airlines have been able to avail of those measures to help to constrain escalating losses. Some have taken difficult decisions to lay off staff on a temporary basis. These staff can and are availing of the Covid-19 unemployment payment. Most are also availing of support under the Government's Covid-19 temporary wage subsidy scheme.

State airports are continuing to facilitate airline services for cargo and limited numbers of passengers. Regional airports such as Donegal and Kerry are also remaining open to facilitate the Government-funded PSO service between those airports and Dublin. These services allow Donegal and Kerry to maintain a basic level of operations and safeguard connectivity. As well as supporting essential travel, they also provide support to air medical and rescue services. Unfortunately, Ireland West Airport Knock has had to close down its operations entirely on a temporary basis.

In line with recent announcements by other aviation businesses regarding cost-reduction

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measures, the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, announced last week that in the context of expected significantly reduced passenger traffic for several years, the company has no choice but to right-size the business to match the number of passengers that are likely to use Cork and Dublin airports in the medium term. To achieve this, a number of options are being considered. These include a voluntary severance scheme. Shannon Group has kept the airport open to facilitate cargo operations, essential passenger travel, emergency flights, repatriations and diversions. The management has taken difficult decisions to reduce costs including temporary lay-offs, reduced working hours, the closure of all Shannon heritage tourist attractions and reduced opening hours at the airport. The key airlines serving Ireland, Ryanair and Aer Lingus, have publicly announced some of the measures they are taking to tackle costs. I am acutely aware that these airlines are particularly critical to the economy.

The Government's priority in response to the Covid crisis, and rightly so, has been to save lives. We all know well the measures taken and indeed, it is only through our collective efforts that we have avoided far worse outcomes. The measures adopted for this purpose place a huge constraint on aviation movements. At present, the travel guidance issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade recommends that only essential international travel be undertaken. In addition, the self-isolation obligation is recommended for persons arriving by air with limited exceptions. In combination, these factors mean that both outbound and inbound travel for a business, social or tourism purpose is heavily restricted. This is, of course, reflected in the actual numbers travelling.

The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business does not set out any timeframe for the resumption of aviation nor is there any clear definition of the conditions that need to be achieved to allow such a resumption on an unrestricted basis. As such, I am concerned that the industry has no certainty when business might regrow and this, in itself, is a significant destabilising influence. The recovery of aviation depends on a number of factors, including the lifting of constraints on border movements and the establishment of new arrangements to protect the health of passengers in the course of aviation journeys.

Fortunately, there is European guidance in respect of both of these issues. I will outline the position on each in turn. The European Commission issued a communication on 13 May setting out guidance and recommendations relating to the travel and tourism sectors that envisage a gradual, phased, co-ordinated and proportionate easing of border controls and travel restrictions across the EU. The guidance suggests the criteria that should be applied to the removal of restrictions on border movements. The criteria include epidemiological conditions in the country or countries concerned, the Covid containment measures and the economic and social considerations. We are beginning the process of considering how these criteria might be best applied in an Irish context. Of course, public health considerations must predominate and we cannot take actions that potentially undermine the good work we have done in bringing Covid-19 under control. On 20 May, guidelines were adopted by the European Aviation Safety Agency, in conjunction with the European Centre for Disease Control and Surveillance, for the management of air passengers and aviation personnel in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The guidelines seek to promote health and constrain the likelihood of virus transmission in the course of aviation journeys. The guidelines include measures such as increased sanitation with regard to both aircraft and airports, the implementation of physical distancing where possible and the wearing of medical-grade face coverings by passengers and staff. Air passengers will have a responsibility to adapt to new behaviours and new practices. In the measures to respond to the crisis so far, we have seen that people are very willing in this regard.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** With the permission of the Ceann Comhairle and of the Minister, as on the previous occasion, could my questions be logged and responded to in writing because it will save time and use our time here most efficiently?

It is certainly timely that we are having this debate. As we know, aviation is critical to the economy. In some reports, Dublin Airport and our airports generally are responsible for up to €12 billion to our economy in terms of direct jobs in aviation, suppliers and indeed the enabling of tourism and aspects of our corporate world. There are many jobs provided directly - 130,000 according to the DAA - and, as we know, in terms of tourism there are 260,000 jobs. That is not to mention the corporate contribution made through aviation in this country. The aviation industry is, therefore, vital.

The Minister covered the many challenges faced by our industries at present. We have seen the temporary lay-offs, the closure of Ireland West Airport Knock and the issues in Ryanair, Aer Lingus and smaller airlines like Stobart Air and CityJet, so none of us is unaware of the extreme challenges facing this sector. I must say that I am very concerned. The Minister highlighted the uncertainty that will continue to affect this industry. Our actions as a State are adding to that uncertainty. I pay tribute to the airlines for their assistance through this crisis, including the measures they have introduced thus far for the few people who essentially have to travel and in regard to the provision of personal protective equipment, PPE. In regard to the proposed task force to which later this week stakeholders will be appointed, presumably those stakeholders are the same people we have been hearing from for months now in terms of getting ready. To kick them out for four weeks frankly is nothing more than kicking the can down the road. The Minister will be aware that Italy lifted its ban today. He will have noted that the European Aviation Safety Agency and the European Centre for Disease Control guidelines, which the Minister referenced, have led to the announcement by Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland and others of specific dates to reopen. As I said, some reopened today and others are set to reopen on 8 June or 18 June in particular, with Spain the outlier of those which have provided certainty setting that date at 1 July.

The guidelines are in place. Most of our European partners are making arrangements to reopen with the appropriate safety guidelines as designed by the European Centre for Disease Control and yet we are setting out the further uncertain message to people who we do not know and who will not know that date but we propose to set up a talk shop which will meet over five weeks to inform us what the stones on the road in the industry Europe-wide seem to know. This is not helpful. As I said, I do not wish to in the slightest undermine our public health advice but we must balance restriction with facts in terms of outcomes and risk and we are not doing that. The 14-day quarantine, based on its continuing for an uncertain period, will mean, in effect, no aviation, which is not acceptable. We need to make haste about our plans. I am sure the stakeholders could be assembled in a matter of hours. I am sure a day could see them come up with guidelines for our safe progression to the use of aviation in the way we need to assist our economy. I appeal to the Minister to bring forward those plans without delay.

As I said, it is unacceptable that it is proposed to kick out the uncertainty which the Minister undermined for a further five weeks. We are all reasonably proud of the great achievements we have had in containing this virus thus far and in flattening the curve. Nobody wishes to jeopardise that but to follow the course outlined by the Minister is to stick our heads in the sand. It is dealing with the issue on the never never, at which time Mr. Ross may not be the Minister. Why not show the leadership that is required, be pioneering and assemble the stakeholders in a matter of hours, take a decision in a matter of days and provide the certainty that it is within the

power of the Minister to provide?

I would appreciate if the Minister could respond to my questions in writing in the interests of efficiency.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I raised the issue of Shannon Airport with the Minister in the House approximately three weeks ago. Others have raised it in the intervening period. I agree that the establishment of a task force at this late stage will only serve to drag out the process. What is the Minister or his departmental officials doing? What is it that they do not know that a task force can tell them? We know that the economy is falling off a cliff and that airport business has fallen off a cliff. These businesses, workers and their families need certainty. The local economy in Limerick and in the mid west need certainty and we need to have connectivity. We need a plan in regard to the funding of our airports to keep them functioning into the future. It is incumbent on me as a Deputy representative of Limerick to advocate for this. It is vital to the mid-west region that Shannon Airport is maintained to international standards in terms of runway capacity, passenger and baggage handling capacity and pre-clearance facilities. We need this for our business and connectivity and for tourism and balanced regional development, which is important but has been neglected for years. I will not pretend that all was well at Shannon Airport pre-Covid-19. It was not, because the separation of Shannon Airport from the Dublin Airport Authority was far from the spectacular success which was sold to us. The business case and numbers which were predicted did not materialise. It is regrettable that the people who advocated against it, including some within Fianna Fáil and SIPTU, for example, were drowned out and not listened to. Local authorities and chambers of commerce became experts on aviation, and we can now see that the passenger market share for Shannon Airport has fallen in comparison with Dublin Airport and others. The mooted 2.5 million passengers who were going to come through Shannon Airport simply never materialised. We need some blunt honesty on this issue and we need a proper look back and review as to why that did not happen.

The Minister also mentioned Shannon Heritage, which is part of the Shannon Group. It operates a number of sites, maybe 14 or 15 between the mid-west, Galway and Dublin, but some of them are only going to open for a two-month period. That is not good enough. We need those sites to stay open for far longer to allow even domestic tourism, which we are hoping to spur on.

I would like the Minister to address what he is going to do to secure the future and viability of Shannon Airport. Has he engaged with the workers and stakeholders around Shannon Airport? They need to know what is going on. Has he engaged with the aircraft leasing industry? Almost 60% of international aircraft leasing is managed out of Ireland and many workers are involved in that. Has the Minister engaged with the airlines, Ryanair and Aer Lingus in particular? There are 100 Aer Lingus staff based out of Shannon Airport, so that needs to be done. I want to impress on the Minister that the Shannon region, including Limerick, which I represent, and the mid-west does not want to be disadvantaged. We need certainty that we will not be left behind in the Government's approach to securing the future viability of Shannon Airport.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Business Committee for facilitating this session, which I requested. Aviation is the sector most exposed to the Covid pandemic. It has been utterly ravaged. It took the sector 18 months to recover from the 9/11 attacks and it is now anticipated that it could take three to five years for the sector to recover from the current health and economic crises. For this reason, I implore the Minister to set up the aviation task force urgently. If we wait until the late autumn to introduce supports for aviation, airlines, airports and the countless

spin-off industries, it will be too late. The sector is on its knees and it needs an urgent adrenaline shot.

Yesterday, I spent three hours in Shannon Airport meeting workers who have lost or are about to lose their jobs. I discovered that of the 1,600 Aer Lingus cabin crew, those at Shannon Airport are in the top 100 in terms of seniority ranking within the organisation. Despite years of loyal service to Aer Lingus, they were told via a video from management that they would be laid off. I find that utterly appalling. This afternoon they got a letter confirming that. In announcing staff lay-offs, it appears that Aer Lingus did not follow the long-established HR procedure of last in, first out. New staff taken on by the company in Dublin and Cork last winter will retain their jobs while those who have given more than 30 years of loyal service to Aer Lingus are being told bye-bye. The Aer Lingus staff I spoke to are currently taking home about 40% of their regular salary. They understood from management that they would receive 50% of their salary, which would be topped up by the Government's wage subsidy scheme, but none of that has happened. The Government has to intervene in this fiasco. It is not good enough to say that this is an independent company and that we cannot intervene. The Government has skin in the game. It has a lucrative PPE transit contract with Aer Lingus and practically all of Aer Lingus's wage bill is being paid by the Government.

I want Aer Lingus to offer clarity and a commitment to its future in Shannon. We need guarantees that flights to Heathrow and the US will recommence at the earliest opportunity. Shannon Airport is the driving force for the entire mid-west, and without it, there is no local economy. The outgoing Government did not provide any capital funding for Shannon Airport over its term at a time when the airport needed to market new routes and attract other routes. It had to invest and dig deep into its reserves to fund runway and baggage claim upgrades. This drought of funding came at a time when Waterford Airport, which had not had any flights for three years, was granted €5 million by the Minister. The final nails in the coffin of Shannon Airport have almost been hammered in, but with a claw hammer we can withdraw them and give the airport the boost it needs. We need to return to 24-7 operations. I was surprised to see cargo crates in Shannon Airport yesterday, which will be trucked out from the apron of the airport to Heathrow to fly to the US. We are missing out on strategic opportunities.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine operates a pharmaceutical screening point in Shannon. I have heard it will be moved to Dublin with a loss of jobs, status and income for Shannon. The Minister and his colleague in agriculture should make a statement clarifying the situation.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I received a query today from a constituent who has booked over 20 flights for a family event at the end of this week. The family does not live within 5 km or 20 km of the airport. It is not an essential trip. The family has not been offered a voucher or refund because the flight has not been cancelled. What are we doing for customers? Yesterday, the Covid-19 committee was told that no non-essential travel is advised. In fact, the Department has advised against travel which is not essential. The law on refunds for airline customers has not changed, but if flights are still running and customers cannot fly, what can they do? People need clarity as airlines fly and countries reopen.

The new restart grant scheme has been welcomed by those in the travel industry. However, the cap on annual turnover for businesses is a cause for concern. The ceiling affects several sectors, in particular the travel industry which has been severely affected. While many travel agents may exceed the turnover cap due to the nature of their business, the margins are not

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reflected in turnover. It is also a sector that will be slower than most to recover. There is a strong case to be made for the ceiling cap to be reviewed and perhaps applied differently across different sectors. Could the Minister liaise with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation on this?

As we heard at the committee yesterday, exploring testing at our airports as a way of easing back into allowing travellers to come to this country presents problems. Are we considering adopting some kind of travel corridors where people from countries with low rates of Covid-19 are able to travel here without having isolation imposed on them? We cannot be left behind if other countries reopen and allow tourism to grow while we restrict growth here. The numbers in our airports have plummeted and as a small nation we will struggle to recoup those losses. We need to get the message out there that we are open for business and safe for visitors.

As our tourism sector has suffered massively, can bed and breakfast accommodation on a small scale offer isolation vacations as a way to combat the 14-day isolation imposition? Has this option been investigated? If other European countries impose a 14-day isolation and we make it mandatory to isolate for 14 days, can a traveller fly from one 14-day isolation period and be considered to be free of the virus, or must he or she go through 28 days of isolation? I ask this question in respect of those who are not pilots, air crew or medical staff and may have to return to Ireland for a certain period for their work and then return to another European country. Will the State issue isolation certificates for such workers to prove they have already completed a 14-day isolation period?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister might respond in writing to Deputies because we do not have time for answers. Deputy Darren O'Rourke is sharing time with Deputies Maurice Quinlivan and Violet-Anne Wynne.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I will take seven minutes and Deputies Quinlivan and Wynne will take four minutes each. I welcome the announcement of the establishment of a task force for aviation recovery. It is very much needed and I ask that it be established and get through its work as quickly as possible. I recommend and encourage the Minister to include the unions representing workers, including Fórsa, SIPTU and IALPA, in the stakeholder forum. It is important that they are represented.

I acknowledge that in the Minister's opening statement he stated he is concerned that the industry has no certainty about when business might grow again. This is a significant destabilising influence in and of itself. I point out to the Minister that the aviation industry, citizens and customers of the industry look to him, as the Minister, and the Government for direction on this.

At the Covid-19 committee yesterday the Secretary General of the Department of Health said NPHET advised the Government on 3 April that the passenger locator form and 14-day period of self-isolation should be mandatory. The Government ignored that advice. More than three weeks later, on 26 April, the passenger locator form was introduced but it was voluntary and not very well adhered to, as we know. Only on 28 May, a further five weeks later, was the form made mandatory. On what basis did the Government ignore the NPHET advice on 3 April only to be half implemented on 28 May, a full eight weeks later?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I do not think there were any sinister reasons for that. I think there were different opinions about that. The advice was taken. It was the subject of some debate, but certainly there was never any intention, that I know of, to

ignore it. My impression was that it was always going to actually come into existence, but the implementation of it took a certain amount of time for technical reasons. I do not think there was any intention at any stage that those locator forms should not come into existence.

There were certainly some difficulties about who would collect them - whether it would be the Garda; who would distribute them; and whether it would be at the point of departure or at the point of arrival. Those things certainly presented some debate, but there was no hidden hand saying we wanted to delay it for any reason. There were logistical reasons about the technicalities. There were international implications about giving the forms to people in one jurisdiction and whether the airline did it. I recall all that being part of a debate, but I do not recall anybody opposing it on any grounds. I think there was always an intention for NPHET's advice to be taken.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** It was stated at the committee yesterday that the advice from NPHET was not adhered to or was not taken on board at that time anyway.

We were also told yesterday the Minister for Health is currently examining the possibility of a mandatory 14-day period of self-isolation. This is causing considerable confusion. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport referred to the industry as well as travellers, including would-be holiday makers, looking to the summer and beyond. For how long will the 14-day self-isolation period be in place? If someone has a family holiday booked in mid-July, will they be expected to self-isolate for 14 days? Can the Minister give us a month, a week, or a date when this restriction will be lifted?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I cannot, obviously. I would love to be able to do that. I cannot even give the actual date when it will be implemented at this stage. However, it is the intention to implement it. The only thing that could delay its implementation would be legal difficulties because obviously there are some legal and constitutional issues here. My guess is that it will continue for as long as the public health advice is that it should continue. I am sorry, but I do not know the answer to that question because it will be a NPHET issue and it will be up to it.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Is the Minister indicating that we will move to a stage when the 14-day period of self-isolation will be mandatory? Is that something the Government is planning to implement?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** The intention is to do that.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Okay. I thank the Minister.

One of the public criticisms of the 14-day period of self-isolation is that somebody can come out of the airport and hop onto a bus to their final destination with the possible transmission of infection. It is exacerbated by the lack of face coverings on public transport. Anybody using public transport will be aware of that. Yesterday at the Covid-19 committee meeting, I asked Anne Graham of the NTA if she would insist on face coverings becoming mandatory for all passengers and drivers on public transport. She said it was not her decision, but it was a decision for the Minister and for Government. I ask the Minister the same question. Will he insist and when will he insist on face coverings being mandatory on public transport for drivers and passengers?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I will not insist because I can-

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not, obviously, but I can make some recommendations about that to the Cabinet. I think that issue is being addressed. At the moment it is not mandatory but voluntary. If NPHEAT suggests that change, I have no doubt I will accept its recommendation, but it is a matter for it. If it is a public health issue and if it will save lives, I will certainly support that, but I would have to get that recommendation from NPHEAT.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I am going to make a short contribution and my colleague, Deputy Wynne, will then come in with a contribution. I have also some questions, and the Minister might answer them after Deputy Wynne speaks, if that is okay with the Minister.

I welcome the task force the Minister announced. It is a good move forward. As my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, said, we must ensure that the unions are involved. We are all supposed to be in this together, and if the unions are not involved, we are on a hiding to nothing. I do not have to tell the Minister that Shannon Airport is critical for infrastructure, the economy and for jobs, not only at the airport itself, where there are hundreds of people, but also the tens of thousands of people across the mid-west region of Limerick city, Clare, Tipperary, north Kerry - all over the place - who directly or indirectly depend on jobs in Shannon Airport. It is crucial that we do something. The economy has collapsed and we all understand the situation we are in. One of the first things I did when the lockdown was announced was to arrange a meeting of Sinn Féin Teachtaí with the CEO of Shannon Airport to express the major concerns we have. I know how difficult it can be as I worked in the travel industry for 19 years. It was traumatic after 9/11 for many businesses, and we are probably in a worse situation now than we were then.

Shannon Airport is vital, and what makes it especially vital is that we have connections across the world. We have direct connections to North America. I know from talking to people in businesses that have come here as foreign direct investment that one of the key reasons they came to Limerick and the Shannon region is the existence of those direct flights to North America. There is also a connection from Shannon to Heathrow Airport, which is an important hub where it is possible to get connections to almost anywhere across the globe.

I got an email from a staff member of Aer Lingus today who is, unfortunately, being laid off on 21 June. She does not know when or if she is going to be back. She was really upset that Shannon staff are to be laid off while those in Dublin and Cork are being retained. This sends out a signal that sends shock waves across the area. Is Aer Lingus going to abandon Shannon? We need clarification on that issue, whether that can be given by the Minister or Aer Lingus itself.

I am also concerned about what Shannon Heritage has announced. King John's Castle is the lead tourist attraction in Limerick city. It is closed because of the impact of Covid-19, and we all understand that. It was announced, however, that it will open on 20 July but will close on 30 August. That is only six weeks. It is simply unacceptable, and if the Minister knew Limerick, he would know the castle is located at one end of medieval Nicholas Street and on the other side is a cathedral. I refer to those sights not being open for longer. People will go to those areas over the Christmas period, if they are open. The street was let go for some years, but it has been redeveloped by Shannon Heritage and the council in recent years.

The Minister can answer my questions after Deputy Wynne has spoken. Has the Minister met the CEO of the Shannon Group regarding Shannon Airport? If he has, has he also met the workers and their unions? What specific plan does the Minister have for Shannon Airport? Has

the Government agreed to intervene in Shannon Airport and to commit to funding it? What transport links to Shannon Airport does the Minister think should be examined? For instance, has the Minister met Transport for Ireland regarding the buses that go from Cork to Galway to ensure some of those services would now divert to Shannon Airport when it opens? Has the Minister had any contact with Shannon Heritage as to the announcement of the closure of attractions?

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** I have been inundated with concerns from constituents in Clare over the uncertainty that Shannon Airport faces and the associated implications for jobs right across our region in future. Jobs in the airport and nearby industrial estates are at risk, as are jobs in the tourism sector in Clare and across the mid-west. We know Shannon Airport acts as a vital gateway for tourism and business coming into Clare and the wider mid-west, and offers citizens great connectivity to swathes of the world. It clearly has a vital role to play as an engine for regional economic growth as we fight to recover from this Covid-19 crisis. We know the challenges faced by the airport are huge, financially and logistically, given the total shutdown of international flights and tourism as a whole on this island.

I highlighted these issues previously, and here I am again reiterating these same points. We know we are facing unprecedented times and that we have been battling a pandemic. That fact is appreciated. What is needed now is forward thinking and planning, backed up with commitments and direct action, and this needs to be done in a timely fashion.

In this context, I am extremely disappointed by the action of Aer Lingus in its recent announcement of the lay-off of staff at Shannon Airport. Not for the first time, Aer Lingus has shown little regard for the needs of our region's community as a whole. All Deputies remember its ill-fated transfer of slots from Shannon Airport to Belfast in 2007. That proved to be a poor decision, just as Aer Lingus's current treatment of Shannon will come to be seen as another major error of judgment. However, Aer Lingus appeared happy to maintain two flights per day to Cork with an average of only 16 passengers. That fact has not been lost on the workers of Shannon Airport or the wider mid-west population. We need the routes back, with priority given to London Heathrow and possibly Birmingham. Those routes are essential as a support for much-needed investment, job creation and job retention in Shannon. We need this connectivity to be prioritised and we need the Minister to intervene.

I welcomed the announcement by the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, that he would meet Aer Lingus. However, I was dismayed that even after I and others highlighted the plight of Shannon Airport, the Minister, Deputy Ross, did not seek to roll up his sleeves and get directly involved. Workers in Shannon Airport are to be laid off from 21 June until 29 August and without any guarantee of being able to return. They know that this measure only applies to workers in Shannon Airport and not to staff in Dublin or Cork airports. The workers are asking why Shannon is being discriminated against.

There is a real fear that this might be the end of all Aer Lingus flights from Shannon. We already know all other transatlantic carriers that fly into Shannon have confirmed they will not return until next spring at the earliest. The future for Shannon Airport and the jobs that depend on its connectivity appears very bleak indeed. This situation cries out for direct ministerial intervention. Every possible option and-or solution must be examined.

It is important that the separation of Shannon Airport in 2012 be revisited. I remind the Minister that Sinn Féin did not support that separation in the first instance. The Government is

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currently supporting the company during this crisis to help it to retain staff. Many Aer Lingus employees will be in a very vulnerable financial situation if unilateral changes proceed and leave the remaining employees on 30% of their salary. I am calling on the Minister to intervene without further delay.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister has one minute to address some of those questions.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I thank the Deputies for their contributions. Some of their questions will be very ably and appropriately addressed by the task force. That is one of the reasons it has been set up. It will voice the views of some of those whose voices are very often not heard as loudly as those of others. I take the Deputies' point on union involvement. It is a very appropriate suggestion because the unions are not necessarily included on all the delegations or at meetings with Ministers. It would be a good idea for unions or the workforce to have an input into the task force and I will ensure that happens.

On Aer Lingus, I share the pain of the workers and the Deputies. It is correct to state that Aer Lingus is an independent commercial body which I cannot direct to send a route here, there or anywhere. It makes those decisions. Although I may regret certain decisions it makes and may make national policy, I cannot direct an airline to put a route into a particular airport.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask the Minister to correspond with the Deputies on the outstanding questions.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** Has the Minister met the CEO of Shannon Group?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I have not met her since the crisis began, but I am happy to do so. I have met her previously.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** The Minister made one whistle-stop visit there in three years.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now move to the Fine Gael speakers. Deputy Emer Higgins is sharing time with her colleagues.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** As the Minister is aware, at this time of year, his Department would usually be gearing up to mark national bike week. It has been postponed as a result of Covid-19. In fact, today is World Bicycle Day. As such, I hope the Minister will indulge me by answering a quick question on cycling before I move to my question on air travel.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is pushing the boundaries.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** I promise to be very quick.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Unless she has a flying bike.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** We are all changing our lifestyles as a result of the pandemic. One of the positive changes is the number of people who have taken up cycling. More than half a million adults are cycling at least once a week during this crisis compared with 220,000 at this time last year. Given the move to reduce carbon emissions and the fact that capacity on public transport services will be impacted by social distancing, it is clear that now is the time for the Government to support the movement to cycling. I ask the Minister to consider increasing the threshold for the cycle to work scheme from €1,000 to €1,500 to support cyclists and those considering taking up cycling.

I thank the Minister for approving the credit note scheme for travel agents who are struggling to secure refunds for customers and consumers. However, many families are still at risk of being out of pocket. For families who were planning to holiday abroad and who did not book through a travel agent, if their flight takes off or their ferry makes its voyage, they will not be refunded if they are not on board. If they are out of pocket, they will not be able to repurpose that money into a staycation. For many of them, that means sacrificing their family vacation this year, a year in which they truly need it. It also means sacrificing money that could be spent in local economies throughout Ireland. Will the Minister consider extending the credit note scheme for families who have booked their holiday independently but who do not travel abroad due to Covid-19?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** With regard to the question on bicycles, I thank the Deputy for her contribution. Although it is not up to me, I will convey her wishes to the Minister for Finance.

On the second question, there is a certain misunderstanding about that scheme. It was introduced for two reasons. We must remember there is a guarantee of the money to the people who have actually had the cancellation. The credit notes are only offered by the travel agent and they do not have to be accepted by the customer. A customer can say, “No, I am going to go after the money”, and if they seek to get the money, they will get it. On top of that, if the travel agent goes bust, and five have gone under recently, those credit notes are guaranteed by the Government. Therefore, the consumer will not lose that money in the long run, whatever happens.

This is not something that is done easily because the consumer is being asked to make a sacrifice. The reason it is being done is because the travel agents are in such an appalling cash flow situation, given the flights are flying but the travel agents are not getting a rebate. This means they would go under if they were to hand over the money to all those people who had cancelled. The idea is to make sure the travel agencies do not get into a really serious situation where a wave of travel agents go bust, and this seeks to ensure they can actually offer something to the consumer, who will be able to redeem it in the long run.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** The Minister might get back to me in writing on it.

**Deputy Kieran O’Donnell:** I have several quick questions for the Minister. With regard to Shannon Airport, I wrote to the CEO of Aer Lingus in the past week as there is a particular point in regard to cabin crew at Shannon who have been temporarily laid off. I have a copy of a letter sent to workers today which is very upsetting for them in that they are being allowed to stay on the wage subsidy scheme but they are being differentiated from their colleagues in Cork and Dublin. I have sent a copy of the letter to the Minister. I ask that he would make a commitment to contact Aer Lingus with a view to it maintaining cabin crew at Shannon on the same basis as elsewhere. Second, I ask that the Minister would ensure that Shannon Airport is on the task force for aviation recovery along with the unions.

Third, the Coach Tourism and Transport Council, CTTC, comprises the bus operators. Will the Minister ensure that one of its members is on the tourism recovery task force? Will he commit to setting up a public transport recovery task force around that area? It is a very vulnerable industry.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I am not going to give the Deputy a pledge about going to Aer Lingus as I cannot do that. What I will do is address the

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matter with it and see what its interpretation of the situation is, and then take it from there.

The second question was about the task force for Shannon Airport. I think we can probably give the Deputy that promise.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** My final question concerned the coach operators on the CTTC. Will the Minister look to set up a specific public transport recovery task force?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I will communicate with the Deputy about that.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating this debate at my request last week. A lot has been said and we are more or less wrapping up this section. I join my colleague, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell, on the situation with Aer Lingus in Shannon Airport. It is vital that the Shannon to Heathrow route is restored at the earliest opportunity. Shannon Airport is being dealt with differently from Cork, Dublin and Belfast. It is the only airport that does not have a direct connection to a hub. Shannon Airport services the mid-west and west. It is imperative that the Minister with responsibility for transport intervenes on this basis.

It seems 21 June is a key date. It is the date the temporary wage subsidy scheme will end. We have been told, and I have been informed, this vital scheme is being extended. On this basis I ask the Minister to intervene, speak to Aer Lingus and encourage it to keep in employment those loyal workers who have served Aer Lingus and the region so well over the years. It is vital that the Minister also asks Aer Lingus to make a statement on the base it has in Shannon, including the 90 cabin crew and 60 ground personnel. It is vital it gives this commitment.

When Aer Lingus was acquired by IAG in 2015, clear commitments were given and they need to be honoured. These are with regard to the Heathrow route and transportation to North America. That North American traffic is vital for Shannon. It is the lifeblood of tour operators, hotels, guesthouses, bed and breakfast accommodation, pubs and clubs throughout the west coast of Ireland. It is important those flights start as soon as possible.

I welcome the fact a task force is in place, which the Minister announced this evening. It is a pity he did not announce it a bit earlier. That said, I welcome that representatives of Shannon Group will be on the task force. The Shannon Group and the 80 other aviation-related firms in the mid-west need an extension of the temporary wage subsidy scheme. I argue this must be extended to 2021. The Minister stated the recovery of aviation will be slow.

We also need to look at the 14-day mandatory isolation period. To get aviation and transport going, which are vital industries for our island nation, we need to look at this issue again and give guidance and security to aviation companies and airlines, their employees and the industries that depend on the connectivity. I ask the Minister to come back to me on some of these questions.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In the 30 seconds remaining.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** The Deputy has asked five or six questions. I will answer him on several of them. Shannon is an area that has made representations to us on many issues, which have been covered by Deputies Carey, O'Donnell and others. We are very conscious of them and we will consider them in the light of every other

plea that comes our way.

I am aware of the fact the Deputy has made representations on Aer Lingus and its flights to Shannon Airport. I cannot order it to put in a route and the Deputy knows this. The fact it has laid off so many people is something I deeply regret. It is something that is very difficult. In its contract there was a get-out clause for a pandemic and it is difficult to do anything about it that way. In the near future, it will be appropriate for me to convey the wishes of all of the Deputies in the House to Aer Lingus about Shannon Airport, what it has done and the wish to reinstall the route.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister might correspond with the Deputies on the matters that have not been addressed. I call Deputy Joe O'Brien on behalf of the Green Party.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** Aer Lingus's parent company, IAG, has informed investors of its €10 billion war chest to see it through the pandemic. They are currently in talks to acquire additional airlines in Spain and Austria, all the while taking advantage of wage subsidy schemes in Ireland, England and Spain.

I wish to raise concerns about the actions of Aer Lingus management in the Dublin area in terms of restructuring plans. Up to and including today, unions have been looking for meetings with Aer Lingus management in Dublin and they have been refused. I would like to row in behind my colleagues and ask the Minister to write to them. I know he cannot direct them, but the State is helping Aer Lingus to a significant degree, as well as its employees, with the temporary wage subsidy scheme. The very least the Minister could do is write to them and ask them to engage with the unions in a much better fashion.

I am sure Michael O'Leary's potential bonus payment of €100 million never entered his head when he encouraged us all to pack in and mask up on the national airwaves last week, but what is the Minister's opinion of his statement that it is safe to fly, of his criticism of public health advice from Irish officials and his statement that if we put on masks, bump up the hygiene and limit contact, we will all be grand? What is the Minister's take on Mr. O'Leary's rather cavalier attitude towards public health?

Has the Minister been approached by airlines for financial assistance? If so, which ones? If any commitments are being made to financial assistance, I impress upon the Minister that they must involve provisos on emissions reductions, improvement in employment practices, and ensuring that no bonuses go to executives nor payments to shareholders in the near future.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I thank the Deputy. I cannot make judgments on statements such as those the Deputy makes in the House without hearing what I consider to be the full facts. I do not doubt what the Deputy is saying but I cannot say what Aer Lingus is doing is outrageous. I can write to it and convey to it what the Deputy has said. If there is a good case for the company meeting these people, sure, I will address it. I am just not familiar with the facts as they have come to the House this evening. I will certainly do that.

On Michael O'Leary saying it is safe to fly, I do not want to make any comment at all except to say that everybody in this space has a particular axe to grind and a particular interest. Michael O'Leary is in the business of selling seats on airplanes. That is his priority. As Minister and as a Government, we have to take note of the industry's views, of course, because it is so important for the connectivity to Ireland. However, we also have to take note of the health au-

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thorities' views. When I listen, as I think the Deputy does, to the airlines' spokesmen, we have to bear in mind where they are coming from. I appreciate it, and I know how important they are and what a great job they are doing for Ireland economically. I also have to bear in mind the fact that health considerations are paramount. We have to counter one with the other. I should say that nobody is getting their way all the time in this space. At the end of the day, the Government has recognised that the health of the nation is the most important factor that we have to consider when dealing with the Covid crisis.

On requests from airlines for financial assistance, an awful lot of them have made them. An awful lot of them are getting financial assistance and are using the wage subsidy scheme and the other props which the Government has provided. Some of them come with special pleading as well. Some of them are getting public service obligation, PSO, payments. All of those are continuing. We consider all pleas sympathetically because of the importance of the airline industry and the airports to the connectivity of this country.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I have three follow-up questions although I do not expect the Minister to have the answer to the first one. Do all aircraft landing in and leaving Ireland have high efficiency particulate air, HEPA, filters, which can block Covid from travelling? That may be a question for referral to the Irish Aviation Authority. What efforts if any is the Minister making to try to separate Ireland from the UK in terms of how our European partners are viewing us? They are viewing us as a single epidemiological unit, which obviously raises issues as the UK has a much worse record than us in terms of Covid-19. Efforts need to be made there to distinguish us as a separate unit from the UK.

On safe routes and corridors, what explorations, if any, are happening to identify countries where travel to and from could be more viable or could be starter countries for us to open safe routes with?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** Not all airlines have these HEPA filters. Ryanair and Aer Lingus do and I will send the Deputy the details on the other ones if he wants them.

On the point the Deputy made about the United Kingdom, one of the initiatives being taken by Europe is that when we open up, we would start by opening up with countries that have matching Covid-19 levels. We are conscious of the fact that we are at a similar level to other countries apart from the UK but we have very close ties with the UK in many other ways. It is our closest neighbour, the one with which we trade most closely and the one with which tourism ties and passenger travel are so close, so we have to bear that in mind as well.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I want to get clarification on trying to separate Ireland from the UK in terms of how our European partners view us. Is anything happening with that? I want to express concern about that.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I see no sign of anybody separating us from the UK in that way.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I want to express concern about the issue of HEPA filters. Does the Minister have any idea how many aircraft or what airlines do not have HEPA filters? He said Ryanair and Aer Lingus do but what percentage do not?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I do not know but I can let the

Deputy know. I know Ryanair and Aer Lingus do and I can let the Deputy know what others do and do not.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I thank the Minister for facilitating this important debate tonight and for his opening statement. I listened to it and I read it and it gave me a sense that the gravity of the situation affecting the aviation sector is not lost on the Minister.

I welcome the setting up of a task force. It is a welcome and much-needed move. Will the Minister commit to the House tonight that the trade unions or their representatives, namely, SIPTU, the Irish Air Line Pilots' Association, IALPA, Fórsa and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, will be represented on that task force? It is a must, as Deputy Quinlivan said earlier.

I refer to the temporary wage subsidy scheme. It was welcome that the Government applied it and that the aviation sector turned it up. It was delivered in bad faith by a number of companies in the aviation sector. Does the Minister consider it regrettable now that conditionality was not placed on the temporary wage subsidy scheme in terms of the retention of jobs and in terms of the topping up of wages? To follow on from that question, will the Minister support the extension of the temporary wage subsidy scheme to the major aviation companies as well as companies such as Swissport, Gate Gourmet and OCS, which provide ground operations, catering and cleaning? Does the Minister support that scheme being extended until the end of this year? We have seen that even the most optimistic projections indicate that passenger numbers would only be back to 50% of 2019 levels in November and December, so this scheme would be much-needed for all of the rest of the year.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I will listen closely to the advice of the Minister for Finance on that and on the state of the public finances. My predisposition would be that there should be full support for those people who have lost their jobs and who are out of work. What way it is done does not particularly matter except that these people are supported. We will have to look at the public finances as well to see how long that can go on, and the situation there is not looking good. We had some fairly grim figures today, but all the same, I would look on that with regard to the advice we are getting from the Department of Finance as well.

On the question on trade union representation on the task force, I will ensure there is a representative of the workforce on that body. I will not give the Deputy a guarantee on what trade union that representative will come from or whether it will come from ICTU or from somewhere else, but I will ensure someone is there as a representative of the workforce. I can give the Deputy that pledge today because that is extraordinarily important. Workforce representatives are a very important part of this great industry. They are suffering and their jobs should be protected as far as is possible.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I welcome that assurance and I am sure the trade union movement and the workers will as well.

Regarding connectivity, will the Minister give any commitment tonight to act, even to write a letter to the CEOs of the airport groups and the companies, to ensure that important routes such as Knock to Gatwick and Cork to Heathrow and the transatlantic routes involving Shannon, to name but a few, are retained? I know he does not have the power, but will he put the heavy weight of his office behind supporting these key routes? There are massive concerns.

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We have seen Knock's closure, which has been mentioned tonight. The workers in Shannon Airport and the region are petrified. It seems long-suffering Shannon has been going through a process of being continually denuded and attacked. This pandemic cannot be used as a method to provide a near fatal blow to Shannon Airport. It needs to be protected. The mid-west needs it vitally, so I ask that the Minister do everything in his power. I would welcome any comment he may have on this connectivity and these routes.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** The Deputy has probably seen from what has been happening in recent weeks that there has been a concerted effort to keep all the airports open and running and ready for the recovery, the exception being Knock Airport. Knock Airport closed down but intends to reopen on, I think, 1 July. That decision was taken by the airport itself. My intention is, and I am sure my successor's intention will be, to keep open those routes which are not economically profitable but are socially necessary, such as those including Donegal and Kerry, and to keep them flying, and they are flying at the moment. There has been a reduction in the number of flights, but that is because the number of passengers has gone down to an absolutely minuscule number. There is a very good case for the regional airports and the routes the Deputy talks about, often for medical reasons, such as people having to fly to Dublin and back in the one day because they need treatment. They are therefore justified. I have every intention, as long as I am here, of seeing that those routes are kept open and that Knock Airport, which was closed, reopens and services the essential routes for society, even if there are no good economic, profitable or commercial reasons for it to function.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I ask also that the Minister write to senior management in the two major airlines, for two separate reasons. The way in which Aer Lingus communicates with its staff and their unions has been very poor. The method of rather dour, foreboding video messages to staff - I am not sure whether the Minister has seen them - has just added to the overall sense of uncertainty, unease and despair in the workforce. This method of communication is not helpful and needs to be nipped in the bud, so I ask the Minister to write to the chief executive of Aer Lingus about that. I have done so.

My colleague, Deputy Joe O'Brien, referred to Michael O'Leary of Ryanair. Michael O'Leary has been indulged for far too long in this country - not by me but by many - as being this crown prince of capitalism, with Ryanair being this big economic success story. He has done this by trampling over the rights of workers, trade unions and indeed customers down through the years. We have all been in company where we have heard that if Michael O'Leary was in charge of the country, everything would be grand. Last week, however, his comments that flying is safe, that we should just mask up, get on an aeroplane and get on with it, flouted every interpretation of public health advice and showed once and for all, without any veil, what he truly is in his placing of profit above all else. It is absolutely disgraceful.

Ryanair are consistently grouped with Aer Lingus, DAA and Shannon as being - and they are - a key driver of the aviation industry and a major actor in it. It is absolutely abhorrent that such a cavalier approach and such cavalier and dangerous language are being used at a time when people are still scared to go down to their local shops. Moreover, people are frightened when they see people in great numbers on local beaches or in local parks. To hear someone who has such agency and power in this State come out with such an attitude and with such comments is deeply unhelpful. It is important that a letter goes from the Minister's office in his name on behalf of the Government to Mr. O'Leary to indicate that will not be tolerated in the teeth of this pandemic. I will leave it there.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I would like to say I will not be sending that letter. The Deputy is perfectly entitled to his view on Michael O’Leary; I do not share his view. I do not agree with everything he does, of course, but I believe his contribution to connectivity in this country is without parallel. While he certainly says things to the Government, to me and to my Department that are not always complimentary and he disapproves of much of the way we have approached this particular problem, it is appropriate and should be acknowledged in this House that he has done a great deal for connectivity in this country and has given an enormous amount of employment. There is a balance to be drawn here and I think it is appropriate for that to be done.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** The balance has well and truly been in his favour during the past two decades. It has tiptoed the opposite way and I think it is now appropriate for the Minister and his office to respond. The Minister has said he will not do it. He is entitled to take that position but I believe the balance has tipped the other way and those comments are absolutely disgraceful.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** It is welcome that a task force is to be set up for the recovery of this particular sector. It is probably one of the most exposed sectors in terms of the impact of Covid-19. I welcome the fact that a representative from the trade unions will be included but there is a wide range of opinion within trade unions. It is wildly different for a person who is an airline pilot represented by the Irish Air Line Pilots’ Association as opposed to someone who is a baggage handler. It will be important for the total views of the trade union movement to be captured in the context of this task force.

It is terrible to read some of the emails we are receiving from people who have got news that their jobs are lost or who are now on seriously reduced salaries but who must manage the commitments they have. There is a wide range of opinion, including people who have views on the 14-day isolation period. The views are right across the spectrum.

The importance of an airport to a region is great indeed. In the Shannon region, we can count the cost of the airport and keeping operations going there. The region benefits greatly from it. The Dublin region is far wider than the Dublin area in terms of from where the personnel who are employed in the airport come. As the Minister is aware, it is quite a wide footprint.

There is a concern that some of what is happening is both opportunistic and unreasonable. That is why it is really important that voices can be heard in the context of this task force.

As we all know, new regulations are in place and it is now mandatory to fill in the form at the airport but unless the Government is going to enforce the guidance for self-isolation, that is all it is, mere guidance. It is important that we know where people are in order that they can be tracked if someone proves positive; that is the point of it. However, if the self-isolation aspect is not enforced, we have to ask about its value. There were some follow-up calls to the first iteration of the form and many people did not follow through or did not answer calls and so on. That has to be closely monitored. We saw the impact of people arriving from northern Italy early in the pandemic when that area was the epicentre in Europe. It was critical in the spread of the virus in Ireland.

This sector will be important in our management of the throughput of people. We cannot ignore the fact that we are an island. As we require connectivity, we need a recovery of the sector as soon as possible.

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I share the concerns about who is making policy. I listened to the Minister's opening statement in which he referred to social distancing on airlines. We are being told by Ryanair or Mr. Michael O'Leary that, from 1 July, the intention is not to social distance but to require people to wear face masks. Does NPHET have a view on this? Are those the conditions under which flights will operate? If NPHET said it would be fine, then that would be an important component, but I have not heard NPHET say anything like that. The Minister will have to address this matter. Otherwise, policy is being made by the airline operator as opposed to with public health considerations in mind.

Many of us have views on the roadmap and whether it is overly rigid in some respects. Regarding this sector, some countries use a traffic light system for flights coming from areas that are not managing containment of the virus as well as they are themselves. We are in an unfortunate a position with our nearest neighbour, the UK, although we have to differentiate. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are managing the virus slightly differently but there is no doubt that its management in England is problematic. It certainly has not been as well managed as in Ireland. Other European countries and parts of the world have handled it differently and well.

Travel is a critical risk factor. While no one wants to restrict movement, the question we must ask is how to allow safe movement. If we can safely allow movement via a traffic light system, it should be considered.

Will the Minister address the issue of social distancing? He mentioned separation on planes. Will he reiterate the situation in that regard? We are being told that, from 1 July, Ryanair will see a scaled-up level of movement. Has health advice been sought on the number of people on flights and on the issue of people travelling from jurisdictions where there is a high incidence of the virus? People will be asked to self-isolate, but is it likely that a differentiator will be applied when following up with people who have come from areas that are highly infected?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I thank Deputy Catherine Murphy. I take her point about wider and differing views in the workforce. Obviously, we cannot have 20 representatives of various bodies. That would be a problem. However, we want to embrace as many as possible. It might be a good idea to have someone from ICTU or one of the largest unions there. We do not want to provoke some sort of inter-union jealousy, but we do want the workforce to be seriously represented. I will ensure that it is. That said, we do not want to provoke a civil war of any sort there either. We will do all that we possibly can to ensure that all those voices, particularly of those who have been put on a three-day week or who have lost their jobs, are represented and that they get feedback from the task force. It is very important that it has a wide footprint.

The Deputy asked a question about who makes the rules. There are some guidelines and protocols, to which I referred in my opening remarks, for when the airlines return to normal operations on 20 May. The EU has a big part to play and we should co-ordinate properly with Europe. The European Union Aviation Safety Agency, EASA, and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, jointly published guidance on measures to ensure the health and safety of air travellers and aviation personnel once airlines resume regular flight schedules, which is what the Deputy was referring to in her question. The Department, through the national facilitation committee, is co-ordinating the implementation of the guidelines by industry to promote health and virus control in aviation, with due regard to the maintenance of aviation safety and security standards. These guidelines seek to propose certain measures

including increased sanitation measures in both aircraft and airports; the implementation of physical distancing, where possible-----

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** What does that mean?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** -----providing protective screens, where possible, between airport staff and travellers; the wearing of medical grade face masks by passengers and staff; the provision of health declarations by passengers; measures to contact passengers for contact tracing purposes; and thermal screening of passengers.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you Minister. We will move on to Deputy Bríd Smith.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I am sharing time with Deputy Paul Murphy. I want to raise a specific aspect of this crisis and its effect on aviation, namely, the present rush by Ryanair and Aer Lingus to cut wages, lay off staff and implement widespread redundancies. I am aware that much of this is not necessarily the responsibility of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport but it is the responsibility of the entire Cabinet. The speed and scale of the assault on workers in the aviation industry is particularly acute. This week, Aer Lingus told its Shannon-based crews that they would be temporarily laid off, while those in Dublin and Cork will see their rosters and pay reduced and 900 jobs will be cut. In mid-May, we were told that Ryanair will cut 250 jobs across its bases in Ireland, the UK and Europe as part of a wider threat to cut 3,000 jobs and to impose a 20% pay cut. Separately, the State company, DAA, will cut a potential 1,000 jobs in Dublin and Cork.

Obviously, one would have to be blind not to see that there has been a massive collapse in passenger travel but there are two points I wish to make in relation to these hugely profitable companies. First, in 2018, Aer Lingus reported an operating profit of €305 million and in 2019, an operating profit of €276 million, which is quite substantial. In 2019 Ryanair recorded an operating profit of €1 billion and the previous year its operating profit for the full year was €1.02 billion. Last year the DAA recorded a profit of €133 million. It seems, however, that eaten bread is soon forgotten by the CEOs, shareholders and directors of these companies, who are rushing headlong into throwing their workers on the scrapheap. As we know, these companies are claiming under the wage subsidy scheme for their workers so effectively, the State is meeting a sizeable proportion of their wage bills. Where is the responsibility of these companies to their workers, who generated these massive profits for them over the years?

We also have a wider problem. We suspended the operation of the redundancy Acts until 10 August and the suspension could be extended beyond that date. Under Covid-19 emergency legislation, we suspended the right of laid-off workers to exercise their right to redundancy but nowhere did we think to balance the suspension of workers' rights with the suspension of the employer's right to make them redundant. I wish to quote the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Ms Regina Doherty, on the logic of doing this. She stated "If we did not extend the end date further, redundancies could occur in the very near future which will burden employers with further debt and have a serious impact on the potential for a business to recover." Ms Patricia King, who is right and with whom I totally agree, said that it is anomalous and unfair that workers are required to accept long periods of lay-off, while employers remain free to impose redundancy on employees. Nowhere is that imbalance between workers and employers more obvious than in the aviation industry. We have seen 2,000 workers disgracefully dumped on the scrapheap by Debenhams and another company called Instant Upright that is attempting to do the same. This is why I am calling for a complete moratorium to be placed on

employers' facility to dismiss workers on the grounds of redundancy during the period in which section 12 of the 1967 Act remains suspended. Just as workers' right to claim that redundancy has been suspended, so must the right of employers to dismiss workers be suspended during this crisis. What it effectively means is that Ryanair and others are using redundancy as a cost-cutting weapon during the current emergency legislation. It is facilitating employers in evading their responsibility. I repeat that these companies are hugely profitable. Will the Minister go to Cabinet and support the call from ICTU to introduce a moratorium on employers' creating redundancies during the Covid period?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** The tale told by the Deputy is a very sad one.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** It is disgraceful.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** It is very sad and tragic for a large number of people; an extraordinary number of people. It involves the DAA, Ryanair, Aer Lingus, Stobart Air and all the airlines and airports. We are seeing lay-offs on a scale the Deputy and I have never seen before. We are also seeing a situation the likes of which we have never seen before and people are reacting to it in ways that are sometimes right and sometimes wrong, sometimes inhumane and sometimes very humane and sometimes very practical. I share the Deputy's sympathy. Nobody here has a monopoly on sympathy.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I am angry. I am not sympathetic.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I also share the Deputy's anger but she does not have a monopoly on anger. Just remember one thing that is really important. The revenue of these companies, which were monsters - one of which was a monstrously sized company while another was a State monopoly - has gone down by 99%.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** A growing number of millionaires and billionaires and their cheerleaders in the media and the Dáil are calling for vital public health restrictions to be loosened more quickly so that the economy can fully re-open and they can resume making their profits. Leading the charge, unsurprisingly, has been Michael O'Leary of Ryanair, a notoriously bad employer, despite what the Minister might say. He has now graduated from bashing unions and driving down workers' pay and conditions to demanding an end to vital public health restrictions needed to protect us all from this pandemic. Two weeks ago, he took to the airwaves on both "Morning Ireland" and Newstalk to demand that social distancing be reduced from 2 m to 1 m. He attempted to dress this up with references to medical advice but anyone with an ounce of cop-on can see it is so that he can keep cramming people onto his planes. Dr. Gabriel Scally said in response that "I really don't think that Michael O'Leary is a good source of public health advice on the effectiveness or not of quarantine" and added "I think he might have a vested interest." I agree with Dr. Scally. In this Chamber a few weeks ago, the Minister admitted to me that the last time the airline industry made demands of him with regard to coronavirus, he bent the knee and wrote to the European Commission asking for the airline industry to be allowed to rip off the public by offering vouchers instead of cash refunds. Does the Minister support the public health advice from NPHE on maintaining 2 m social distance or has he been one of the Ministers clamouring behind closed doors for restrictions to be loosened in order that Michael O'Leary and the rest of his class can maximise their profits?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** On the health advice, I have

followed and will follow consistently on this issue.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Minister is not pushing to reduce the 2 m distance to 1 m.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I have already said I have not ever in this area in any way departed from the health advice.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** For the record, I take it the Minister agrees that there is substantial scientific weight behind the 2 m requirement. A review of over 200 scientific studies published in *The Lancet* two days ago states that transmission of viruses was lower with physical distancing of more than 1 m and that the evidence is clear that 2 m saves more lives than 1 m. The World Health Organization, WHO, is also clear on that point.

A number of Ministers have stated, as did the Taoiseach last week, that the vast majority of people would like to see us accelerate the plan. Would the Minister agree that there is no evidence for that? The Department of Health public opinion polls which are published on a weekly basis demonstrate that the vast majority of people believe that the current pace of loosening is either correct or too fast. In this week's survey, only 23% expressed the view that the pace of loosening restrictions is too low. Therefore, what we have is a manufactured public opinion demanding a loosening of restrictions which in reality is a relentless drumbeat from big business, amplified by the media and certain politicians, in particular Fianna Fáil, which demanded this debate on aviation following Michael O'Leary's media appearance. Matt Cooper in *The Sunday Business Post* gave the game away when he wrote that it does not matter that opinion polls suggest that the majority are happy with how things are being done, the needs of employers in both the public and private sectors must be given greater weight.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** It is self-evident that the vast majority of people want to see the restrictions back to zero but they also want the conditions to be correct as well.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** Job losses, cost-cutting, pay freezes, financial losses and crisis are the stark words that have been bouncing off the walls of this House as Minister after Minister has faced questions in recent weeks. The Government response, by and large, has been proactive. I trust the Government will also give practical support to the Irish aviation industry which landed in this crisis with a legacy of unresolved issues and now has little runway to help it rise out of it. The urgency of the current situation is unparalleled in modern times and finding solutions is crucial not only to the industry but to our tourism industry, to keeping our cargo supply chains open, to keeping our airports viable and to sustaining export trade with other countries.

I want to focus on the immediate future of workers in the industry and the situation that is unfolding at Shannon Airport. From the perspective of getting aircraft back in the air, aviation workers at all levels are calling for the 14-day quarantine period to be re-examined. Ireland is the only country, other than the UK, enforcing this strict rule and the latter is currently re-examining it. The science behind this mandatory quarantine in relation to travel should be explored in depth. Does the Minister agree that the 14-day quarantine requirement should be reviewed?

It was revealed last week that Aer Lingus will now move forward unilaterally with the restructuring of the company, which will include lay-offs and reduced terms and conditions for the staff who remain in their jobs. Since the onset of the Covid crisis, Aer Lingus has availed of the wage subsidy scheme and it has also benefited from a lucrative contract with the HSE to carry PPE from China. In addition, the airline reported operating profits of €276 million

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for 2019 and its parent company, IAG, is currently in talks to acquire airlines in Spain and Austria, while, at the same time, taking advantage of furlough schemes in Ireland, England and Spain. While it is not unreasonable to seek temporary changes within Aer Lingus during this pandemic, the concern is that staff terms and conditions have constantly been under revision. Cost-cutting is nothing new to Aer Lingus staff. This most recent decision, taken without consultation or communication with unions or staff, for non-voluntary redundancy or unilateral redundancy is yet another slap in the face for Aer Lingus employees. Throughout the years, many of these employees have seen and taken drastic cuts, not only in terms of pay freezes, but in alterations to their terms and conditions. In recent years, however, when the highest profits in the history of Aer Lingus were announced, the pay and conditions were not restored and nor did the staff share in the monetary success, although agreement to do so was set by the Labour Court in October 2017.

The driving force and success of Aer Lingus lie not with its executives but with its unique staff. These staff members, who are scattered across Tipperary and the rest of the country, are currently living their lives under a black cloud of uncertainty. The Government is keeping them in their jobs, for which they are grateful, but their futures are vulnerable and uncertain. This vulnerability will have a ripple effect throughout the entire economy if significant job losses occur. These people are homeowners, supporters of local business and contributors to the local and national economy. We are talking about families - men and women who have built their lives around their jobs, struggled through the bad times with the promise of a brighter future, but who now face the prospect of shattered lives, hopes and aspirations.

Governments across Europe, including France, Spain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway, as well as American air carriers that compete with Aer Lingus, have provided sizeable financial support to their airlines with the strict condition that jobs are not lost and that there are no changes to the terms and conditions for employees. Why has the Irish Government not followed suit to protect the future of workers in the aviation industry?

While assistance is needed to protect the future of the airlines operating out of Ireland, the airlines should, in turn, play their part in securing the future of the industry as a whole. The new all-party Oireachtas Shannon Airport group has called on Aer Lingus to make a long-term commitment to Shannon Airport to restore confidence in the entire mid-west. This call comes in light of the airline's decision to temporarily suspend its vital Shannon-Heathrow route and the fact that it is treating Shannon Airport differently from Dublin and Cork airports. My constituency of Tipperary forms part of the mid-west region. This region, along with many counties on the western side of Ireland, is dependent on the ease of connectivity to Britain afforded by the Shannon to Heathrow route. It provides swift entry for business and social purposes and quick access to connecting flights to worldwide destinations not served by Ireland.

The Shannon Group is a driver of economic growth. Independent research has proven that its activities support over 46,000 jobs in the region. Since the establishment of Shannon Group in 2014, it has undertaken a major €115 million investment programme and as a result, the regeneration work it is doing at Shannon free zone is breathing new life into the area, stimulating foreign direct investment and indigenous investment and creating jobs for our young people from around the region.

Prior to Covid-19, passenger traffic at Shannon Airport was set to take off this year. Commitments by Aer Lingus and Ryanair to new routes and increased frequency for existing routes were welcome and promising. Over the course of the last two months, like other airports all

over the world, Shannon Airport has witnessed an almost total collapse in its airport traffic and revenues. The success of Shannon Airport and Shannon Group's activities is critical for the economic well-being of businesses in the mid-west and all along the west coast. The airport is the very lifeblood of the region. The air services provided through Shannon Airport are essential to support Irish and international businesses located here, and its location at the heart of the Wild Atlantic Way makes it an important gateway for international visitors.

There are a number of initiatives that would greatly help Shannon Airport at this time, including funding to assist in securing strategic routes and, importantly in the context of the Covid crisis, restoring current routes. This funding would go to the airlines. Dedicated funding is also required to complete essential capital expenditure projects. These types of projects are currently funded by Shannon Group from its own resources. We also need a waiver from commercial rates for Shannon Airport and Shannon Heritage until some normal level of revenue and activity is restored and the continuation of the wage subsidy scheme for the aviation and tourism sectors severely impacted by the pandemic. Shannon Airport is at a critical juncture. Any new Government needs to secure the future of this vital service hub for the mid-west and we need to pursue the restoration of the Shannon-Heathrow route as a matter of urgency.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I thank Deputy Lowry for his contribution, which was very reasoned and moderate. What he voiced are the opinions I have heard all over the House for the past two hours. It is a plea for the workforce and an understanding of the extraordinary change which has been made to their lives so suddenly. That is something which all sides of the House share. It is matter of how we address something which is utterly unprecedented.

The special pleading which has been made for Shannon in the House today is very convincing, not just for strategic reasons but also because of the conditions and difficulties in which the workforce find themselves and because many people feel the airlines have behaved in a way that is lacking the sympathy which might have been expected. On the other side of that coin, we have to acknowledge that what we are facing is a lot of airports and airlines haemorrhaging money. If the situation went on and we had not taken the action that we did, some of them would be facing oblivion. If they were facing oblivion, the workforce would be in a worse situation because there would be no jobs for anybody.

We are trying to create a space where we provide those supports which I have already listed. Shannon Airport, which the Deputy mentioned, and other airports are using the temporary wage subsidy scheme and the pandemic unemployment benefit is going to people who have, unfortunately, been laid off. We have introduced possible three-month rates waivers, stabilisation recovery funds and all sorts of subsidies and supports for airlines and the people who have been badly affected. That is not a panacea and has not worked totally, but it has recognised the real difficulties in which people may find themselves.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Michael Healy-Rae is sharing time with Deputy Carol Nolan.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I am going to make sure I stop in time to give the Minister a chance to reply. The first issue I want to raise with him is very important. I have three specific points. With regard to people who want to do their driving test, I want the Minister to-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, we are talking about aviation.

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**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** No. The Minister will allow me-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** This is about driving cars-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Minister will allow me the opportunity to give him the chance to explain to the people who desperately want to know what is going to happen to people who need to sit their driving tests. People want to get a full licence. Nurses are going to work on the front line every day and have not seen their families for weeks or months. They are in an awful position whereby they have to get to work but do not have a full licence and cannot have anybody in a car with them. Can the Minister shine some light on this? A frightening number of people have contacted me about this, and I am only one person. I am sure everybody else is in the exact same position. Can the Minister provide some clarity on the issue?

With regard to aviation, I too have been contacted by many hardworking people who have lost their jobs or whose jobs are in jeopardy. The Minister referred to the medical advice and guidance we have been given. Nobody is saying we should throw that out of the window, and I am not saying that for one minute. However, can we have a balance between protecting people and not wasting the sacrifices that have been made, while trying to protect the jobs which are so important and on which thousands of people are relying?

I know the Minister will not blame me for raising with him the importance of sports capital grants. I know he will not blame me for saying that on the record of the Dáil because he, more than anybody else, should know how valuable it is to have those grants continue into the future. I would appreciate an answer on driving licences, in particular.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Are there any sports grants for the aviation sector?

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I thank the Deputy for his contribution. He has a brass neck. The Ceann Comhairle was very generous to him also. I am very happy to answer the question on driving tests. I answered it the last time and I think I answered it when Deputy Michael Healy-Rae was in the House, but he is entitled to-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** He did not answer it clearly enough, I am afraid.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I will answer it again. I share the Deputy's sympathy for the people who cannot do their driving test at the moment. What he is saying is right but he is not providing a solution for me. The reason people are not doing their driving tests is a very good one. It is that to do so would be a danger to their health and the health of the people testing them. I will take the advice of NPHEA on that particular issue. If at any stage it advises it is all right for driving testing to go ahead, I will obviously accept that advice and I will go to Cabinet and say I think that should happen. However, at the moment that is not on the early-opening list because people have to sit very closely beside each other for a very long period. It is a very unfortunate situation.

An alternative is often suggested by people taking the Deputy's point of view. As the Deputy does, I get many complaints about this every day. The alternative is obviously to let people out on the road without having taken their driving test, which is not acceptable. That is a safety issue and it would be absolutely unacceptable. I know some people say this should happen. It would be totally unacceptable to allow people who are not qualified to drive to go out on the road, do dangerous things and kill people. The answer to that is that I will keep this in mind. I

will keep asking about it, but the advice is very strongly that it is not a priority.

I will not be the Minister when the sports capital grants are allocated. I will not be able to do anything for the Deputy. However, I will make a strong recommendation. I will leave a note on my desk for my successor to contact Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, saying when it comes to sports capital grants, he is the man who knows how to manage them.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Nolan. Now follow that.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I accept there are difficulties in the aviation sector. I wholeheartedly support the call for jobs to be strongly protected. Has any plan been drawn up based on the expected impact on the sector? Have any streams of funding been identified? It is vital for the local economies in the regions, not just in our cities, that the aviation sector is protected and supported.

On that note - it connects very well - obviously buses and coaches are needed to transport people to the airports. There is a connection. With that in mind, will the Minister commit to supporting the calls from the coach and bus sector for a reclassification of VAT status to harmonise the island's VAT system? The coach sector should have had a representative on the tourism recovery task force to ensure that voice is heard. Will the Minister support that proposal?

I wholeheartedly support the ongoing provision of the sports capital grants. They have been fantastic for our communities. I hope the Minister will add my name to his note, as well as that of Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** We will have two names in there.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** It is very important in Offaly; we want to keep our football going. We obviously do not want Kerry dominating in everything.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** It would give the hurlers a chance as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Rural Independents are very inventive in their use of the time.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** We have to be.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** They are very quick out of the traps. I am not sure what the Deputy's plea for the coach sector is.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I am calling for the reclassification of the VAT system. Apparently, the coach sector in the North of Ireland is at a competitive advantage. I have been inundated with calls from the bus and coach sector about this issue. They have spoken to me about the reclassification of VAT status to harmonise the island's VAT system. Those operators feel it would be advantageous to the local economies, businesses and tourism.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Shane Ross):** I will pass on the Deputy's message. I have not considered that yet, but I will pass on the message and get a consideration of that issue. There was no particular reason those operators were not on the task force and we were not in any way trying to exclude them. The task force is very small and includes people who will represent them extraordinarily well. It includes representatives from Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland, the Irish Tourist Industry Confederation, ITIC, and many groups that will certainly represent the point of view of the operators. We could not possibly include every vested

interest in the tourism industry or we would have a committee of 400 or 500 people. I think the bus and coach operators will, however, find people on the task force who will represent them very capably. There are also people from my Department on that task force who will be very happy to hear their points of view. They are not being excluded for any reason except that only some of the very significant and large stakeholders, such as hotels and others, are on it. There are niche elements that are not on it, many of them, but they will find a home there if they approach someone on the committee. There is no doubt about that. If they come to me directly, I will refer problems or representations, whatever they are, straight to the committee. There is no effort whatsoever to exclude them.

The other issue addressed by Deputy Nolan was jobs. One of the reasons for having a task force is so that the voiceless can be represented. I refer to those not normally represented on bodies like this. It normally tends to be chief executives and the big battalions exclusively. I would certainly include the chief executives and the powerhouses in the industry on that. We also want to see, however, people who are not particularly powerful and who are weakened by this crisis represented on the task force. That is what we intend to do, and I promise all the Deputies who have made representations about this issue today that they will be represented there, because as people they are equally important to the most powerful people in the country.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Deputy McNamara and I are sharing cúig nóiméad agus cúig nóiméad. While the Minister is writing love notes on his departure, he might include one for the 24,000 people in Galway who asked him to carry out a feasibility study on light rail. I am still awaiting an answer, so perhaps he will just do an extra little love note on that, and on reflection given the post-Covid conditions and the climate change challenges.

On this matter, I welcome the opportunity to speak and I welcome the task force. It is a little late in being set up, but I welcome it. I also welcome the confirmation from the Minister that there will be workers' representatives on it. That is extremely important, because all of us have been contacted by the workers in Shannon Airport, some of whom live in Galway. Various parts of letters have been read out, and the one that hit me the most, and I think Deputy Lowry referred to it as well, was one that referred to the driving force and the success of Aer Lingus not being entirely - and I would go stronger than that - the result of the executives but of its unique staff. The letter went on to state that the customer-facing front-line staff are renowned across the globe for their empathy, humour and kindness to passengers and much more besides.

The Minister stated no one has a monopoly on anger and sadness. That is certainly the case across every side of this House. The Government is in a unique position, however, and has a monopoly on legislation and policy. Policies shape the type of working conditions and society we have. The decision made in our name to sell off Aer Lingus in first place was problematic. We now have a situation where Shannon Airport has no planes going in or out, except for military planes, or civilian planes on contract to a government, coming down for refuelling. I might come back to that point in a minute.

It might be asked why I am mentioning Shannon Airport when I am from Galway. When the airport closed in Galway, however, one of the reasons given was that we had an airport just an hour down the road in Shannon and that it was vital for the region, not just for Clare, but also for Galway. It was one of the very strong reasons put forward. The Minister's task force, therefore, might look at the importance of balanced regional development. I hope they can make it mean something. Shannon Airport is vital if we are seriously interested in balanced regional development.

The Minister was earlier asked whether any airline had approached him for help, as Lufthansa has done in Germany. By way of answer, he referred to the wage subsidy scheme, the PUP, and other measures. However, that did not answer the question asked of him. I will ask it again: did any airline approach him or the Government for specific help in the way that Lufthansa did?

Going back to my point on policy, the wage subsidy scheme and PUP have been put in place and Aer Lingus is availing of that in Shannon. What I understand from listening to the contributions - it is quite difficult to comprehend - is that the wages of the employees were reduced by 50% in the first place and, as such, when the company availed of the wage subsidy scheme, it only paid 50% of what it ought to have been paying. There was a gain on the back of the system. I fully agree with the decisions taken in respect of the scheme and PUP, but it is important that we reflect on them and ask what conditions are necessary. Germany has set great conditions on the help it will give to Lufthansa, including taking equity in the company. What has been done here? We have given out taxpayers money - absolutely correctly - to maintain the connection between employers and workers and to help employees who are out of work but from what I can see and as other Deputies have mentioned, no conditions whatsoever were set regarding the company, the profits it is making and the war chest it has for the acquisition of airlines in other countries while Shannon remains bare. The Minister will not have a chance to reply because I wish to give a full five minutes to my colleague.

On Shannon Airport, I understand that two aircraft touched down there at 6.24 this morning and at lunchtime to refuel on their way to I know not where. They were using the airport for the purpose they have always used it, that is, for the furtherance of American military might. It is odd that we are all talking today about racism in America and the deplorable actions of the American President, yet we facilitate him at Shannon Airport.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I echo what has been stated in respect of the necessity of balanced regional development. The lack of balanced regional development was very much a theme that emerged under the previous Government of which the Minister was a member. Before the entire economy went into a tailspin we saw significant inequality develop between the eastern seaboard and the rest of the country. There was an example of that at Shannon Airport when it lost not just passenger share, but passengers in absolute terms, while Dublin Airport powered ahead.

I do not know whether to welcome the fact that the Minister is setting up a task force because its outcome will very much be determined by its membership and its terms of reference. If he is going to appoint people to it along the lines of those who persuaded him that making Fingal County Council the noise regulator for Dublin Airport and that it could somehow be independent in that regard, I do not have much hope for it. If it is to be comprised of the people who persuaded him that a third terminal at Dublin Airport was a good idea while the terminals at Cork Airport and, to an even greater extent, Shannon Airport lay empty, and that a second runway at Dublin Airport was essential even though there is a second runway at Shannon Airport and the first runway is not utilised, much less the second, then I do not have much hope for it. However, I hope there are people in this country - and there are a multitude of people internationally - who could be appointed to the task force and made responsible for developing a balanced aviation policy that is good for the entire country and not just for Dublin. Residents of north County Dublin have had a second runway put in, the flights to which are literally going over their heads. Dublin Airport is actively trying to change its planning conditions to ensure flights can come in at night time over the heads of those residents, who do not want them,

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whereas Shannon was a 24-hour airport - it has temporarily stopped 24-hour operations. I urge that the task force ensure that is a temporary measure and that it will return to being a 24-hour airport.

Aer Lingus and Shannon Airport have had a particular relationship going back years and it has never been a comfortable one. There has always been a suspicion at Shannon Airport that Aer Lingus's sole priority is Dublin Airport. Indeed, I sat in on a transport committee meeting when the sale of the State's 25% shareholding was being discussed in 2015, and Willie Walsh very much admitted that Dublin Airport was going to be its priority. In fairness, he did not mislead anybody; he said Dublin Airport would be the priority and Dublin Airport has been the priority of Aer Lingus.

I accept that the airline sector is in trouble everywhere, not just in Dublin, in Shannon or in Ireland. Aer Lingus is a private entity, as the Minister said. I noted his almost Freudian slip when he said the problem is that it is a private entity. It is amazing what a tenure in government can do to one's perspective on matters like that. Aer Lingus is now exclusively a private entity, which is because of decisions made by successive Governments. People who supported the sale of the 25% shareholding, including from my own county, are now crying crocodile tears, when this was the inevitable consequence. There are also people who did not support it at the time, because they never had to vote on it, but who are certainly members of a party that supported the sale of Ireland's shareholding in Aer Lingus which reduced it from 80% to 25% in 2006.

While I am not ideologically opposed to the privatisation of some companies, we are an island nation and we are uniquely dependent on our connectivity. It now appears that the sale of the State's shareholding in Aer Lingus was as strategically short-sighted as the sale of the State's shareholding in Eir, or Eircom as it was then. We have had all this brouhaha about developing a broadband infrastructure and whether it will be public or private. Of course, we have an appalling level of customer care from Eir for its existing customers, who are the majority of people in Ireland, because there is absolutely no State shareholding and very little control that the Government can exercise.

I ask the Minister, if he is setting up a task force, to make sure it is fair and it looks at fifth freedom rights, so that we do not have people flying from, say, Addis Ababa into Dublin and on to Los Angeles. The Government has complete control over fifth freedom rights, which are not covered by open skies. It could say such people need to go to Shannon Airport in circumstances where we need to limit the number of people congregating, perhaps unnecessarily, in Dublin Airport when Shannon Airport could desperately do with the traffic. I also ask him to ensure the task force looks at the possibility of testing not just passengers coming into the country but also, perhaps, passengers going out. We already have a big customs pre-clearance facility at Shannon Airport, just as we have a physically smaller one in Dublin Airport. It might be possible to persuade the federal authorities in North America to open up to European passengers who have already tested negative for Covid-19. It may become the gateway from Europe for passengers to North America. Shannon Airport needs a shot in the arm, particularly now there is no State connection and it is solely reliant on passenger numbers to determine whether or not Aer Lingus stays there. Sometimes one thinks that it is not just about passenger numbers and that when the airline has had to choose between a flight in Dublin and a flight in Shannon, it has always preferred Dublin.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will conclude. The Minister might correspond with the two

Deputies.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** On a point of order, the Minister, Mr. Ross, raised an allegation that I had somehow misled the House in a previous debate, which I had not. Is this an appropriate time to deal with it?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is not.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** Thank you. I would, of course, say that I did not.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

The Dáil adjourned at 9.20 p.m. until 12 noon on Thursday, 4 June 2020.