



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*  
(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 04 Meitheamh 2020*

*Thursday, 04 June 2020*

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

***Paidir.***

***Prayer.***

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## **Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before proceeding, the House must agree the arrangements for next week's proceedings of the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. Those arrangements were notified in the report of the Business Committee for next week's meeting, which was circulated to Members this morning. I take it we can agree those arrangements as read. Is that agreed? Agreed.

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

**The Taoiseach:** Every day there is some good news with the declining number of new cases, but it is tempered by sadness and grief at the loss of more lives. Although the numbers are small, every single one is heartbreaking, and our condolences go to all of the families and friends affected. While we may be adjusting our lives to a new normal, we will never get used to the deaths caused by Covid-19, and we continue to mourn their loss and reaffirm our desire to do everything we can to honour their memory.

As of last night, 1,659 people have died in our State from Covid-19 and a further 534 in Northern Ireland. In total, 25,111 people in the Republic of Ireland have been diagnosed with the disease. In total, almost 350,000 tests have been carried out, with more than 22,000 in the past week, of which 389 were positive, resulting in a positivity rate of 1.7%. This rate continues to decline. Given these numbers, we can see we are making real and measurable progress. When I spoke in the Dáil last week, we had 73 new cases recorded the night before. There were 47 last night. We had 268 people in hospital this time last week with Covid. This is now down to 165. We had 48 people in ICU and this is now down to 36. Whereas 17 new deaths were reported last Wednesday night, it was three last night.

We are nearing the end of phase 1 of our plan to reopen business and society. The Cabinet will meet tomorrow morning to decide whether it is safe to move to phase 2, and this decision

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will be made on the basis of the available medical data and the expert advice from NPHE alongside reports from key Departments, including the Department of Health and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. As I have always said, we need to be confident it is safe before making that move. I am concerned that this week many people were calling for us to accelerate things and jump ahead before we even had the data from recent days, the data that will tell us the impact that the phase 1 lifting of restrictions had on the spread of the disease. I believe it is better to adopt the slow and steady approach than to go too far too fast and risk falling backwards. Our plan to reopen the country can be accelerated but only if it is safe to do so. Given the trend of the numbers I am confident that we will be able to proceed to phase two on Monday. If Cabinet approves this move tomorrow it will mean a further lifting of restrictions on Monday. The economy will continue to reopen. More people will go back to work and we will see more businesses resume trading, particularly in the retail sector. More outdoor sporting and fitness activities will be allowed, including team sports training in small groups, as long as social distancing can be maintained and there is no physical contact. We will also be able to meet in small groups indoors as well as outdoors, travel up to 20 km from home for exercise, and people who work alone or can effectively social distance will be allowed to return to their workplaces more frequently.

I hope that as the world returns to a new normality we will see international air travel resume, in the first instance through air bridges with countries that have suppressed the virus to an extent similar to ours. With air bridges we can lift travel requirements if people are flying to or from another country where the virus has been successfully suppressed. This, however, is some weeks away and it is far too soon for anyone to book their holidays but summer is not yet lost.

Amárach, déanfaidh an Rialtas cinneadh maidir le dul ar aghaidh go céim 2 dár bplean chun Éire a athoscailt. Beidh an cinneadh seo bunaithe ar chomhairle leighis na saineolaithe go bhfuil sé slán sábháilte. Ní thógfaimid aon riosca má tá baol ann. Impímid ar an bpobal aon riosca nach bhfuil gá leis a sheachaint. Ó seo amach, tá súil agam go gcuirfimid go mór leis an dlúth-pháirtíocht a chonaiceamar le linn na míonna seo caite agus go n-oibreimid le chéile chun Éire níos fearr a bhaint amach. Ní mór dúinn infreastruchtúr shláinte phoiblí agus folláine a thógáil, athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar conas a sholáthraímid cúram do dhaoine aosta, an cur chuige atá againn maidir le tinneas san ionad oibre a athrú, cothromaíocht idir an saol agus an obair a ghlacadh, taisteal nach bhfuil gá leis a laghdú, agus meas dár dtimpeallacht nádúrtha a chothú.

Last week, I said I would provide an update on the new proposals from the European Commission. The post-2020 multi-annual financial framework will total €1.85 trillion over seven years and will include a completely new €750 billion allocation for what is being called next generation EU. These euro will be used to protect lives and livelihoods, repair the Single Market and build a lasting recovery across Europe. It will be funded through one-off Commission borrowing on the financial markets as an exceptional response to the unprecedented circumstances we now face. I welcome the broad thrust of last week's proposals and will work with colleagues in the European Council to reach early agreement on a substantial front-loaded recovery instrument. This will reinforce the three safety nets of up to €540 billion for citizens, businesses and countries that we have already agreed. Every EU member state has been affected by this emergency, some more so than others. We need to kick-start economic and social recovery and get funds flowing to sectors and regions that need them most. To overcome the new challenges arising from Covid-19 the EU budget must also deal with issues which were vital to Ireland before the crisis including CAP, cohesion, research and innovation. I believe we must use this opportunity to set Europe on the right path for the future building a greener,

fairer, more resilient, digital and sustainable Union. In doing so we must be honest with the Irish people. We are now net contributors to the EU budget. A bigger EU budget means we pay in more as well as getting more out. However, the value of our membership is incalculable in terms of security access to Single Market, European citizenship and the cost-sharing gains from joint projects and joint programmes. It is money well spent.

In recent days the world has watched in horror the events following the killing of George Floyd. It has prompted a palpable outpouring of emotion and spontaneous expressions of solidarity against the poison of racism. We have also seen genuine revulsion at the heavy-handed response in some instances towards peaceful protesters and journalists. We have witnessed the absence of moral leadership or of words of understanding, comfort or healing from whence they should have come. It is right to be angered by injustice. Racism too is a virus, transmitted at an early age, perpetuated by prejudice, sustained by systems, often unrecognised by those whom it infects, possible to counteract and correct for, but never easy to cure.

The Ireland I grew up in is a very different place to the one we live in today. In recent decades, we have been enriched by racial diversity, people of colour who came here and more born here. I believe we are fortunate to have a policing model that is based on consent, strict gun control and an unarmed and highly professional police service of which we can be proud, namely, An Garda Síochána. However, we do not need to look across the Atlantic to find racism. We have many examples in our own country. Discrimination on the basis of skin colour is pernicious. Sometimes it is overt: discrimination when it comes to getting a job or a promotion, or being treated less favourably by public authorities, including sometimes by Government officials. Sometimes it manifests itself in the form of hate speech online, bullying in school, name calling in the streets or even in acts of violence. Sometimes it is almost innocent and unknowing and all the more insidious - little things, small but nonetheless othering such as being asked where one comes from originally because one's skin or surname look out of place, how often one goes back to the country one's mother or father was born in, being spoken to more slowly, cultural and character assumptions being made based on one's appearance or being made to feel just that little bit less Irish than everyone else. Sadly, this is the lived experience for many young people of colour growing up in Ireland today.

We have come together as a country in this fight against Covid-19, so let us use that sense of solidarity and community that has been so present in recent weeks to take on racism in our country too and change the experiences of young people of colour in Ireland for the better. We can learn from the mistakes of other countries and make sure we do not follow their path or be subject to their fate.

As Deputies will be aware, the pandemic unemployment payment expires on 8 June. A Government decision on its future will be made tomorrow morning, but I want to give these three assurances to everyone in receipt of the payment today. First, it will be extended for months and not weeks. Second, nobody who was working full-time before the pandemic will see his or her unemployment payment cut. It will stay at €350 per week for those who were working full-time prior to the pandemic hitting. Third, some people who were working part-time will see their payments reduced but their weekly payments will still be more than they were earning on a weekly basis before the pandemic.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** In the past three months, this pandemic has claimed the lives of nearly 2,200 people on this island. It is with their families and friends that our first thoughts must be today and we must also remember the nearly 40 people who are in intensive care units

today because of Covid-19.

The progress of the disease in Ireland has been severe, and in some areas it has been worse than in most comparable countries. An unprecedented and rapidly evolving public health emergency leads to mistakes being made, and there is no question that mistakes were made here and in many countries. Once we are through the pandemic, we will have to take a deep and urgent look at the lessons we should learn. No full understanding will be possible until at least most of Europe reports that the immediate danger has fully passed. At that stage, we will be able to see a comprehensive like-with-like comparison of figures and the type of detailed scientific work which is needed to explain how a single virus can have radically different impacts in different places and on different groups.

It is important to say that from early March onwards, not only have hard questions from politicians and journalists been vitally important in challenging gaps but this situation remains so, as we know from the questions early on about testing, personal protective equipment, PPE, and so on. Those questions were valid and they raised issues. There should have been greater transparency early on in terms of the outbreaks and where clusters manifested. More information should have been given.

Today our focus must be on having a substantive discussion as to where Ireland goes from here and how quickly we can move to restore as much normality as possible. From the first moments of this pandemic, my party and I have been clear in saying that the primary consideration of policy must be to implement public health advice. We have also been clear, however, in saying that there are many options possible while respecting this advice. Today, more than at any point in the past three months, the legitimate options for opening closed parts of our social, cultural and economic life are larger than ever. It is deeply unfortunate that the Government has settled into a kind of rigid approach to deciding on changes and steps. As predicted three weeks ago by most parties here, we have seen three weeks of on and off-the-record briefings as to what might be done, all leading up to a high-profile announcement tomorrow, to be followed by an already booked marketing campaign. This approach is causing some difficulties, and people in every part of the country are now reporting confusion as to what measures are actually in place. The habit of non-stop briefing of decisions yet to be made means that the difference between the headlines and the guidelines grows significantly by the day.

We need a bit of reality in our discussions today. When the Taoiseach articulates the position at tomorrow's press conference, we need to hear a far more comprehensive explanation of the current status of the pandemic and the detailed rationale for the restrictions which remain in place. Unfortunately, in a number of communities we see examples of restrictions being broken. There was the well-publicised situation in Cork, where a number of students booked houses in a particular area of the city, namely, College Road and Magazine Road, and there were quite significant house parties, leading to socially distanced protests from residents in the area. This is happening at an alarming rate. There is simply no doubt that compliance is fraying. The biggest problem with this is that it is highly divisive. The majority continues to fully respect the guidelines, and the tension between those who ignore the guidelines and those who feel a threat to their health cannot be ignored. In many respects, the restrictions are more onerous on those who are complying with them. There are people who want to comply literally with them and are doing so. Then they watch others who have more or less dispensed with compliance with a lot of guidelines. The spirit of being in this together can only be protected if we get everyone back onto the same agenda.

While we cannot be guided only by practice in other countries, it falls to our Government to explain the circumstances when the policies we pursue differ significantly from those in other countries. Absurdly, it is easier for an Irish person to plan a holiday in much of Europe than it is to plan one here. A range of countries this week signalled their intention to be ready to quickly lift travel restrictions. Their tourism industries have begun working on the assumption that travel from Ireland will be possible without quarantine before the high season. Yesterday it was announced that a review of the aviation sector by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Shane Ross, will be prepared. This is welcome, but what is borderline ridiculous is that it is scheduled to take at least five weeks to complete.

Smaller businesses continue to bear the brunt of the restrictions, which remain severe in the context of their operations, and there is no clarity as to whether or how they can survive. In the hairdressing industry, for example, a lot of anecdotal evidence is now emerging of a black economy developing, of people just availing of hairdressing services informally and of the legitimate operators being marginalised as a result. Greater engagement is required in that regard.

There is a growing divide between a message which says things are going well and another which tells us that Ireland is not yet ready to follow other countries. It is important that in tomorrow's announcement the Government explains - and I would like the Taoiseach to explain - the exact position on the five tests for reopening which NPHET recommended to it in April. The first test is the general progress of the disease. According to the briefings, the disease is under control and the reproduction number is significantly lower than in many countries that have largely reopened. The community spread of the disease in recent weeks has been very small and dramatically lower than it was in March or April. If community transmission is that low, many of the travel restrictions in place do not make as much sense as they did when they were originally introduced. There are 1,300 active cases of Covid-19 at the moment, meaning that 95% of the total number of positive tests are no longer active cases. What exactly is the specific benchmark for the progress of the disease that has to be reached before most restrictions can be raised?

The second test is a healthcare capacity and resilience test. Today, the system is dealing with less than one quarter of the cases it was handling at the height of the pandemic. The Government and public health officials have repeatedly stated that the capacity and resilience exist.

The third test has also been achieved. According to the Government the capacity to test and trace is - we have repeatedly been told - in place. In fact, there has been significant excess testing capacity.

The fourth test is the ability to shield at-risk groups. This has not been fully outlined. However, it appears that the policy here and internationally relates to advice from people in high-risk groups concerning their behaviour. This is not relevant to the bulk of restrictions in place today.

The final question - increasingly one of great concern - is the risk of secondary morbidity or people who may die because of other illnesses caused by, or not diagnosed or treated because of, pandemic-related restrictions. No data on this have been published, but we know that the numbers attending for diagnostic procedures have fallen dramatically, as have those attending medical appointments. Today, roughly 1,000 beds in our public acute hospital system are empty and close to 50% of the capacity of private hospitals was unused as of Monday. Unless we are to believe that something radical has changed in the progress of other diseases and the importance of early detection and treatment, there is now no doubt that we are facing into more

people's lives being in danger because of the lower levels of medical services being accessed.

Is léir go bhfuil an dealramh ar an scéal go bhfuil daoine ag fulaingt anois le galair eile agus nach bhfuil na seirbhísí sláinte ar fáil dóibh, mar shampla, daoine le hailse, le galair chroí agus a lán galar eile. Tá dainséar ann go mbeidh saol na ndaoine i mbaol gan na seirbhísí seo, agus is léir go bhfuil plean tábhachtach uainn agus go bhfuil géarghá ann anois plean cuimsitheach a chur i bhfeidhm chun déileáil leis an bhfadhb seo.

In addition, we need to understand the growing evidence of serious mental health and psycho-social problems emerging in many countries. The World Bank and the OECD have outlined evidence of a profound gender basis for this issue, with women carrying a far heavier economic burden.

We need clarity about how exactly the five tests are being implemented. The public deserves the full details. If it is the case that the National Public Health Emergency Team and the Government believe that Ireland is behind other countries for a reason, that reason needs to be outlined in detail, not in generalities.

As I have said here every week, the failure to provide any assurances to State companies and institutions about their finances is unacceptable. Those in public transport and higher education, for example, are facing new deficits of an unprecedented scale, but they have received no support. In many cases they are now reading anonymous briefings about how they need to look after themselves. This has to stop. I have consistently made the point that third level education is in a real crisis because of the depletion of revenues from sources they have increasingly relied on in recent years. To me, third level education and research are key to economic recovery and sustained economic development in this country. They always have been. The responses so far from the Department have been unacceptable in terms of the lack of engagement of any kind.

We still have roughly 1 million people on some form of state support for their income. We have thousands of businesses and entire industries which do not know what they are facing into. We have a growing divide in the population between the majority who are silently abiding by all the restrictions and others who are not. We also have an unexplained divide between measures taken here and those taken in comparable countries. We need full transparency. We need our Government to give all the details behind its decisions. We need it to understand that the only way of retaining public support for restrictions is to be far more open about the exact basis for the choices that are being made.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I want to start by extending my heartfelt condolences and sympathies to those who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 in recent days. These are very difficult times for so many who are coping with profound grief. I also want to send good wishes to those who are sick with the virus and I wish them a full and speedy recovery.

We are walking a long road and our battle with this virus and the disruption it has brought to our lives continues. All the signs suggest that we are heading in the right direction. The numbers of deaths, hospitalisations and cases have fallen significantly. Much progress has been won thanks to the strength and dedication of the people. Now, we must stay the course and see this through.

Black lives matter. The life of George Floyd mattered. His death and the manner of his death matter, too. Racism is, as the Taoiseach said, a virus, and it is a global one. While we stand in solidarity with all in the United States of America as they face the ugly reality of sys-

temic racism and the challenge of solving and overcoming it, we must also do our bit. Whatever its source, rhetoric from the Irish system that decries racism but fails to dismantle the disgraceful and discredited system of direct provision is no good at all. Rhetoric that decries racism but still allows blatant discrimination and injustice against our Traveller citizens is no good either and would beg the response from all onlookers: “Physician, heal thyself.” Racism is a virus. We have the diagnosis. Now we need the treatment. Now we need to ensure that we take direct and definitive action. The ball is in our court. What do we do? That is what the death of George Floyd asks of all of us.

Reports this morning that the Government is preparing to cut the pandemic unemployment payment for thousands of workers have come as a significant blow to people who are struggling to cope with the economic impact of this public health emergency. Last night, many workers breathed a sigh of relief when the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, announced that the payment would be extended beyond 8 June. Today, however, that relief has been replaced by stress and anxiety about the future at a time when people need security and certainty.

Beidh sé mícheart an íocaíocht seo a ghearradh. Cuirfidh sé strus airgeadais ar go leor teaghlach. Nuair a chailleann daoine a gcuid post, ní athraíonn a gcuid chostais mhaireachtála. Tá billí fós le híoc agus airgead fós le fáil. Tá dualgas ar dhaoine bia a chur ar an mbord agus caithfear soláthar a dhéanamh do pháistí. Cutting the Covid payment would be deeply unfair and leave many families in difficult financial straits. When people lose their jobs, they lose their incomes, but the cost of living does not go away. The electricity and gas bills still have to be paid. Money still has to be found for the rent or mortgage. Food has to be put on the table. Children have to be provided for. The ESRI has stated that cuts to these payments would lead to an increase in mortgage arrears. The Covid payment has helped workers and families to keep the wolf from the door during this pandemic.

The mantra from the Government throughout the crisis has been that we are all in this together. However, the Government’s plan to cut the Covid payment contradicts that message. It demonstrates that, while we might all be living through the same storm, we are certainly not all in the same boat. Thousands of workers who have lost their incomes through no fault of their own will now have their protections slashed. That will have serious consequences.

I acknowledge that there are anomalies in the emergency schemes. I also acknowledge the correction of the anomaly around women returning from maternity leave. The anomalies with the Covid payment should have been sorted out weeks ago - the exclusion of 66 year old workers or, at the other end of the scale, students who would have worked one shift per week. It is grossly unfair and unacceptable to introduce a blanket cut to the payment for all workers who work less than full-time hours. That is a blunt instrument, poorly thought out and a bad approach by the Government. It is also another example of where the Government’s plan to reopen the economy is disjointed. It is similar to the Government’s shambolic approach to childcare where the sum total of the plan was to send people back to work with no solution for their childminding needs. It is incredible that, as large sections of the economy remain shut, the Government is planning to withdraw an income on which people depend. The Taoiseach says that this was an emergency payment, but the emergency is still here. This suggests to me that his Government really does not have a clue, or maybe does not want to have a clue, about the pressures on ordinary people at this time. It is a grossly unfair move and a bad decision for the economy because we need to boost domestic demand, and that means protecting, not slashing, household incomes. At a time when consumer spending and confidence are down, the best thing the Government can do is support demand. That is the smart thing to do. It would be the

height of recklessness to withdraw income from people and to deny income that is currently being spent in the local economy. The Sinn Féin position is clear. Nobody who has lost income as a result of this crisis should be worse off again as a result of cuts to income supports. To ensure that this happens, we believe that the emergency Covid payment should continue until the end of the year.

Is the Taoiseach really suggesting cutting payments to hundreds of thousands of workers by 40% overnight? What will these proposals mean for people working less than 40 hours per week, perhaps for 35 hours? What is going to happen to seasonal workers who work one or two jobs for most of the year but who were on less hours in January and February? What about them? Does the Taoiseach understand that the move he is proposing to make will drive households into debt? Has he factored that in? Does he understand that such a move will undermine the repair and growth of our economy? What of the ESRI's contention that a move to cut these payments would cause mortgage arrears? Have these issues been factored in?

These workers and families should not have learned of the Government's plan to cut their income from a newspaper. The way this Government handles matters is the height of disrespect. The Minister for Finance reassures people that everything is okay one evening and then the following morning, all across a national newspaper, is news that in fact incomes are going to be cut. These are real families in real time who have to provide for themselves, and as we speak today, the Taoiseach has caused incredible stress and grief for them. In the short time available, I ask the Taoiseach to answer my questions around seasonal workers and those working less than 40 hours per week. What of household debt that will inevitably follow from the cut that the Government is planning?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy has got it wrong. I am happy to set the record straight for her, but by getting it wrong, once again she is the one who has caused stress for a lot of people who are in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment today. It was a payment introduced by a Government that I lead. It amounts to €350 per week, a flat rate and one of the most generous in Europe. I stand over it. Contrast that with Northern Ireland, where Sinn Féin is in office, where the payment is only £100 per week. Contrast it with Spain, where a centre-left party is in coalition with the far left, where the payment is something like €125 per week. I stand over that.

As things stand, the pandemic unemployment payment is due to expire next week. Cabinet will make a decision tomorrow on its future and I can give an assurance to anyone who is in receipt of the payment today that it will be extended for months, not weeks. Those who were working full time prior to the pandemic happening will not see their unemployment payment cut. They will continue to get €350 per week. Some people who were working part time before the pandemic will see their payment reduce, but they will still get more than they were getting on a weekly basis before the pandemic hit in February. Nobody's income will be lower than it was before the pandemic as a consequence of the decision we make tomorrow. The position for seasonal workers remains unchanged.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Our thoughts are with those who are ill in hospital or who have lost loved ones to this pandemic. We must continue to listen carefully and with respect to medical and health advice at all times. I have been reflecting back on this crisis and as I recall it at one of our first meetings with our best experts on the health issue they said that it was not going to be possible for us to suppress the virus completely. If I recall correctly, they then said it was not something that we could do alone and that we needed to suppress it in order that our health service would not be overrun. However, the complete eradication of the virus or guaranteeing

that there would be no further waves was not something that seemed to be on the agenda at the outset. While, several months later, our health service has thankfully not been overrun, it still seems clear that it will be difficult for us to completely suppress or remove the virus, particularly in light of what is happening in the neighbouring jurisdiction and our border arrangements with that jurisdiction. It seems that this would be very difficult unless some vaccine or other development comes into play. Our situation is different from that of countries like New Zealand and one wonders how even that country would manage to isolate itself completely in order to be able to stop any recurrence of the virus. However, we must do everything we can to minimise, manage and suppress the illness and the loss of life until, hopefully, a vaccine arrives. This is accepted absolutely.

It is also clear that the health advice must surely be and is that there is a wider understanding of the health issues at play, including the fact that there may be increases in other illnesses if people are not accessing health services in the way they traditionally would do so. There are also real issues in the context of people's mental health and well-being in the widest sense. The effects of unemployment on people's mental health are clear and certain and I am sure they can be modelled in the same way as the modelling the virus. From experience, I am in a position to state that one can manage during the first month of two of unemployment. If somebody asks one what one is doing, one does not have an answer but after a period of four, five or six months, it becomes a very serious mental health issue.

This is why I say, with respect, that we must have that wider health consideration regarding some of the timelines relating to the lifting of restrictions. To take one example - I am not prejudging this and I accept that it must be based on good health advice and a mix of such advice - the lifting of the fourth phase, when we will allow our people to move around the country and go on holiday here becomes a viable option. If that took place at the start rather than at the end of the month, it would have a significant bearing on the viability of the tourism industry into next year. It would also have a significant impact on the return of jobs across the country in order to cater for those domestic holidaymakers. Getting the tourism industry up and running would provide a massive boost to people's mental health in terms of the employment generation that would be the natural result of such a development. The viability of that employment into next year would also be secured. Even though it would involve taking this step three or four weeks early, it would make a huge difference.

I do not wish to contradict or be seen to undermine NPHET but if we are to look at possible restrictions on that date - let us say that we might move to phase 3 rather than phase 4 - when might that be decided? When would the Taoiseach sit down with NPHET to work out those sort of arrangements? If it is only done towards the end of June, it will not give people time to plan or businesses time to set up and organise. While one does not wish to contradict, prejudge, presume or risk any health factors, an issue that we must consider is when we might signal if such a slight change in the timelines were to be put in place in order that we could know in advance what we might be able to do regarding the tens of thousands of jobs that might be reactivated. What type of approach and what type of timeline might apply in respect of such a decision if it is possible, on health grounds, for us to make it?

**The Taoiseach:** From the outset, I have always said that this is a living plan that can be accelerated if we are getting on top of and ahead of the virus. One thing we will stick with is the three-week intervals. They are in place for good epidemiological reasons. If one relaxes restrictions and the virus spreads, incubates and is tested for and so on, it will be at least two weeks before that shows up in the data. We believe we should stick with the three-week

intervals. Some people have said that the World Health Organization, WHO, recommends two-week intervals and the European Centre for Disease Control, ECDC, recommends four-week intervals but we have chosen to go with three-week intervals. Three weeks makes sense because we need to know that if we ease restrictions they have not caused the virus to take off again. It is only after two weeks and into the third week before we can know that so we will stick with the three-week window but we can bring measures forward, as the Deputy suggests, from phase 5 to phase 4 or phase 4 to phase 3 as the case may be. We have made proposals to the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, and to the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, about bringing forward measures from phase 4 to phase 3 and from phase 3 to phase 2. NPHE is considering the proposals that the Government has made and the Government will make a decision on Friday morning and inform the public of the decision on Friday afternoon.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I look forward to that announcement. A second example of looking forward in terms of mental health issues and wellbeing is our children. Their education is critical to their health and future wellbeing and development. I recently read an interesting article by Mr. John Boyle, Secretary General of the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, who I know well. I knew him as a teacher in a school I previously represented. He is a brilliant teacher and leader of our teaching profession. He referred in that article to our schools reopening in August and to the need for guidance to support those plans. Many parents are confused or uncertain. They are hearing that the schools will be reopening in late August but not for all students, leaving them scratching their heads and wondering how could this be possible. For example, will Tommy attend school on Monday, with Seán attending on Tuesday? That guidance is needed for the health of all of our people, particularly families. People need to get a sense that children will be back on track in August-September. Perhaps the Minister for Education, Deputy McHugh, who will be in the House later for a questions and answers session, will have further details on the matter. In terms of instilling confidence in how this area is being managed, that guidance is needed very quickly such that parents will have a sense of understanding in regard to the return of their children to school. The same could be applied to our third level colleges. The guidance for third level colleges might be towards distance learning but I do not know how that could work in a primary school classroom. As stated by Mr. John Boyle, how do we do that where there are 30 pupils in a class? I do not know the answer. People want and deserve an answer. They need that guidance very quickly. It is important the Government does not wait until the latter part of the summer to provide it. There is uncertainty around how many pupils can attend and how the school system will work. Is there any time limit for the issuing of that guidance, which might help provide certainty in this area?

**The Taoiseach:** As the Deputy suggested, the Minister, Deputy McHugh, might be more up to date on this matter than I am. Assuming the virus continues to move in the right direction, primary and secondary schools will open for all children at the beginning of the school year, which is the end of August. What we have not yet worked out fully is the exact arrangements around how that will happen because change will be required. For example, there will have to be hand-washing on the way in and arrangements to ensure children do not congregate at entrances and, obviously, classrooms will have to be reconfigured. We do have the advantage of being able to learn from other countries in Europe that have opened their schools. They do appear to have managed to do it. It probably would not be helpful for me to speculate about those arrangements but they are being worked on and they will be in place well before schools are due to open in August.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I want to acknowledge the families who have lost loved ones in the

last week and also workers. I have five questions for the Taoiseach, the first of which relates to workers. As of 26 May, more than 32% of Covid cases here have been healthcare workers, which is worrying. We are an outlier. ECDC analysis shows the infection rate among healthcare workers in the US is 3%; in China, it is 4%; in Italy it is 10% and in Spain it is 20%. I accept these rates could have changed since that date but they are the rough figures. As I said, we are an outlier. SIPTU and the nurses' unions have raised their deep concerns about this. Why are we an outlier? When will the HSE and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, HPSC, do an analysis of what has gone wrong here? Something must have seriously gone wrong for that figure of 32% to exist. Will the Taoiseach commit to that analysis being carried out and published as soon as possible?

The second issue I wish to discuss is secondary healthcare. Where is the reopening plan from the HSE? It has been announced a number of times. One of the five key criteria is secondary morbidity and secondary mortality. Where is the modelling on this? I have been raising this matter for a month now. Where is the plan and why has it not been announced? It is deeply worrying. Dr. Anthony O'Connor of the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, said in this Chamber that we could have 1 million people waiting for appointments, and that is a conservative estimate because 3.2 million people get appointments every year. The Government made a political decision in the last week not to renew the contract with the private hospitals, and it made a political decision not to look at purchasing them. The political consequence of that is that we are going to have huge backlogs, increased morbidity and increased mortality. That is a political consequence of a political decision. Where is the plan? I want to see it. We have no screening, mental health services, disability and community services, elective procedures or services in a whole range of other areas. We need to see the modelling and the plan for how we are going to deal with this because people are really regressing.

That brings me to the roadmap. People are getting ahead of the politicians, as is often the case. Professor Jack Lambert was right when he said that we, as a nation, need to think rationally again. We need to look at what is high and low risk. While I accept what the Taoiseach said about the three-week intervals for data analysis, surely we should also analyse whether we need five phases instead of four. What we were looking at when the Government set out the five phases was different from what we are looking at now. Things have moved. We now know that we have to live with this virus for a considerable period. We cannot put everything into hibernation, including society, the economy, and particularly secondary healthcare, which I have always raised. Will the Taoiseach look at the rigidity of the roadmap and consider changing it to four phases?

Will the Taoiseach also examine the communication process? The daily briefings are causing more confusion now. At the very beginning, people would ask me whether they should be listening to the Taoiseach or the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, because at times, there can be different messaging. I always said they should listen to the Taoiseach, but in the last few weeks I have been telling them to listen to the CMO. That is not the way our country should work. If there are going to be daily briefings, I ask that they be about all public health issues, including secondary morbidity and mortality and all the issues in the plan which has not yet been launched. We need that. The Government needs to get in control of the message because when there are contradictions between what NPHET is saying through the CMO, what the Government is saying and the various different pronouncements of a range of eminent public health experts, that breeds confusion.

I refer to the pandemic unemployment payment for young people. Some 135,000 people

between the ages of 18 and 24 are on the Covid payment, many of them working in very low-paying sectors such as hospitality, tourism and retail. The Government's decision is going to strike at a whole cohort of young people in this country, and that is not right. It goes against what people are doing across other jurisdictions in trying to ensure there is finance out there, but it is a particular slight on young people. They do not have the same opportunities for jobs because of where they are in life. Many of them would have only moved into full-time work at the time Covid hit. They are being discriminated against. I ask the Taoiseach to please not do this. As far as I and the Labour Party are concerned, this is discrimination. It is ageist. It is against a whole sector of our community.

Finally, black lives do matter and we do not have to look far in this country to find examples of discrimination and racism. Will the Taoiseach and the current Government or his party commit to ending direct provision? That is the real discrimination and racism that is going on in this country, as I am sure he will acknowledge. It has to end. We all have to make sure that collectively and politically we end it. What is going on in Miltown Malbay in terms of the standard of food people are eating, leaks coming through the roof and the fact that people cannot leave where they are because they have no form of exercise in the area is not humane. Will the Taoiseach commit to addressing that?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank Deputy Kelly. On young people who were working part-time before the pandemic and lost their jobs as a consequence of the pandemic, the changes we are making tomorrow will ensure that those young people are no worse off than they were before the pandemic. The most important thing for those young people is not the pandemic unemployment payment, rather, it is enabling them to get back to work. The fact that the shops will reopen next week will allow many of them to go back to work. Let us try to get the hospitality and tourism sector, including hotels, open as quickly as possible so they can get back to work. The solution to this is not extending welfare payments forever. It is enabling people to go back to their jobs and get back to work and earn more than they did before.

As the Deputy correctly pointed out, 32% of the cases have been among healthcare workers. That is a very high rate, but it is important not to misunderstand it. It is not the case that 32% of healthcare workers had Covid-19. About 7% of healthcare workers contracted it and tested positive for it, and 93% did not. Sometimes that fact is misunderstood in the way it is reported and spoken about. We do not know why that is the figure. Part of it might be down to a lot of testing. We are one of very few countries, if not the only country, in the world that tested all of the staff in our nursing homes. Healthcare workers can pick up Covid-19 anywhere, just like anyone else does, such as at home, particularly if they are living with other people, in shops and in the workplace. I agree that an analysis of the situation needs to be done and I can commit to that, but it will not be an analysis that will be easily done and may not come to any conclusions. It should be done nonetheless.

The plan to resume normal healthcare is being developed by the HSE. I understand it is due to or has just gone to the HSE board and until it is approved by the board it will not come to Government.

The daily briefings from the CMO and his team are very good. Many people find them very informative. Different countries have adopted different approaches. Across the water, for example, the daily briefings are always led by a Minister or the Prime Minister. I prefer our approach, where they are led by the CMO and medical experts. It is a better approach. Across the water, when the CMO or an expert was asked for an opinion the politicians stopped him

or her from answering the question. That is not my approach and this Government has never taken the approach of saying that we do not want to hear the experts. They have their own press conference every day and I think it is a good thing that is the case. It will not continue forever, but it will continue.

On direct provision, I absolutely accept what Deputy Kelly said. Much direct provision accommodation is substandard and that needs to change. Some of it is of a good standard, such as own door self-catering. Some of it is of a bad standard and that absolutely needs to change. The last Government tried to do that and the next Government, if I am part of it, will want to do that. We need to understand the difference between direct provision and a man who was killed by the police by having somebody step on his neck. Direct provision is, ultimately, a service offered by the State. It is not compulsory or a form of detention. It involves people being provided with free accommodation, food, heat, lighting, healthcare, education and some spending money. It is not the same thing as a man being killed by the police. There is substandard accommodation in some cases and that needs to change.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** As we start the slow move back to some kind of normality, and it is hoped we will be able to move on to phase 2 from Monday, it is important again to recognise the great efforts by the public in complying with the advice and in succeeding in not only flattening the curve but driving the virus out to a large extent. It is also important to acknowledge the heroic efforts by front-line workers, particularly in the health service but also those many front-line workers who have kept the country open, including retail workers, delivery people and all kinds of different people who have supported the rest of us in keeping the show on the road to the greatest extent possible. It is important that we always remember those people who have done so much for the country.

I absolutely agree with the points that have been made about the primacy of public health advice in all decision making on the virus. I agree the daily briefings from the CMO are very good. My concern is that at this point, while we hope we are on that road back, other considerations need to be taken into account. I have raised the issue of risk assessment and risk management with the Taoiseach before. I am not satisfied that there is adequate risk assessment of the different steps in the roadmap. I urge him to consider different sectors on the basis of the level of risk involved in opening up those sectors, or indeed different sectors of the community or the population. It is important to be open and honest with people about the level of risk involved because we have not heard how risk is being assessed and managed. We take on board the advice from the CMO and from NPHET, which is very important, but there are other considerations. The data supporting risk assessment need to be published.

I have spoken to the Taoiseach before about the decisions on schools reopening and the leaving certificate. At no point were we told the level of risk in pursuing either of those courses. The same could be said about many other areas. While there has been this enormous public effort, certain sectors of our community are paying a very high price, such as the under 40s. We previously referred to people in their 20s and 30s as the locked-out generation. They took the brunt of the last recession and had their hopes and dreams very much dashed. They have again been called upon and have willingly made enormous sacrifices for the rest of the community. I am really concerned that it has not been spelled out to that generation in their 20s and 30s about how they can resume some kind of normal life. We need to prevent that generation of people experiencing a double whammy. We need to ensure they are not set back again in their lives, hopes and ambitions.

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Particular consideration must be given to low-paid workers, that cohort of people who are in very precarious employment, unsure about contracts, wanting to work much more and not having the potential to do that. We know that nearly a quarter of the workforce prior to this were in that category. It is a very substantial number of people. They are now taking the brunt of the shutdown of the economy.

Yesterday's Department of Finance figures revealed that tax receipts were not as low as had been expected, indicating that in the main people who are better off and paying higher levels of tax have retained their employment.

*1 o'clock*

It is predominantly people at low levels of income who have been worst hit by the closing down of the economy. It is absolutely critical that we are mindful of the potential for a huge increase in poverty in future. That is why I have to express concern regarding what the Taoiseach said about the withdrawal of the pandemic payment. He spoke about a very blunt instrument. Perhaps it is more refined than he indicated. If he is only guaranteeing the €350 payment for people working full time, then many people at levels between €203 and €350 are likely to lose substantially and that will increase levels of poverty. It is not just a question of who is working full time and who is working part time. There are many different grades of workers in between, and I would be much more reassured if the Taoiseach had said his approach will be to ensure that people working part time will not suffer a loss of income either. There needs to be much more refinement than the kind of blunt instrument set out by the Taoiseach today. I am concerned that there will be a substantial increase in the poverty rate as a result of what is being done. What was done initially was absolutely right regarding providing income support and support to businesses, although it is clear that has not been sufficient and we need to continue and increase those supports.

What the pandemic has exposed in this country are great weaknesses in how we provide public services. I am interested in the Taoiseach's view on that matter. When we look at critical public services, such as healthcare, the weakness in our public health service has been exposed very graphically in respect of inadequate numbers of beds and inadequate access to essential healthcare. All those weaknesses have now been exposed, and I wonder what lessons have been learned. It is not just an issue regarding hospital care. We can also look at elder care. I refer to the over-reliance on nursing homes, the model of care and the approach taken to a private sector and a privatised, for-profit model of care. There are major weaknesses associated with that model and those have been exposed by the appalling occurrences within our nursing home sector.

I also refer to weaknesses in the area of mental healthcare and what has been exposed by this pandemic. We can look as well at childcare, where again the privatised model has made it so difficult to reboot our services and to have a coherent response to the demand for childcare. In addition, we could look at lack of access to affordable housing, as well as the inhumane situation in direct provision. Those issues have again been exposed by this virus. While the Taoiseach has said he recognises that the service we see is highly unsatisfactory and inhumane, this is the privatised model of care that his Government has promoted and stood over. It has been shown to be hugely fragile and weak and has not been unable to respond to the crisis.

I ask the Taoiseach again if he accepts there are major weaknesses in our public services and that we need to move to a much different model in respect of universal healthcare and uni-

versal public services generally. I state that because that is what is being called for by all the important bodies in the country. The ESRI referred to the need to reinforce our public services and have a stimulus. The document produced by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, *No Going Back: A New Deal towards a safe and secure future for all*, referred to the need to bolster our public services substantially. We could also look at what IBEC has stated concerning the need to ensure we have universal public services similar to those in northern European countries, in particular, but also to such services provided right across Europe. The question is whether the Taoiseach accepts that our public services, in the manner in which his Government and the previous Government provided those services, are wholly inadequate in respect of meeting the needs of the public.

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

Black lives matter. Racism is not so much a virus as a poison deliberately administered. George Floyd was a victim of murderous, brutal and systemic racism that was deliberately stoked, encouraged and escalated by the billionaire Donald Trump, who uses racism deliberately, as even General James “Mad Dog” Mattis has admitted, to divide and rule, to deflect away from economic and social injustice and to set people against one another. Will the Taoiseach condemn Donald Trump for his use of racism and police brutality as a result of which George Floyd lost his life and of which millions of Americans and millions more across the world are victims?

Will he match his words against racism by eliminating the racist injustice that is the direct provision system? It is an inhumane and degrading system that marks people of colour out as different, other and separate and, consequently, leads to encouraging that poison and racism. Will he accept that the failure to address systemic and ongoing inequality, poverty and injustice perpetuates the soil in which racism and the divide and rule tactics we have seen from Donald Trump continue to flourish? If he does not, his condemnation means nothing. In order to eliminate racism we need to eschew divide and rule tactics and address the horrors of poverty, unemployment and homelessness. If the Taoiseach condemns racism, does he also recognise his Government’s failure to deal with those ingredients that continue to perpetuate the opportunity for that divide and rule poison to be used by cynical and dishonest leaders?

**The Taoiseach:** I answered a similar question on direct provision earlier. On the events we have seen take place in the United States, as I stated, we have witnessed a real absence of moral leadership from the top in the United States. We should have had words of unity, comfort and reconciliation, but we did not get them and that is absolutely wrong. I am sure that if those events had happened in this country or another country, we would have seen a much better response from the political leadership of this country or the other country.

Racism has many facets. The history of racism in the United States is a very different one from ours. It is rooted in a history of slavery which has not yet been overcome. In Ireland, our experience of building a multi-racial society is quite different and has different characteristics. I touched on them in my opening statement.

The Deputy has spoken and preached about divide and rule and divisiveness, but almost all of his politics is divisive and populist. It is all about setting up ideas about elites versus the masses, bosses against the others, conspiracies, tearing people down and setting people apart. It is anger and rage. What he does is the flip side. To me, the far right and the far left are not very different. They are the same kind of thing. It is about a conspiracy of elites against the people

and simple answers to complex problems. The Deputy is not too different, really.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Perhaps a more accurate description of divide and rule tactics is the false claim the Taoiseach tried to make in order to boost his political ambitions by decrying the welfare cheats who cheat us all, rather than the bankers and property speculators who truly did cheat us all.

Maybe the Taoiseach will address another group who are about to face an injustice at his hands and, indeed, have faced police harassment in recent days. I refer to the Debenhams workers who are currently standing outside Leinster House and have done so every week for several weeks. They were unceremoniously dumped on the scrap heap by a cynical company that is using the Covid-19 crisis as a cover for its sheer greed. These are workers who are fighting for decent redundancy terms and who want to be at work but, and this is critical, many of them are women part-time workers who are now on the Covid-19 payment. Of course, when we ask who are the working poor in this country, they are women part-time workers in the main. Are they now going to be the victims of the Taoiseach's plan to taper, cut and reduce the €350 pandemic payment? Rather than cut and attack the working poor again, why does he not address the employer - Debenhams - that treated these workers in such a cynical way?

**The Taoiseach:** The former Debenhams workers should get the redundancy payments they were promised, in my view, but, as I understand it, most of these issues are now matters for the courts and none of us can interfere in that. It is dishonest to tell people that politicians can interfere in a court process when they cannot.

Let me restate what I said earlier about the pandemic unemployment payment. The Cabinet will meet tomorrow and make a decision on this. The assurance that I can give to the 500,000 or so people who are on the pandemic unemployment payment is that it will be extended for months, not for weeks, because this pandemic is not over yet. People who were working full-time before the pandemic happened will continue to get the €350 payment. Some people who are working part-time will have their payment reduced but it will still be more than they were getting before the pandemic, and that would include those Debenhams workers, so they will still be getting more than they got on a weekly basis in January or February.

What the Deputy is doing again is engaging in exactly that form of cynical, nasty populism - spreading untruths in order to make people angry, dividing the people from a perceived, invented elite, putting emotion over reason and peddling easy solutions to problems that are complex. It is fundamentally dishonest. It is not very different from what those on the far right do elsewhere.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I want to raise some points about the intervention of the Garda in an industrial dispute. The dispute I refer to is the Debenhams dispute. Debenhams workers, who are members of the Mandate trade union, have balloted 97% in support of industrial action. That makes this the first official strike of the lockdown and, therefore, something of a test case.

In Cork city last week, staff from a security company removed a safe from the Debenhams store in St. Patrick's Street containing approximately €40,000. Nothing moves in that place without the workers knowing it and by the time the security staff were ready to drive away, they found themselves blocked in the loading bay by 25 strikers. The workers correctly took this action because they believed that stored money and stock should be used exclusively to save jobs or, at the very least, provide decent redundancy payments. The staff from the security company

stubbornly refused to restore the safe to the store and a four-hour stand-off ensued. Gardaí were called and, eventually, a senior officer arrived and threatened the workers' leaders - three women - with arrest under charges of false imprisonment if they did not desist. Here we had a group of workers who had been shamelessly abused by their employer, who were fighting for justice, who would normally be on their way home to make the tea for their families, and who were being accused of *de facto* kidnapping and threatened with arrest by senior Garda officers. Under protest, the workers stood aside and let the van pass.

In Dublin last Saturday, gardaí took the names of all of the workers picketing the Henry Street Debenhams store, citing Covid-19 regulations, despite the fact the workers practised social distancing and many wore masks. I would go so far as to say the workers have set an example for any group that wishes to protest during lockdown. Their discipline has been consistent and their social distancing has been organised conscientiously and comprehensively throughout. Yet, this was not the first time gardaí took the names of Debenhams workers. It had been done previously at both Henry Street in Dublin and St. Patrick's Street in Cork. After one such incident, we were treated to a display of hand-wringing here in the Dáil by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty, but, as my story illustrates, the Debenhams workers continue to face harassment from gardaí, especially officers from the Anglesea Street station in Cork and the Store Street station in Dublin.

I have two questions for the Taoiseach and I hope there will be an extra minute of time in order that they can be answered. Is the Taoiseach prepared to apologise to these workers for the treatment they have received at the hands of officers of the State? Given that Covid-19 restrictions may not prove to be a short-term phenomenon, does the Taoiseach accept the need for arrangements that will allow workers to pursue and defend their interests through industrial action without having to suffer constant harassment at the hands of An Garda Síochána?

**The Taoiseach:** I have no knowledge or information on that incident. It is one on which I would have to seek a report from the Garda and I shall. There are a lot of restrictions in place as a consequence of this pandemic but there are not restrictions on protests or industrial action. Pickets and protests can happen provided people behave in a way consistent with the regulations, which are maintaining a distance from other people and not travelling more than 5 km from their home. This will change to 20 km on Monday. There is no prohibition on pickets or protests but people need to do it with regard to the regulations and I ask them to do it in a responsible way to protect the lives of others, especially our healthcare workers and our elderly. I have seen pictures of Deputy Barry involved in protests and he has been doing exactly that; keeping a distance of 2 m from other people and not being more than 5 km from his home.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** As the country now enters phase two of the lockdown I once more pay tribute to the many heroes working on the front line, helping to keep us all safe during this period. I also offer my condolences to the family and friends of those who passed away in the last week as a result of this horrible disease. The people of Ireland are putting in a truly great effort in keeping this virus at bay.

We have heard many media reports that the emergency weekly pandemic unemployment payment will be changed shortly. I believe this payment should not be stopped until the economy is allowed to reopen fully. Many people are very worried about the changes that may be introduced. Will the Taoiseach confirm that no changes will happen to the pandemic unemployment payment until the economy is open fully again?

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In addition to the social distancing rules I understand we are following the World Health Organization, WHO, guidelines. These are that a safe social distance of 1 m is recommended, but we are maintaining a distance of 2 m. Will the Taoiseach confirm which guidelines are we following in this regard? If we are to take the WHO advice of 1 m it could have a major impact on getting our economy up and running again. Many small and medium size businesses will go to the wall if they are not allowed to reopen soon. I put it to the Taoiseach that we must not allow these businesses to fail. While several measures have been put in place to support these businesses, nothing will replace them being allowed to reopen and trade again.

On Tuesday a demonstration took place in the centre of Dundalk, with similar demonstrations in other parts of the State. I fully understand the anger felt by these people and that the cause they are highlighting needs to be highlighted. The Black Lives Matter cause is very worthy and needs to be highlighted. What has happened in the United States of America is a disgrace. No human deserves to be treated that way. Those responsible should be treated as murderers because, in my view, that is what happened. I have an issue, however, with the large congregation of people that took place in Dundalk town centre. No social distancing took place at all, which is not acceptable. As we have suffered the lockdown restrictions we placed people who are over 70 years of age under a virtual house arrest, we stopped friends and even family members from attending funerals of their loved ones, and families have been unable to visit loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes. People have gone to extraordinary lengths to keep this horrible virus at bay. This week a constituent told me she was unable to attend the wake or the funeral of a close relative because of the restrictions in place, yet these other large gatherings of people are apparently allowed to take place. I fully support the cause that brought people to demonstrate but during this lockdown surely a different form of protest should be organised. I am interested to hear the Taoiseach's views on these protests and whether they should be allowed to take place.

During questions to the Tánaiste some weeks ago, the Tánaiste dismissed my suggestion that a hard Brexit was coming. Indeed, the Tánaiste made light of the point I was trying to raise. It now emerges, and looks likely, that we will have a hard Brexit. The UK Government is also preparing for a hard Brexit. I fear we will sleepwalk into this. Coming as I do from a Border county I know more than most about, and understand the effects of, a hard border. Will the Taoiseach confirm to me today that the Government has plans in place for a hard border? Will he enlighten us on some of the plans in place for a hard Brexit? We cannot rely on the UK Government to help us. It is quite clear from its actions and its complete lack of keeping promises that it is planning for a hard Brexit. We must protect ourselves should this happen. Will the Taoiseach confirm to the House that we will be fully prepared for a hard Brexit should it happen?

I listened closely to an interview the Taoiseach gave this week in which he stated Fianna Fáil and the Green Party must agree we need to start paying back some of the money received through the Covid fund within the next two to three years. Such comments worry me greatly. It sounds as though the Taoiseach is preparing for the introduction of austerity. I want to be very clear that the people do not deserve another period of austerity. They will simply not accept it and I will support them in it. People cannot be made to pay for this crisis. Will the Taoiseach support me and confirm that he, as leader of the Government, will not introduce austerity measures or support the introduction of austerity measures as a member of the Government?

During the course of the past week, fires have raged in the Cooley mountains, which have put residents, wildlife and property in great danger. In recent days, a second major blaze was

started on the mountains. Last week, a code red forest fire alert was issued to the public. The alert warning requested that many activities would not take place, including the outdoor use of barbecues and fires on forest land and other high-risk areas. Agricultural activities that may present a risk of fire were suspended. Members of the public were reminded to adhere to the regulations in respect of the Covid-19 restrictions. The alert also included that vehicles were not to be parked near site entrances so they would not impede the emergency services. Forest owners and managers and other relevant authorities were to implement fire patrols to exclude all fire activities. It is quite obvious the above advice was ignored by certain members of the public. It is understood the fires in the Cooley mountains were caused by a camp fire. To make matters worse, vehicles were parked at the entrance, which prohibited the fire services from attending the scenes. The damage to property and the distress to residents and wildlife that the fires have caused is disgraceful.

What powers do the authorities have under a code red fire alert to bring action against these people who have caused so much damage to the Cooley mountains? Can any action be brought against those responsible for this reckless act? If no action can be brought, surely we must look at introducing legislation to deal with this type of reckless behaviour. It is simply not good enough for a red alert to be issued and hope everything is okay. We need to back up alerts with real powers.

Will the Taoiseach answer the following questions? What powers do the authorities have under a code red forest alert to bring action against those who ignore the alert? Will the Taoiseach confirm that no changes to the emergency Covid payment will take place until such time as the economy fully reopens? Will the Taoiseach confirm the Government has proper planning in place for a hard Brexit? Will the Taoiseach confirm whose guidelines we are following on social distancing? If we are not following the guidelines of the World Health Organization, on what basis are we not doing so? What are the views of the Taoiseach on the large public gatherings that took place in Dundalk and other areas this week as part of the Black Lives Matter protest? Will the Taoiseach confirm he is not planning to introduce austerity measures to repay the emergency Covid fund? I appreciate the Taoiseach answering as many questions as he can, and if he cannot do so, I would appreciate the answers in writing.

**The Taoiseach:** I have answered questions on the pandemic unemployment payment already so perhaps I will answer some of the Deputy's other questions. I am totally opposed to reintroducing austerity or austerity measures in Ireland. There is nothing I would hate more to see happen to our country than having to experience more austerity budgets. Let us not forget why we had austerity in Ireland ten or 12 years ago. It was not because the economy collapsed. It was not because the banks collapsed. It was because we lost the confidence of the financial markets and could not borrow any more. That is why austerity happened. We could not borrow money and had to go to the IMF. The IMF said it was the lender of last resort and would only give us money if we fulfilled certain conditions, and those conditions were austerity.

How would we end up in austerity again? We would do so by putting ourselves in a position that we lose the confidence of those financial markets, and that would be by borrowing more than we could afford to pay back. That is the basic point. Austerity happens not because the economy collapses or the banks collapse but because we lose the confidence of the financial markets and we lose the confidence of the financial markets by borrowing more than we can afford to pay back because people then will not lend us more money. It is as simple as that and that is why the kind of policies that are pursued by left-wing governments, socialist governments and reckless populist governments around the world are the ones that lead to austerity in

the end.

On WHO advice, I think I am correct in saying the advice is to stay at least 1 metre apart or more than 1 metre apart but that 2 metres is best. There are different opinions on this, and different agencies and experts will give different opinions. What is useful to read is a study published by *The Lancet* only a couple of days ago. That is a meta-analysis of 170 different studies on masks and social distancing and what works and does not work. To cut a long story short, what that *Lancet* analysis concludes is that if people are more than a metre apart, they are between 70% and 80% protected, and if they are 2 metres or more apart, they are between 95% and 100% protected. That is the difference. Nobody disputes that. One metre is good; 2 metres is better. The question is at what point we are willing to take the risk of moving from 2 metres to 1 metre. I think we do not take that risk until the virus is more suppressed in our community than it is now.

I believe protests and demonstrations are part of democracy and I believe in free speech and hate to see that suppressed in other countries. I would however ask anyone who is taking part in protests of any nature to maintain that physical distance of 2 metres and not to travel more than 5 km from their homes to participate in the protest. Protests can be organised locally as well as in city centre locations. Anyone who is organising a protest should ensure that they take responsibility for that protest, that the public health guidelines are managed, and to do that not because I am asking them to but out of respect for our health care workers and older people who are the ones who will suffer if any of these protests become a cluster for infection.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** At his press conference on Friday, 15 May 2020, the Taoiseach announced that horse racing was to return on 8 June. Horse racing worldwide is known as having two codes, thoroughbred and trotting racing. Trotting is the largest form of horse racing within Europe, and where both codes exist, the relevant governments allowed both to recommence at the same time. These countries include France, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Finland, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Holland, Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. In Ireland the Irish Harness Racing Association, IHRA, is the governing body for trotting racing. On Tuesday, 14 May, the IHRA forwarded its 70-page document of racing protocols, similar to Horse Racing Ireland's, HRI's, submission, and a letter addressed to the Taoiseach and to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The IHRA has been told it is now at the Taoiseach's office but no response has been given allowing the IHRA to recommence its racing season. The IHRA has also been informed by the officials of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, that the Taoiseach's announcement about the resumption of horse racing was only for thoroughbred racing and not for trotting. Will the trotting racing, under the IHRA, be allowed in Ireland under phase 2? Given the decision on 15 May to allow the return to racing involving the HRI on 8 June, does the Taoiseach agree that the IHRA should be granted the permission to commence? Otherwise, the response would be highly discriminatory and violate competition laws. The greyhound industry wants to reopen greyhound racing in a safe manner at the same time as other sports such as horse racing. Greyhound racing is well regulated and is of considerable financial benefit to rural and urban communities. Will greyhound racing reopen in phase 2?

Businesses are haemorrhaging at an enormous rate in west Cork, as must be the case all over the island. Massive efforts are being made by businesses to keep their doors open, but even having a picnic bench outside their businesses 2 metres apart is not being allowed, leading to massive frustration in towns such as Kinsale, Bandon, Clonakilty, all the way back to Schull, Bantry and Skibbereen. There is a feeling that we are being treated like areas in Dublin where

there are high corona virus rates. Will the Taoiseach tell me where the public can access a town by town breakdown of how many Covid-19 cases there are in their areas, similar to the breakdown for the hospitals?

Why are we not investing in Covid-19 testing in our airports and ports as in Singapore and Vienna so that we can open up our country in a safe manner to people who want to come here for whatever reason? There could be a simple test at the point of entry, sent to an Irish laboratory which sends results back within hours, and a certificate granted showing the person to be Covid-19 free. This is a no-brainer and while the State will have to invest very little in it, it will provide a massive boost to our economy and make people safe in their communities, welcoming people from wherever they come. While we invested in private hospitals for genuine reasons at the beginning of the pandemic, now is the time to invest in some of our excellent labs that can provide same day results and in so doing, kick-start our economy again.

**The Taoiseach:** I will have to check out the Deputy's question about trotting racing. I am not familiar with the case the IHRA is making so I will check that out later today or tomorrow and come back to the Deputy.

On greyhound racing, we would hope to get it back some time this month. That is not confirmed yet but that is the intention. It will be without spectators but it will all be done outdoors so that should happen some time this month.

I do not know if town-by-town or district-by-district numbers are available for coronavirus cases but we should bear in mind that they can be misleading. A nursing home in a town might give a figure for a town that makes it look like that town has many Covid-19 cases but in fact all of the cases might be in one nursing home or meat factory. Therefore, that information might not be as useful as people might think it is.

However, it is reassuring to see that so many counties have had no new cases in recent days. That is one of the reasons I disagree with people who say the 5 km rule or the 20 km rule do not make sense. If we had not had that rule in place in recent weeks we would have seen people from Dublin and Cork travelling to counties where there are no new cases and there would have been new cases in those counties. I totally disagree with people who are arguing that the 20 km rule has no scientific basis or is not a good idea. It is a good idea and that is the travel limit that will apply in phase 2.

We will examine the issue of Covid-19 testing in airports and ports but it costs €200 a go so the person getting tested will have to pay for it.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** It costs €50 in west Cork with same-day results.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Today we hear travel agents and airlines advertising that Spain will be opening up on 1 July. In that same vein, I call on the Taoiseach to open hotels and pubs on the same day as restaurants and cafés on 29 June and to give the tourism industry in Kerry in places such as Killarney, Dingle, Cahersiveen and right around the Ring of Kerry the chance to avail of a few weeks of tourism. We all hope the schools will go back in the last week of August so we are only talking about six to seven weeks of a window. If we do not open the hotels and pubs until 10 August the season will be over and it will be gone for this year. Many places will just not open under those circumstances. We need businesses and pubs to operate in order to create jobs and incomes. To do this, we need to adjust the 2 m limit to 1 m. The WHO, which we gave an awful lot of money to, more than €9 million, suggests that 1 m will do.

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The programme for Government should be about getting our economy back up and running. It seems to me that for the last number of months until this week, it has been about the climate and climate change. The fact is that our emissions are only 0.13% in the worldwide context.

Most businesses and SMEs will need grants to get themselves up and running and they will need a cash injection, as they did in Germany. Bus and coach tours need guidance about seating. Yesterday, we heard from a tour operator that it is trying to sell tours for 2021 but it is not clear how many people will be allowed to sit on a 50-seater, a 30-seater or a 16-seater bus. It is not fair on these companies that they are getting no guidance. Someone somewhere should somehow be able to tell them and guide them as to what will be acceptable.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil should not block the proposed liquified natural gas, LNG, import terminal in Shannon and not cave in to the Green Party. This project does not need any money from the Government, it would create many jobs and we need a second gas source.

The Government still has not addressed the need for Covid payments for seasonal workers or people over the age of 66, who really need whatever they were on to be brought up to the value of the Covid payment. They were not looking for the payment on top of what they were getting but rather the €350 just to bring them up to €350.

Farmers are not getting much encouragement or assistance. The Taoiseach advised us to cut down on eating meat. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, says that we cannot stay farming like our fathers did, even though everyone on my side of the country recognises that the Minister's father, Donal Creed, God be good to him, was a fierce farmer and landed up here one morning after milking his cows and the place was still not open. The Greens just want to sow seeds in south-facing window boxes. They say we should not cut turf. Some other geniuses are saying we must block drains and make land useless after all the hard work on it, some of which was grant-aided. The Greens, we now hear, want no more planning in rural areas, only towns. They want to build lay-bys and no more roads. We had plenty of lay-bys in Kerry and they were grand for lorry drivers to pull into in order to have their rest breaks, but they were closed and blocked because it was felt Travellers would camp there.

I was very disappointed when Deputy Micheál Martin stated on "The Late Late Show" that farmers would have to diversify and plant forestry. Planting forestry does not provide an acceptable income for many farmers. Around east Cork and north Kerry, we have great land. We are not allowed plant marginal land. It is not grant-aided. We have to plant good land. Planting forestry while the rainforests in South America are cut down and beef is brought into Europe is not an option for Irish farmers, and it is not acceptable to come out with such a statement. I am really disappointed in the leader of Fianna Fáil and the Taoiseach and his entire Government for the non-assistance they have given farmers over the past four and half years.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Black lives matter, and it is good to hear that spoken about in the House today. There is no doubt but that the type of racism we have seen in America does not apply here, and that is very welcome, but racism is here, as the Taoiseach acknowledged earlier. We have heard racist talk from Deputies in this House but also during election periods, when candidates get elected using the race card against Travellers and black citizens and residents of our State in order to curry favour and gain votes for themselves. Does the Taoiseach agree that the system of direct provision, as it operates here, adds to this sentiment across the State? That is a very different question from those that were asked earlier, and I would like him to reflect on it.

There has been a lot of rumour and speculation around the reopening dates. We have also had a lot of discussion on it today. I wish to touch on the issue of the 2 m and 1 m separation distances that the Taoiseach mentioned earlier, particularly in the context of small restaurants and how they might afford to meet the requirements. Many of the owners of small restaurants to whom I have been talking have indicated that they will not be able to open or that it will not be financially viable for them to open with the 2 m requirement in place but that they could do it if the 1 m requirement was introduced. How restrictive is this, and how committed is the Taoiseach to the 2 m requirement? Restaurants and so on need to be able to start planning now for when the 2 m distance requirement might be lifted in order that they can spend money to make sure they are well positioned. The bigger disaster would be for them to go ahead and plan on a 2 m distance requirement only to discover in two or three weeks' time that the Government will reduce it to 1 m instead. That would be worse. The Government needs to highlight clearly the decision now and whether the measure is going to stay or if it is going to be reduced. We need a clear indication of when the Government will make the final decision on that. I am keen for the Taoiseach to address that issue as well.

**The Taoiseach:** My thanks to Deputy Pringle. As I mentioned earlier, direct provision is very often substandard. The kind of accommodation we want is at the McMahon standard level, where it is self-catering and where people have their own door. Much of direct provision is substandard and that needs to change. We have brought in good examples of accommodation in recent years, but obviously the whole programme needs to be accelerated by the next Government.

Does it add to racism? I hope it does not. Many communities have welcomed accommodation centres in their towns and villages and have set up friends-of-the-centre groups, for example. It has been good to see that. I do not think it always fuels racism.

What would the alternative look like? The alternative often put forward is that there should be purpose-built accommodation provided by the State to house asylum seekers or built and provided on a non-profit basis by affordable housing bodies or charities. I think we would run into the same problems in communities. That may well be the right model to employ, but the minute a planning application goes in, I can guarantee Deputy Pringle that we would see objections and public meetings. We would have people coming up with all sorts of reasons they do not want a purpose-built, own-door, State-run accommodation centre in their town or village. Would it be any different in terms of the reaction we get from local communities? I do not know but I fear it would not be.

Deputy Pringle referred to the 1 metre-2 metre issue. As I mentioned, we hear different advice from different bodies. We hear different experts say different things. The best information I have read on this is *The Lancet* paper published the other day. It is a meta-analysis of approximately 170 different studies that looks at issues like social distancing and masks. What the study says in simple terms is that being a little more than 1 metre away gives a person protection of between 70% to 80%. If we go to 2 metres, the level of protection goes to between 95% and 100%. If we go from 2 meters to 1 metre, it is a risk. We should not pretend that it is not a risk. We have a rough idea of what sort of risk it is, going from about 95% protection to something like 70% or 80%. If we take that risk, I think we should not do it yet. We should suppress the virus more in the community before we are willing to take that risk. We will not be recommending a change as part of phase 2 tomorrow. That is not to say that we might not do so in future.

Interestingly, the paper does a good piece on masks too. There is very strong evidence that they should be worn in healthcare settings but weak evidence that they are valuable in the community setting.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I want to raise two issues with the Taoiseach this morning. Earlier, the Taoiseach spoke about the €1.57 trillion EU budget that is to front-load our response to Covid-19 and the €540 billion to support both the social and economic recovery. We need to do the same in this country. We need to support a social and economic recovery. The Government has put several programmes in place. Some of them are working well. However, significant gaps remain. On many occasions I have asked the Taoiseach and the relevant Ministers for the Government to look at putting in place some small-scale grant aid for small businesses which see a mounting wall of debt as they remain closed, whether because of insurance, utility bills, rent etc. It would give hope to those businesses that maybe in phases 2, 3 or 4, they could reopen. They will know at that point, especially in the hospitality sector, that it will be a matter of survival. If they are already carrying debt, they are less likely to think in terms of reopening. Yet, a small level of grant aid could make a significant difference.

I raised this issue with the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, yesterday around community and voluntary groups trying to keep community centres afloat. They are dotted throughout the country. They are the lifeblood of communities. Often crèches, language schools or dancing classes bring in a little money to keep them afloat. They too are facing rising utility bills and they have no way of making any income to help. As part of our social and economic recovery, could we consider some small level of grant aid for such businesses and community enterprises? Businesses that do not pay rates are locked out of the restart grant. Could that matter be examined?

This is the fourth time I have raised my next issue in the Chamber with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health, namely, healthcare for non-Covid patients. I asked for flexibility on the consultants' contract and changes to the private hospital contract. I am happy with the Government's decision to end the latter contract. However, it will be in place until the end of June. That is 25 full days. If someone is waiting for a biopsy or is in pain, those 25 days will make a considerable difference. Is there any possibility that, in the interim, flexibility can be shown and changes can be made to give people hope that they can get into hospital?

In the beginning, the Government moved quickly. That was the right thing to do. Will it now inject the same sense of urgency into the rapidly building non-Covid healthcare emergency that it injected into the Covid emergency?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy. There is the reopening grant of up to €10,000 which is available to small businesses to help them reopen. Rates are waived for three months. There is the wage subsidy scheme, which pays a lot of the salaries and wages of people who work in small businesses. In terms of utilities, one only pays for the utilities one pays for, but the companies have agreed a suspension.

We are going to look at doing more. One of the things we are looking at is something the Deputy specifically raised, that being, businesses or places that do not pay rates. I would be aware of a few, for example, local tourist attractions or museums around the country that are charitable and they do not pay rates, but they need money to reopen just as much as anyone else does. That is one of the things we are examining. Perhaps we could do something a little bit better with the reopening grant. What we have done, we have done. It is not the end of it. We

are going to have to do more, and we accept that. If the Deputy has any specific proposal she wants to make, we will examine it.

Regarding private patients needing care in June in private hospitals, I think we should be aware that it is not impossible for private patients to be brought into private hospitals by their private consultants. In fact, that is happening. They just cannot be charged. There are consultants who have accepted the State contract - €4,000 per week, not a small amount of money - and are seeing those patients *pro bono* in private hospitals. That is what they should do.

*Sitting suspended at 1.50 p.m. and resumed at 2.10 p.m.*

### **Covid-19 (Education and Skills): Statements**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Iarraim ar an Aire a ráiteas oscailte a thabhairt dúinn ar dtús. Tá deich nóiméad aige.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Chathaoirleach Gníomhach as a cheapachán úr.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Níl mé sa phost ach ar feadh tamaillín beag.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Níl an gown air go fóill.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Deputy Ó Snodaigh is getting ready for the big job.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas le Baill an Tí as ucht a dtiomantais maidir leis na rudaí a bhí ar chroílár na díospóireachta ó thaobh an oideachais thar na míonna agus na laethanta a chuaigh thart. Tá na rudaí sin iontach tábhachtach. Bhí stádas a dtodhchaí neamhchinnte ach ba é sin an bealach a bhí romhainn. Táim fíorbhuíoch do na páirtithe leasmhara san earnáil oideachais as an chuidiú a bhfuair mé uathu. Bhí siad ag obair go dian. Táim ag tagairt ach go háirithe d'fhoirne uilig na mbunscoileanna, na meánscoileanna agus na n-ollscoileanna. Tá tionchar mór ag cúrsaí ar na mic léinn agus na daoine óga. Is é sin an fáth go raibh an Rialtas tiomanta d'oscailt na scoileanna agus ag obair go dian dícheallach ar son daoine óga le riachtanais speisialta. Táim buíoch as a bheith ann do dhíospóireacht arís. Is é an ról agus an dualgas atá ormsa ná obair le moltaí na daoine uilig sa Dáil. Beimid in áit dhearfach an tseachtain seo chugainn de bharr na díospóireachta.

I am happy to be here in the House again to provide Members with the latest updates on the significant issues in the education system, including reopening our schools, leaving certificate 2020, and the provision of the summer programme. I am conscious that the Business Committee has also scheduled a full session on the issue of the summer programme in the House next week.

A lot has happened across the education and skills sector in the last 12 weeks since schools, colleges, universities and other settings closed on 12 March, which is 12 weeks ago today. In the 12 weeks between now and the end of August a lot more will be done. The pace at which issues have been identified and addressed over the past 12 weeks is a credit to those who work

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in the sector, the students and the parents. It exemplifies the spirit of being in this together and I want in particular to acknowledge the leadership of the officials in the Department of Education and Skills who have worked on all of these issues throughout. Since I was last in this House, the executive office working on the calculated grades process in my Department, which is working in close collaboration with stakeholders, has progressed a range of issues. These include the publication of the guide for schools in providing estimated percentage marks and class rank orderings on 21 May, with supplementary guidance issued on 28 May.

Over 60,000 leaving certificate and leaving certificate applied students had registered on the student portal by the 12 p.m. extended deadline for registration last Friday. This is over 98% of the total of 61,029 who had been expected to sit the leaving certificate examination in 2020. I can also confirm that my Department will continue to engage with schools in the coming weeks in an effort to establish why some students may not have registered on the portal. I want to take this opportunity to thank the students who responded to my call last week to be proactive and engage in the online process and not to leave registration to the last minute. The executive office has established a special section to deal with students who are in atypical situations and supplementary guidance will issue on these aspects. This is an area that many Deputies had raised and every effort will be made to resolve these cases.

The system through which schools will submit data to the executive office will shortly go live with accompanying guidance issuing to principals. I confirmed the appointment of Dr. Áine Lawlor as the chair of the independent monitoring committee of the calculated grades process when I was last in the House. I can now confirm the other members of the committee. They are Dr. Peter Archer, the former CEO of the Educational Research Centre; Ms Majella O'Shea, former Deputy CEO of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA; Mr. Joe Hamill, former Secretary General of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and chair of the New Schools Establishments Group; Mr. Justin Edwards, CEO of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, Northern Ireland, and Professor Michael O'Leary, Professor of Assessment at DCU. These are all eminent people whose experience crosses education, governance, assessment and research. I want to thank each of them for agreeing to be members of the committee and I wish them well as they have their first formal meeting today.

The initial feedback coming from school management bodies and teacher unions on the operation of calculated grades at school level has been positive, with teachers engaging in a professional manner with the process. I understand teachers and principals have found the guidance material prepared for them to be very helpful, including the provision of additional guidance and answers to queries, in addition to appreciating the speed at which these have been provided. Our focus now is very much on ensuring we are ready to receive the submissions from schools and to then reopen the student portal so students can choose to opt in to receive calculated grades.

Everyone in this House appreciates the wider impacts of extended school closures on children and particularly on children already at risk of disadvantage or who have special educational needs. That is why I want to see the maximum return to school possible in late August and September that is consistent with the need to do it in a safe way. Managing the reopening of schools is a massive logistical operation and requires careful planning and management. My Department is engaging in a process of detailed planning and stakeholder engagement at primary and post-primary levels to achieve this objective in a way that is safe for students and staff.

I brought an update to Cabinet last Friday on these issues and regarding delivery of the summer programme. I will be returning to Cabinet next week with a plan to achieve these dual objectives. I then expect to publish those plans.

Among other things, we will look at a range of issues including: public health guidance on mitigation to build confidence within the school community of teachers, staff, parents and children; measures to ensure hygiene and infection prevention and control; training for staff in communication with families to promote those measures, including such measures as good hand hygiene and hand cleaning and good respiratory practices; attention to promoting children's well-being in returning to school; and engagement with stakeholders. I am paying very close attention to the experience of other countries which have reopened schools and to emerging scientific advice. I will continue to engage with my counterparts in the North, the UK and across Europe to learn from their experiences.

The potential for running summer programmes for children with complex special educational needs and children at greatest risk of educational disadvantage is being developed. In 2019, students with autism and children with severe and profound general learning disabilities participated in the traditional July provision scheme over two strands, with approximately 70% of students accessing the home-based strand and 30% attending 232 schools, predominantly at primary level.

My Department, the Department of Health and the HSE have linked up to consider a joined-up approach to the provision of a continuum of care and support during the summer period. A cross-departmental working group has been established to map this continuum. I want a summer education programme to run, recognising that students with special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage need to be prioritised. Regression in their learning and difficulties in transitioning to the next educational setting are real concerns for some of these students. It is generally acknowledged that disadvantaged pupils are more at risk of disengaging in a remote-learning environment relative to their peers and may fail to make a successful transition to a more senior level.

The existing summer provisions aimed at students at risk of educational disadvantage are being examined, including the school completion programme, summer literacy and numeracy programmes for DEIS primary schools and summer camps run by or outsourced by boards of management. Planning for summer education programmes is difficult under the current circumstances with some of the issues examined including: the running of any school-based programme will need to be informed by public health advice; the availability and willingness of schools, teachers, SNAs and bus escorts to support the programme; a desire that key logistical arrangements will be worked out in advance of announcing the programme; availability of transport to and from schools; and willingness of parents to allow their children to attend such a programme, particularly children with significant health conditions. My officials are engaging closely with stakeholders in developing a summer programme with a further round of meetings happening today. This work will help inform different aspects of such a programme.

School principals, teachers and SNAs have already done so much since schools closed to help support their students, particularly those with special educational needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schools have ensured regular communication, devised individual support plans with the agreement of parents, provided familiar resources, hosted live online classes and provided a new structure and routine. Schools have done this out of a desire to support their students to the best of their ability in very challenging times.

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For teachers and SNAs who can do so, I urge them to think seriously about supporting a summer programme which will make a meaningful difference to their most vulnerable students. The length of school closure has been much longer than we might have hoped. Providing an opportunity for children to participate in a summer provision would provide a really important opportunity to reconnect with schooling and offer an important structure which may help towards a fuller return to school in the autumn.

I will be returning to Cabinet next week in relation to the provision of a summer programme. I know the positive impact such a programme would have and I want to see it happen but we must do it in a safe way for all concerned.

The various challenges that have emerged since the closure of the schools 12 weeks ago on 12 March have been faced and addressed in a systematic way that has taken into account what is best for students at various levels and through collaboration with all stakeholders. I repeat that as we move forward in our planning to reopen schools and to provide a summer programme, we must do so safely and with the confidence of all concerned, whether that is the confidence of students, their parents, or the staff in the sector. I want to see children back in classrooms, with their friends, and being supported in school by their teachers, special needs assistants, SNA, and other school staff. Achieving this objective will be guided by public health advice and wider decisions concerning the roadmap for reopening our society.

Mar fhocal scoir, we are working towards those goals and will be communicating with students, teachers, school staff and management bodies in the coming weeks on how we return to school in the new academic year.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire.

Anois, casaimid ar cheisteanna agus freagraí le críoch a bheith curtha le ráiteas an Aire. We turn now to questions, answers and statements. The first party to speak is Fianna Fáil which has 15 minutes. I call Deputy Thomas Byrne. An bhfuil an Teachta ag roinnt a chuid ama?

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Táim ag roinnt mo chuid ama leis na Teachtaí Séamus Ó Laighléis, Seán Lahart agus Seán Mac Aonghusa. Tógfaidh mé seacht nóiméad agus beidh trí nóiméad ag mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Ó Laighléis, agus dhá nóiméad go leith ag an mbeirt Theachta eile.

Gabhaim comhghairdeas leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh as a bheith tofa go sealadach sa Chathaoir. Ní fhaca mé ball ó Shinn Féin riamh sa Chathaoir roimhe seo.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Níl mé ann ach mar Chathaoirleach.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Tá sé ina Chathaoirleach don lá, ar aon nós.

I welcome much of what the Minister said today and acknowledge that some of the suggestions made by Fianna Fáil and other parties in Dáil Éireann over the last number of weeks have, in fact, been implemented.

I particularly welcome the role played by Dr. Fernando Cartwright in the process surrounding the calculated grades system, and the Minister's announcement of an independent monitoring committee for the process. That is crucial, and the Minister is correct. Generally speaking, the process has gone off without a hitch so far. I am aware from talking with teachers and students that we are not in an ideal scenario, but this will significantly help public confidence

in the process and address some of the issues that I and others have raised in this House. They are genuine issues, and nobody wants anything but the best possible outcomes for the class of 2020 and, indeed, their colleagues coming up the line whose progression depends on a successful outcome of this entire process.

It is welcome that the Minister is due to meet the Ombudsman for Children in the context of reopening schools. Fianna Fáil has raised the need for strong advocacy for children and students in the discussion surrounding the opening of schools. This now seems to be taking place, and while it is important to talk to the stakeholders, the most important stakeholders are the children themselves. While the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, ISSU, does a fantastic job at secondary level, I was somewhat concerned that at primary level, in particular, the same advocacy is not necessarily there for the child. The ombudsman is certainly playing his part with the Minister in that regard.

The Taoiseach's clear commitment last Friday to reopening schools was welcome, and we while are all too aware of the long-term impact of school closures, we are aware anecdotally. I want to see some level of research done as to what exactly the gaps were in these last few months. Did we learn from it, and do we know what exactly we are catching up with in the new school year?

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, review of senior cycle needs to be fully considered in the context of plans to reopen schools in September. The process for the leaving certificate has been underway since 2016. The documents published by the NCCA clearly would not have had a focus on Covid-19, but we have learned a great deal about the leaving certificate over the past few weeks, in particular, that should inform the NCCA as to what direction we need to go. I am looking for robust research on what has happened over the past few weeks, the processes that have been engaged in, and how they will benefit the class of 2021, 2022 and others in the long term.

I will turn my attention briefly to the financial situation in higher education. On top of the upcoming and current demographic bulge we are seeing moving from primary into secondary school, higher education is facing not only that bulge but a shortfall of approximately €0.5 billion over the next few years due to Covid-19. We know universities and colleges are doing their best to try to get classes online and see how they will provide college courses next year. It is also fair to say that many are struggling, first of all with the availability of technical people who do this type of work and who are in short supply globally. We must make sure that our colleges are financially capable of doing their job. The aspiration and reality of higher education that has been available to generations in this country must not be denied to students this year or next year or denied to the students who are already in higher education. There may be a fall in international student numbers and reduced funding for research, particularly from the private sector, as a result of Covid-19. Given the likely fall in the number of students attending campus, it is not feasible for third level institutions to meet the shortfall by themselves. A targeted programme of financial support will be required and I will certainly be urging the Minister to provide same and to focus his attention on higher education.

We know that higher education and the knowledge economy will play a vital role in driving our economy and it is fantastic that the general public has been able to see that on a daily basis on the news. People sometimes think of our third level institutions as places for their children to go to college or as tourist attractions. What we have seen throughout the Covid-19 pandemic is the level of expertise that exists in this country to the fore in terms of informing the public and

advising the Government. This is really good and we must get back to a societal appreciation and understanding of the academy informing society, guiding us on what we should be doing, gathering the information and doing the research in order to improve the country. So many lessons have been learned about education in the past few months. We now have a chance to open up education in a way not seen before. We have not seen this type of external advisory board in the Department of Education and Skills for quite some time. It is very welcome to have outside input to the advisory board on the leaving certificate. There will be more opportunities for similar over the next few years.

We must streamline the demands on school management in the context of initiative overloading. I am somewhat concerned about the Minister's statement regarding summer programmes. Essentially, he asked that summer programmes be run or outsourced by boards of management and spoke about the availability and willingness of schools and teachers. He asked schools, teachers and SNAs to get involved during the summer and, while I endorse this ask, I do not think it is sustainable in the longer term for the provision of education to those who are disadvantaged or who have special needs to depend on the Minister standing up in the Dáil and asking people to participate. I am sure people will rise to the challenge this year but we need to make sure we can do this properly. The way the education system is structured in this country at the moment means that boards of management have a huge burden of responsibility. Sometimes they do not have the necessary training and sometimes individual members do not have the time required to meet the responsibilities foisted on them and everything goes back to the school principal, who is often under stress and pressure dealing with other issues. We need to look at giving parent councils a real role in the coming years. Parents have been to the fore in supporting their children's education in the past few weeks too and they need to take on a much bigger role in schools. We must always heed expert advice when it is made available to us.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I am glad my colleague raised the issue of higher education because in the course of the Minister's 11-page speech, universities and colleges were mentioned only once. Reference was made to the fact that they had closed and nothing further was said. I wish to return to a number of points I made six weeks ago which was the last time education was debated in the Chamber and I had the opportunity to ask questions. On that occasion I put two questions to the Minister which have not yet been answered. The first issue I raised was the plight of fixed-term researchers. I outlined that there are 14,500 individuals involved in fixed term research here. These are people who were working on grant-funded, time-limited projects and who are not eligible for the Covid payment or any other form of income support. In many cases, the project finances are about to run dry. Apart from the human capital cost, this could mean that work spanning three or more years will be lost as some projects were just about to conclude. Without an intervention, without guaranteed extensions to project funding as well as support for the individuals concerned, projects will run aground and researchers will be forced to examine other options and may not get to complete their research. This is a real, live issue for 14,500 fixed term researchers which has been raised by the Irish Federation of University Teachers, IFUT, the Research Council and many others. The last time we spoke the Minister told me that Mr. William Beausang and his group would consider this issue and I hope the Minister can give me an update on that today.

The next point I made to the Minister on that occasion was the wider picture in terms of higher education and higher education institutions being in crisis. Deputy Thomas Byrne mentioned the figure of €500 million. That is the hole that has been identified as the shortfall in university funding between lack of international students, accommodation and other supple-

mentary income that universities had to bring in in recent years just to make ends meet. If we are being honest, they should not have been dependent on that in the first place, but there was a shortfall in the public purse and they had to do such things. Now they find themselves €500 million in hock with no sign of light on the horizon. I was dismayed to see the Department come out with a statement last week to the effect that they were on their own. Universities, which are our institutions of learning through which young and old progress, where our knowledge economy is supposedly based, and which supposedly constitute the foundation stone of so much of what we do as a society, nation and economy, were effectively cast adrift. Apart from anything, I thought it was practice that with a caretaker Government, a significant policy decision like that would not be made or announced. It was an unnecessary provocation and many within the sector wondered what the motivation was.

I read contributions such as the excellent editorial by the provost of Trinity College Dublin, Patrick Prendergast, earlier in the week. I note the 1,700 scientists, including Dr. Kevin Byrne, who signed the petition calling for supports for the sector and for research funding. The sector was already in crisis and this has been exacerbated by Covid-19. The Department cannot wash its hands of it but must get involved with regard to practical and big picture issues. I call on the Minister and Department to make that happen.

**Deputy John Lahart:** My first question concerns a local issue but it could be transposed to many schools nationally. It concerns Scoil Naomh Pádraig in Ballyroan where the principal has had to write to parents to say that the existing five junior infants classes will become four classes in September because, while having 99.3% of the pupils required, they are four pupils short of getting that extra teacher. What that means is that instead of having classes in their low to mid twenties, which is still in excess of the European average, the school will now have class sizes in excess of 30 and will lose one teacher as a consequence. This is an austere measure never mind in the context of social distancing. Will the Minister comment on that? There needs to be some flexibility and discretion. It involves the schools just being four pupils short and having 99.3% of the pupils required for an additional teacher.

My second question concerns fifth year. This is my first opportunity to talk about it. It has come up and the Minister has answered it. What is the progress with regard to his thinking on current fifth year students and their sitting of the leaving certificate in 2021?

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Regarding Deputy Lahart's question about Scoil Naomh Pádraig, the system in place has not changed because of Covid-19 because it was based on attendance on 30 September of the previous year. The school has an opportunity to appeal in June with regard to progression and potential around progression in terms of numbers for next year to see whether it meets the criteria. If it meets the criteria by a particular date at the start of the school year in the first term, we will take that into consideration. It does come across as a fairly ruthless and rigid system but we need a system because there will also be schools with vacancies. It also tries to provide certainty for that teacher because the teacher in that class will also look at other schools and other vacancies and go for other jobs. This is the system we have. We have a particular cut-off point every year but I will certainly ask the inspectorate to look at Scoil Naomh Pádraig. As the Deputy is aware, it is an independent group.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** Part of the recovery for the south east will be the approval for the technological university involving the institutes of technology in Carlow and Waterford. What action will the Minister take to ensure they conclude negotiations and resolve their issues so that they can play a central role in the recovery of our economy in that area? Will he provide

the necessary finance and professional input to solve some of the HR issues that have emerged? There is significant debt involved that will have to be dealt with in order that the new entity will be able to perform at the highest level and quickly. This has dragged on for too long. The Minister needs to get involved to ensure that it comes to fruition sooner rather than later.

Second, I ask that the HR issues relative to Cork Institute of Technology, now with Munster Technological University, MTU, be resolved. There are whistleblower and other issues still outstanding and it is high time the colleges were forced to deal with those issues so that the new entity can move on without looking over its shoulder. We must ensure that all these issues are dealt with. This will require money, input from the Department of Education and Skills and leadership in that area.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I thank the Deputy for making direct contact with me on these issues as well. There is momentum now with the technological university process for the south east. There will be no question mark around the momentum in terms of the response at official level and at a financial level as well. We want to get the south east on the same plane as Technology University Dublin, Munster Technological University, the Connacht-Ulster Alliance and the Limerick-Athlone Alliance. There is funding already provided for those processes. I spoke to my officials on the issue last week and the issue will remain on the radar. I have also raised the HR issues with my officials, who will report back to the Deputy in that regard.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** An bhfuil an Teachta Ó Laoghaire ag roinnt ama?

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Tá mé ag roinnt le Deputies Cullinane agus Funchion. I will begin my contribution on the same subject I commenced my contribution to the previous debate we had on this area a little under two weeks ago. At that stage, I told the Minister that I felt it was not good enough that schools had had no communication on reopening from 12 March until that date. Since then, while there has been much discussion on the issue, in some respects we are not much wiser. Confusion reigned last Thursday and Friday when the Minister told Sarah McInerney at 10 a.m. that blended learning would be a reality and later said on “Prime Time” that he would not accept a half return to school. The following day, the Taoiseach reverted to the previous position that not all students would return, at least at the same time. The Minister has now told us that the goal is the maximum return of students.

While it is welcome that we know it is still the plan for children to return to school on the normal date, neither parents nor teachers know exactly what that means. The reality is that we have the most overcrowded classrooms in Europe, with a ratio of 28:1. This will make return to school buildings here much harder than is the case in most states. It is an indictment of Governments of recent years that we are in this position. Parents know this, but they are frustrated and anxious and they want education to return to normality.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the incredible work being done by teachers, principals and school staff. It is a fact that students have lost out, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special educational needs. Many of these students are struggling. Owing to the change in routine and a lack of social isolation and stimulation many of them have fallen back. A particular case that has stayed with me, which was shown on RTÉ, is that of Zoe Hynes who had progressed to being able to spoon feed herself but can no longer do so owing to the lack of contact. I note the proposed dedicated debate next week on the July education programme. I look forward to that debate but this issue needs to be a priority for the

standard school year as well.

On the reopening of schools, has the Department at this stage communicated directly with all schools on the reopening of school buildings? Will the Minister speak frankly on this occasion and tell us whether the reopening will be full or phased? Parents deserve an honest answer. If the process is to be a phased one then the Minister should say so. I would like a response to those questions, following which I will come back in with more questions.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** To be clear in regard to the public commentary around schools reopening, if the current health guidelines remain as they are we will be facing a partial reopening. If the Deputy had listened carefully to what I said in my public commentary, he would have noted that I said I am working with my officials and the public health officials in the Department of Health, who are learning all the time from the European and international experience, and I am looking at the different advice and monitoring it. I will state publicly that I am confident that advice will change. We will be in a better position before I make the announcement at Cabinet on what that advice will be. What I said was very clear. The modelling we conducted around current health advice would mean a partial return, but we engaged with health officials and are constantly getting new evidence. We are learning from the likes of Denmark, which has primary school children back, and Greece and France which have 15 students in each classroom. I am learning from the likes of England, as I spoke to Gavin Williamson two weeks ago, and from Peter Weir in Northern Ireland, to whom I spoke yesterday. We are going to learn from those experiences and I reassure people that it is our intention in the Department of Education to maximise the return of students at the end of August and into September. There is no ambiguity around that. That is our intention, but obviously we are going to be guided completely by the health advice. At the same time, the health advice has been very clear and when Dr. Tony Holohan briefed us recently he said that while it is his job to give advice and guidance, it is not his job to do a risk assessment. That is a job we are doing now. The Deputy said schools have not been notified, but the reason for that is that we are waiting on this advice. I will bring a memorandum to Cabinet next week and at that time I will publish the advice. That is when the principals and the leadership in the schools will find out.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** That is all very well but some communication should have been possible since 12 March. Schools deserve some kind of communication or indication. They should have gotten that and they still have not, as far as I am aware. Staying with the-----

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** That is not true. There is ongoing communication.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** No school I have spoken to has had direct contact from the Department about reopening. They may have had some in the last four or five days, but up until then they had not received any contact. That is a fact based on all the schools I have spoken to, which is around 20. Staying with the reopening-----

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I would like to respond to that. If we do not have the advice, the guidelines or the instruction, I am not going to go back to principals with a half story. Next week we will have the full guidance and the publication.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** It is quite reasonable for the Department to go back to schools and explain the process, where we are, what we are waiting for and the criteria involved. There are messages and preparations that could have happened-----

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**Deputy Joe McHugh:** There are, and it is wrong to say that there is no communication with schools. The schools and school representative bodies are in constant engagement. What the Deputy said is not true because there is engagement. What I am saying here very clearly is that we will not be in a position to say what the end of August and start of September will look like until next Friday.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Ba chóir don Aire ligean don Teachta ceist a chur.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I am unfortunately going to have to truncate the rest of my contribution, though I was going to come in on a few issues. First, I refer to calculated grades. Parliamentary questions that I got back today tell me two things quite clearly. If one cannot get a calculated grade, there is no other option and there is not going to be a written leaving certificate before third level admissions. Students who cannot get calculated grades deserve some kind of plan B. It is a small cohort and something should be done for them, such as an online or oral assessment. It is unfair that they could potentially miss out on a year of third level education. I have written to the Minister asking for the exact statistical model for the school profiling and I ask him to respond to that.

Around 800 schools are listed as requiring additional accommodation. Many of them are or were going through the planning process before that was slowed down by Covid. One of them, South Lee Educate Together, is a new school in my constituency which is in its second year. Those schools may not get planning permission in time to deliver the accommodation they need. Can the Minister ask local authorities to prioritise these applications?

Finally, it is reported that an additional €25 million will be needed by schools for hygiene purposes. Parents are already having to pay €10 a month or €100 a year for the cleaning of schools because schools are underfunded. I ask the Minister to please provide the funding or that cost will be passed on to parents who are already hard-pressed. Those questions must be responded to.

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** I have one very specific issue to raise with the Minister and hopefully he will have time to respond. It relates to the lack of secondary school places in Kilkenny city. I have spoken to the Minister and his officials about three boys and have received a response. I have the permission of the families to raise this issue. Zach, Cathay and Abudi, all of whom attend St. Canice's primary school in Kilkenny city, cannot access secondary school places for September in the city. In two of the cases, the mothers of the children do not drive and their fathers are working away from home. In one case, both parents are working in a hospital, are on call, work difficult hours and have other children. Sending children outside the city for school is not ideal.

When I raised this issue, I received a reply to the effect that they were entitled to appeal the decision. We went through that process and they received replies from the Department of Education and Skills stating that the appeals had not been accepted because they were out of time. It should be borne in mind that this was during the pandemic and school places for secondary schools are usually announced in February and March. The three families are under a lot of stress. I imagine that many other families are in this position because this issue arises every year in Kilkenny. A secondary school is needed.

Will the Minister give a commitment to look into the three cases I have mentioned? His

Department has the information. I asked last week what happens when a parent is told that he or she cannot appeal a decision and I did not receive a reply. I do not want the parents to go through an appeals process if it will not result in anything. Can something be done to help these families? All of the children in sixth class have not had the opportunity to finish school and say goodbye to friends. They are at a stage in their lives where they should be excited about the next chapter. These boys do not even know what school they will be attending. It is now June and secondary schools will restart in some shape or form at the end of August. These children need some sort of help and intervention. One of the boys told me that he is nervous, would have no friends and would not know anybody. When the parents looked at schools outside the city they were told they were not entitled to transport because they would be seen as technically sending their children outside the catchment area, which would cause a whole bunch of problems.

I would like to explore how we can get another secondary school for Kilkenny city. There is no second level school in the eastern part of the city. We do not have an Educate Together secondary school. This could be a good opportunity for something like that and would take pressure off all secondary schools in the city. I do not want to have to talk about this year in and year out, and I am quite sure the Minister feels the same. I would like to be part of the long-term solution and see whether there is some way I could meet people in the Department to discuss how we can explore opening another secondary school in the city.

That will not help Zach, Cathay and Abudi and I would like somebody from the Department to consider their case and understand the stress, worry and anxiety the parents and children are under. It is not a nice time for them. My son started secondary school last year and I know the nervousness that children have about that, even when they know everything about their school, uniform and all of the rest that goes with that for that age group. Unfortunately, a lack of secondary school places seems to affect boys in primary schools in Kilkenny in particular. I ask the Minister to look into the matter.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I have four minutes. I will take two minutes and give the Minister two minutes to respond. There are a lot of questions.

I want to follow on from the question Deputy McGuinness asked about technological university status for the south east. The Minister stated that the Department is working on it and that he wants to see the matter progressed. Since 2011, when I was first elected to the Seanad, I have raised this issue on a monthly, if not sometimes a weekly, basis. It is now 2020 and we are still no closer to a resolution. People in the south east see other consortiums powering ahead. The south east is the only region without a university. There is an uneven playing field and that matter needs to be resolved. Whatever impediments or roadblocks are there, the Department and the Minister has to play a part in resolving them. A meeting is taking place tomorrow at my behest between local Oireachtas Members and the presidents of the two institutes. We will do our best at that meeting, but the Department has an obvious role to play.

There is also concern about the Munster consortium and whether there was a successful panel visit. We know there was a panel report for March and April 2019, and another potential report for February of this year. Questions are being asked about whether there was a successful panel report because the first report last year was quite critical of the application and said it did not meet the criteria in a range of areas. Legitimate questions are being asked about whether the consortium met the criteria or if the criteria were bypassed, which would be an incredible situation to find ourselves in.

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The south-east consortium is very important for Munster and Waterford - the Minister should know that. For a region that lags behind economically, where we have one of the highest levels of unemployment, we need this. We should not have to come in here week after week, month after month, year after year, pleading the case and still being the only region without a university. I ask the Department to play its part to ensure the remaining issues are resolved.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I am glad to hear the Deputy and others are meeting collectively with both presidents. I take this opportunity to acknowledge their individual roles in bringing it to this stage. They are in the process of preparing an application this year even amid all the uncertainty, difficulties and challenges we have at the moment. As the Deputy knows, there have been roadblocks and challenges with the process in the south east. The Deputy lives in the south east and he knows about the desire for a university among the community there. We have heard that, and we know about it. I wish to reassure the Deputy, and he will find out tomorrow from the presidents if he is meeting them, that not alone are the momentum and commitment there, there is no issue over the funding that will be needed to bring that process along.

The Deputy mentioned Munster Technological University. I have formally written to that consortium. Certain issues needed to be addressed and they were addressed. It has a planned start date of 1 January 2021. We want to make progress with all the different consortiums: the Connacht-Ulster alliance; Athlone and Limerick; and in the south east between Carlow and Waterford. They are in a very strong position. They are in the middle of preparing their application and there will be progress.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Is the Minister in a position to publish the reports from the Munster consortium? Can they be made public so that we can see it was a transparent process? I am not saying it was not, but the questions are being asked. It would be helpful if we could see those panel reports.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I can certainly ask my officials.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** The Sinn Féin slot is over. Má tá ceisteanna sa bhreis curtha ag baill d'aon pháirtí, b'fhéidir go bhféachfaidh an tAire orthu agus freagra a thabhairt i scríbhinn.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Beidh mé sásta é sin a dhéanamh.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** I am asking if the Minister could give an answer in writing to the questions he was not able to reach, and he has agreed.

I call Deputy Dillon, who is making his maiden speech.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I will be sharing time with Deputy Feighan.

It is a true honour to speak in Dáil Éireann for the first time. From the outset I sincerely thank the people of Mayo for placing their trust in me as we navigate these unprecedented times in circumstances I could never have imagined. I hope to serve my constituents with honour, integrity and humility. I assure the Mayo electorate I will continue the work of my predecessor, Enda Kenny, with the same ethos as he showed when he entered this Chamber on his first day as a Teachta Dála by serving the greatest number with the greatest good. I have always said that what matters to Mayo matters to me. As a new Teachta Dála, I extend my thanks to the staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas for the courtesy and professionalism they have shown me to date.

I acknowledge the efforts that individuals and families in every community are making to combat Covid-19. Some have suffered privately following the loss of family members or friends and I express my heartfelt sympathies to those people.

I commend the Minister, Deputy McHugh, the departmental officials and in particular the teachers and students around the country. They have all adapted incredibly quickly to their virtual working and educational environment. I regularly speak to local teachers and the topic of most importance is the leaving certificate on which we have received greater clarity in the past few weeks. However, the concern relates to the next steps facing today's leaving certificate students, particularly those who wish to pursue higher education and what awaits them in September. This time of year usually represents a right of passage for young people finishing their second level education. I am hoping some level of normality can be brought to the next chapter for those choosing to enter higher education.

As the Minister, Deputy McHugh, may be aware on Tuesday the Connacht-Ulster alliance announced the appointment of a new executive project lead with the aim of progressing the technological university in the west and north west. This is a progressive step forward for the region's higher education institutes, including the Mayo campus of the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology at Castlebar as well as Letterkenny Institute of Technology in the Minister's constituency. In addition, as a science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, ambassador, a qualified teacher and someone who has worked in the pharmaceutical and biopharma sector, I worked closely with many students to encourage them to consider careers in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics sector. It would not be unreasonable to assume a spike in applications to the CAO in these areas of study, which have played a key role in the fight against Covid-19. I am hoping, therefore, that the Minister might provide some clarity on what leaving certificate students can expect and when detailed information will become available as part of their third level entry process.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I congratulate Deputy Dillon on his maiden speech and I wish him every success. It is nice to see a man from the west. Following up on the issue raised by the Deputy, does the Minister have an update on the application for technological university, TU, status for Sligo, the north and the north west, and does he think it will be submitted before the end of the year? I welcome Niall O'Donnellan to the board of IT Sligo. He is an excellent appointment and I wish him well in the work he is doing.

I have two matters to raise. There are some issues regarding national schools. One concerns hygiene standards in national schools, especially in the context of Covid-19. Are we taking into consideration that some national schools just have sinks and do not have the proper hygiene standards to match those brought in to address Covid-19 some months ago? What is the Department doing in that area?

I also refer to Carns national school in Grange in County Sligo. It is on the N15, between Grange and Cliffoney, and I am sure the Minister passes by it nearly every day. The school has been granted an 80 sq. m additional classroom and the tender process is complete. The school, however, is awaiting written confirmation to begin construction so that the contract can be signed during the summer. I know it has been confirmed, but I would like to know if there are any issues.

In the context of Covid-19 and Brexit, we talk about an all-island basis, east-west relations and there being much work to be done. What discussions has the Minister had with the Min-

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ister of Education in the North to consider mitigating the impact of Brexit especially, but also of Covid-19? I ask that because we are talking about addressing these issues on an all-island basis and I am interested to know exactly what the Minister is doing. Finally, regarding another constituency I was in, I am delighted that Dangan national school in Kilmore, with which the Minister is also familiar, also got the go-ahead to start construction of its much-awaited new extension.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Congratulations to Deputy Dillon on his election and on his maiden speech today. In his last point, he referenced clarity concerning the leaving certificate. The school alignment process has started and we have set up the portal, which will be going live between the executive office and the Department and the schools. We are looking to trigger that on Monday so the schools can start feeding back information. There has been, therefore, a great degree of momentum at the school alignment level, although there is still much work to be done. My ambition has always been, and it still is, that we will have results coming out as close to the traditional date as possible. I refer to the normal date for the issuing of leaving certificate results. That is the ambition and I will work intensely with my officials to make sure that happens. It is important on several fronts, including the transition to third level. I am also conscious, however, of the transition involving those applying to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, UCAS, whether that concerns Northern Ireland, England, Scotland or Wales. I refer also to those applying to go to Europe, where the majority of students last year went to the Netherlands, and we have ongoing engagement with our European counterparts.

I turn now to part of Deputy Feighan's question regarding my engagement with the Minister of Education in Northern Ireland, Mr. Peter Weir. I spoke to him just yesterday and raised the issue of UCAS to ensure we have those deadlines.

*3 o'clock*

One of the things I have picked up from engaging with my officials, officials from the UK Department for Education and the Secretary of State for Education, Mr. Gavin Williamson, is that there is a flexibility there. We will continue to work with them on that.

The Deputy referred to the Mayo campus and its importance. He has raised that issue several times with me, as well as the integral connection between Galway, Mayo, Sligo and Donegal in the context of the new Connacht-Ulster alliance. He requested an update on that alliance. He is correct that Dr. Seán Duffy has been appointed and has been working closely with the three colleges to ensure the preparatory work needed for an application to be submitted is on track. The plan is that an application will be submitted for a Connacht-Ulster alliance in quarter 4 of this year. There has been quite a degree of momentum there. I referred earlier to the south east. There is also quite a degree of momentum with regard to the proposed Limerick-Athlone alliance. Those three applications are in a very positive place.

The Deputy referred to hygiene standards in schools. He is correct that the reopening guidelines, plans and roadmap that the Cabinet will sign off on and publish tomorrow week will include instruction, guidelines and advice for schools.

Going back to Deputy Ó Laoghaire's point on the additional cost involved, I am conscious that it will cost a great deal of extra money and that schools are already under pressure as a result of the reduction in capitation moneys from 2011. We have restored 7.5% of that but we need to go further for the schools. I will discuss the construction project raised by the Deputy

with the officials.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I thank the Minister for his reply. I am delighted that he has met Mr. Peter Weir. I think we knew him through the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. It is great to see that cross-Border and cross-department co-operation which is vital across the island of Ireland.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** Is deas dom an deis seo an tAire a cheistiú don chéad uair sa Dáil seo. These are certainly testing times for the Minister and I wish him well in his responsibility to oversee the leaving certificate in 2020. Today, students should be sitting English paper 2, which would include their comparative studies, but that is not the case. I wish the State Examinations Commission, which is working in unison with Dr. Harold Hislop in the Department, and the various teams of teachers that are collaborating with their colleagues in schools across the country this week to finalise the initial sets of predicted grades for their leaving certificate students well in their work. This is a novel departure for our post-primary sector and, like many issues currently, it is one that has been brought about directly as a result of Covid-19. I am sure the NCCA will maintain a watching brief on how this progresses. Of course, it has been charged with the task of reforming leaving certificate assessments and accreditations such that students at the end of the senior cycle are primed for further study in the 21st century.

The Minister recently referred to the potential emergence of blended learning in our schools in the 2020-2021 academic year. That will require a digital upgrade in classrooms. Although it is true to say that the clár dubh is giving way to smart boards in many places, it is not true to say we are close to finishing that transition nationwide. We should extend this digital upgrade to the summer colleges sna Gaeltachtaí timpeall na tíre. Sadly, those custodians of the language will not be in a position to accept students in person this year. Some of the colleges are making efforts to move their courses online. It is fantastic to see this ingenuity operate in real time. Summers in the Gaeltacht offer many their first independent stint away from home and it is unfortunate that this rite of passage has been put on pause as part of the new normal, ach tiocfaidh an céilí mór arís, gan dabht.

The necessity of digitally upgrading our schools speaks directly to the European Commission's plans to help repair and prepare member states' economies for the future. Next Generation EU is the recovery instrument that will be employed at this juncture. The stimulus will be of the order of €750 billion, the details of which were outlined in Brussels this week by the Commission President, Ms Ursula von der Leyen. There is a dual aspect to this instrument, namely, the fact that, along with the digital upgrade, the Commission wants to see this recovery being one that is rooted in green initiatives. The EU wants member states to set out in detail their plans in this regard. Our students are already discussing the welfare of the planet in CSPE and geography classes, and An Taisce, through the green schools award, has brought to the fore the importance of environmental management in the minds of teenagers. Schools are developing sustainable systems that respect the importance of protecting water resources and the role of proper waste management.

As we know, when the order came for schools to close, in keeping with the NPHET advice, schools and colleges had to move their teaching overnight onto the cloud, and this was a considerable undertaking which our teachers met with distinction. New systems were put in place to allow teachers to interact with students remotely. As the Minister alluded to previously, social distancing may require a level of remote teaching to continue into the coming academic year. The winds of change are bringing students and teachers to new places. The European Commis-

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sion recognises that these new worlds will be more digital and will also need to be greener. This could involve retrofitting school buildings, where appropriate, and the roll-out of digital exams in the future, where equity of access can be achieved. If we are prepared for this change, we can benefit in our schools from the fact gur olc an ghaoth nach séideann maith do dhuine éigin.

Accepting that it is very early in the process, what preparation is the Department of Education and Skills currently making to help Ireland in its application to the next generation fund?

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht a cheiste. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis as a bheith tofa. Guím ádh mór air sa ról úr atá aige. Is dualgas agus onóir mhór é a bheith tofa mar Theachta Dála.

I want to take the Deputy back to his first point around the €750 billion fund. We are now working in that world of billions. One of the things I believe is central to any deliberation around funding and that collective response from Europe is to ensure that, at its heart, is how we tackle educational disadvantage and how we ensure that the most vulnerable are protected. When I think back to the last recession, I think of all the young Donegal people who had to leave and go to Australia, Canada and the United States. In that recession, I could see on my own doorstep that they were the hardest hit. We only had to look at the rest of the country, as well as at countries like Italy and Spain, to see that massive negative impact on the younger generation. I believe any conversation around funding streams has to look at what we can do to empower young people, while obviously focusing on the skill level and how we ensure that education continues and that there are jobs at the end of that education.

As to my contribution, at a recent round of ministerial meetings at European Commission level, I discussed with all of my counterparts the issues of Covid, school reopening, third level and all the challenges that go with that. My point was to ensure that, whatever funding and support Europe can give, we put education at the heart of it.

That brings me to the last question on funding. My proposition and that of my Department is to continue those conversations with my European counterparts. We are due to meet again towards the end of June, in some two weeks time.

The Deputy also talked about the digital agenda being to the forefront. The German minister very clearly outlined that the upcoming German Presidency is going to have a very sharp focus on the digital agenda, not just in terms of education but also the world of work. One thing has been quite clear in the last three months. At the tertiary level, universities were very quick to adapt, to continue with online lecturing and to do their exams online. Post-primary was quite well-equipped in terms of having the experience of Google Classroom and had already started using the investment available, given we invest a considerable amount of money every year - more than €60 million at this stage - in digital support for schools. On the primary school system, the information coming back from our inspectorate indicates really creative and innovative ways to use technology but that, whether it is a generational thing or for different reasons, online teaching was not as interactive compared to a post-primary setting. There are very valid reasons for this such as gaps around broadband and other obstacles. One of the clear indicators coming from the teaching profession is that while digital communication technology filled some gaps, it is not the solution. We want and need to continue to ensure that our students are in a classroom setting but digital communication and new technology can add value to that process and can simplify some things. One of the simple learnings from teachers during this period was that they did not have to photocopy. Consider the amount of money that goes

into photocopying. The expectation, however, was put onto some parents to copy, especially at primary school level, and I can attest to that. There were some massive learnings and one of the great insights into it, from parents and teachers, is that a house with home schooling is a very tense environment at times. Parents are trying to mix work and home schooling at the same time and it is a very stressed environment. We need to get our students back into the classroom and it is my ambition to continue to work closely with health officials to ensure we are provided with a roadmap so at the end of August and the beginning of September we have a maximum number of students back in primary and second level classrooms. I am interested to stay in touch with Deputy Leddin on his specific suggestions on where this fund could be used in education. I am very open to that.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** The Minister is aware that the world is saying with one voice that black lives matter. I raise this issue because it appears to me we should be cognisant of the fact that we stand in probably the whitest parliament in the world, and that our teaching profession should reflect the students they teach. We have been remiss in trying to get a teaching profession or role models in the professions such as teaching, nursing and the Garda, that reflect the general population. I am not sure of the statistics for members of the Traveller community or people from minority groups who are in the teaching profession but I am interested to know what kinds of conversations are happening in the Department of Education about promoting such a pathway so people from various different backgrounds to be role models and leaders in education. I do not know the statistics but I can only imagine that the teaching profession is probably similar to the political profession in this regard. There is a lot we can change in Irish society. Many people will know Members, who sit currently in this House, who have said things they should regret about Travellers, migrants and asylum seekers. We have to find mechanisms in every Department on how we can change attitudes. Many students now sit in classrooms with people from all sorts of backgrounds, which is to be welcomed, but in most cases the teachers are quite similar. I ask that the Minister would reflect on that and see what the Department of Education and teacher training colleges are doing to reach out to have an education and teaching profession, including a special needs assistant profession, that is reflective of the student body.

I shall now turn to the issue of returning to school. When listening to the mixed messaging, as referred to earlier, sometimes I get frustrated with how differently education is treated to how the economy is treated. We speak about education in very different ways. When we speak about the retail sector or the economy there is nothing that cannot be addressed. Rent can be addressed, rates can be addressed and paying staff can be addressed. When we talk of schools losing teachers, however, the Minister said the system has not changed because of Covid-19. Why can the system not change because of Covid? The last time we spoke I mentioned to the Minister a school in an acutely disadvantaged area that is one student short of keeping a teacher for September. Every school will greatly struggle in September to keep the show on the road and to get students back into the classroom. Secondary school principals tell me we will lose a generation because students they have been clinging to for years to keep them in the education system, who legally do not have to be there after the age of 16, are now making a decision not to go back. The discontinuation of education has been so profound in their lives they are unlikely to go back in September. Unless we frontload this area with huge resources and realise how important it is we will not get them back and we will lose a generation.

What frustrates me about the language used is that I do not really get the sense this is a priority or of how enormous it will be for schools to reopen in September for young people and

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children to have the chance to change the direction in their lives. It will cost money. People speak about other examples in various European countries. They are putting money into it. They are putting staff into it.

Sanitation has been mentioned, as has the figure of €25 million that it will cost. I want the Minister to be aware of a project undertaken by four students in St. Seachnall's national school in Dunshaughlin. I will send the Minister the details so he will be aware of it. They did a project on sanitising their school and they want it to go nationwide. Laura Kilbane, Emily Lynch, Julia Olelale and Adelina Stewart are anxious that the project be taken on by the Department and rolled out.

I want to ask about safe passes. It appears that imagination which could be used by the Department is not being used. For a construction worker or someone who wants to get an apprenticeship the safe pass is everything but the system does not seem to be able to bend to the new reality. I am told, from speaking to the Connect Trade Union, that the trade union movement is willing to step up to the mark and fill in the gaps that need to be filled. There is potential for these courses to be delivered online. SOLAS oversees it but, unfortunately, it is unbending. This is under the Department and I ask the Minister please to speak about the safe pass so that people moving from one jurisdiction back to Ireland or from one profession to another will not have this pause button on their potential to start work or start their apprenticeship. It appears that the Government is all over finding a solution for some sectors of the economy but when it comes to issues such as education and safe passes it is unbending.

Something else that is unbending is the Teaching Council. Under the Droichead framework for teachers' probation, primary teachers must have 60 days in a school and secondary school teachers need 200 hours in a school. Nothing after 13 March will count. Primary school teachers could have done 59 days since 13 March, doing the best they can online trying to educate children, but it will not count for their probation. This is another unbending arm of the Department.

For some reason the Department will not change its ways. It is causing a huge amount of frustration for young teachers trying to get into the profession and young people trying to get their safe pass. Principals are worried about getting students back in September or being one student short to keep a teacher. Everything in the Department is unbending. It just will not bend. When it comes to the economy, retail and all the other lobbyists on the radio every day of the week, the world can change for them because people need to buy flights and snack boxes in Supermac's.

The Minister mentioned the July provision and I appreciate the fact he has given it an awful lot of airtime in this contribution and in his previous contribution. I congratulate him for that. There is a rolling ongoing scandal in the country regarding children who have a diagnosis of autism who do not have a school place in September. It will be compounded this year because of Covid-19. The issue is between the Departments of Education and Skills and Health and it is the classic problem in Irish education when something falls between two Departments; both Departments have the perfect answer that it is the other's problem. Parents struggling with a diagnosis and challenge in their families are handed a list of schools and told "off you go". I know parents who have been to 15 or 19 schools which have all found mechanisms for saying "No". The Minister now has power under the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 to force a school to open a unit, or demand that it do so, and I want him to speak to that.

These are extraordinary times. Everybody appreciates that and everybody sitting here, asking these questions appreciates the fact that it is a difficult time but the Department of Education and Skills needs to unbend. The Department knows how to deal with schools and teachers but it does not know how to, or feels that it cannot, deal with anyone outside that and it has no empathy for the situation. If the Minister does not have time to respond to all my questions I would appreciate a written response.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I will work my way backwards. The good news is that over the past few weeks with what has happened between Department of Education and Skills officials and the Department of Health there has been a sea change on a summer programme. We are looking at the school inclusion model which we all want to work towards for children who need physiotherapy, occupational therapy or speech and language therapy. The Deputy is right there are two different Departments working separately. There has, however, been a sea change. We are working together to get a summer programme for the 600 children with complex medical needs, along with disadvantaged kids and special educational needs kids. I acknowledge the work of the officials on that.

The Department is not unbending in respect of the safe pass. Rules to meet different needs have to change. I am actively considering the safe pass issue. The Teaching Council is also actively considering the probation issue too. I hope we will have news on those two fronts in the not too distant future.

The Deputy's first point was really interesting. I would be interested in the St. Seachnall's project if the Deputy would send me the information. On the rules for the end of September, as the Deputy said, the pupil-teacher ratio is a budgetary consideration. There is a budget coming up in three months' time, at the end of September. There, I have announced it even before the Minister for Finance gets to do it, whoever will be in charge then. I take the Deputy's point and have asked the inspectorate to look into the issue in Darndale which the Deputy has raised previously. I am waiting for it to get back to me on that.

The Deputy is 100% right about creating pathways to reflect our society. That is why I ensured funding for a migrant project in Marino which is considering an induction into the Irish education system for mature students from different countries who live here now, Irish citizens. Some might be former French or mathematics teachers in Spain or wherever. It was formerly funded by the Department of Justice and Equality. I took over the funding of it, only €50,000, because it identified exactly what we need to do. The Deputy might like to familiarise himself with that project. It has been showing great leadership in Marino on this.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** Deputy Gannon has ten minutes. I remind all Deputies that if they want to allow the Minister time to respond they will have to make it within their own timeframe because our time is limited due to the Covid-19 restrictions.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I am very conscious that as we sit here today and discuss education, students who would otherwise be doing their junior or leaving certificates or who would be going on school tours are sitting at home. In addition to the pandemic, which is affecting them in a multitude of ways, now when they turn on their television or social media they are faced with pictures of racial injustice and state-sponsored violence in the US. It is important to acknowledge and understand that and to position ourselves in respect of those images and what we can do. I join my colleagues in expressing my solidarity with everyone protesting against police brutality and racism. The killing of George Floyd and countless other black men and

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women by police must be protested. The inexcusable structural racism that allows innocent black men and women be killed by police forces without consequence, and the unique brand of politics that excuses these killings and breeds fear and sows division, must end. People power, protest and worldwide expressions of solidarity are the only way to do this and we in the Social Democrats stand in full solidarity with protestors on the Black Lives Matter demonstrations both here and abroad.

This is an important moment in which to reflect on racism and on the discrimination that exists in our country. I have made the point on several occasions in this Chamber that diversity matters. In a representative democracy, it is important that a person can witness some semblance of his or her likeness as he or she engages with the structures of the State. This thought was foremost in my mind as I prepared for this session on education today. As we pursue a pathway to return to normality, I am conscious of what normality has been for students from minority backgrounds in Ireland up to this point. Marian Wright Edelman famously said: "It's hard to be what you can't see." If that is true, students from low income backgrounds, students of colour, students with disabilities and students from Traveller backgrounds and ethnic minority groups cannot see themselves in the teaching community in Ireland.

It is a point that has been made by a previous speaker but I will elaborate on it. The Department of Education and Skills's data shows that in the period between 2013 and 2014, one in nine primary school children was from a non-Irish background. In our second level schools, one in eight students was born overseas. Le Chéile Secondary School in Tyrrellstown reports 67 nationalities making up its student cohort but this diversity is not reflected in our teaching professions. A diversity in initial teacher education in Ireland study found that of new primary school teachers in 2014, 99% of respondents identified as white, Irish and settled and 100% specified either English or Irish as their first language. For our secondary school teachers, the picture is much the same. Over 98% of 2013 entrants and 99% of 2014 entrants expressed their origins as being of Irish nationality only or as of Irish nationality with an additional nationality.

There are some positives which the Minister has mentioned and I want to touch on the programme the Minister mentioned as well because it is a worthwhile programme. I applaud the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Justice and Equality for funding the Marino Institute of Education migrant teacher bridging programme that allows migrants with educational qualifications onto a one-year course to become qualified teachers in Ireland but 40 teachers progressed from that course last year and that is simply not enough. Dr. Emer Nowlan, who the Minister will know, is a course co-ordinator there. She has said they have been taken aback by the huge interest in the programme. She said they have 600 teachers on their mailing list and 140 applied to enrol in their current bridging programme but that, unfortunately, they could only accommodate 40 and so they had to apply selection criteria, which took a number of factors into account, including teacher qualifications and their progress through the Teaching Council registration process. I appeal to the Minister that this is an incredibly worthwhile initiative which he clearly values. We might need to widen the scope of this initiative and to bring more teachers through that same process.

When I think about racism, that replicates itself and becomes ingrained in our society and I cannot help but think about the plight of our Traveller community. That goes much deeper than simple representation. We need to reflect on the terrible history of racism in this country and on the treatment of Travellers by the State. Every day, Travellers in Ireland experience a denial of their identity with direct and indirect racism. At an individual level, Travellers are denied access to public businesses, Traveller children have reported being bullied in school and

Travellers have been denied calls to interviews based on their addresses. On a structural level, we see an appalling lack of political will to deliver upon Traveller accommodation, with city councils returning Traveller accommodation budgets unspent each year. We see that inequality and racism further compounded when we look at the deep educational inequality experienced by Travellers in Ireland every day. That manifests itself in a multitude of different ways but I have even seen the denial of Traveller culture being placed on the syllabus. One can even look at the inability of so many Travellers to access third level education, with only 167 Travellers of any age reporting having a third level qualification. That is simply unacceptable.

When I think about the schools I have been in when I worked with the Trinity College Dublin access programme going into DEIS schools, one of the saddest things I saw, which is a shameful indictment of this country, was children who were born in Ireland who still felt the shameful consequences of that 2004 referendum which denies them citizenship. Anyone in this Thirty-third Dáil who is committed to confronting racism in this country, needs to commit him or herself to removing that horrendous consequence of that referendum. We do not need another referendum to do it. We should not go around asking people whether they are good enough to live in this country. This Parliament can remove that consequence, and we should. We should commit ourselves to that in the Thirty-third Dáil.

The Taoiseach mentioned today in his contributions that the Covid payment will now be decreased for people who were not previously working full time when the pandemic started in February. This will have a profound impact on students who may not have been working full time in February but certainly would be working full time now so they could cover the potential cost of their registration fees. The Minister might say SUSI will do that, but it certainly does not do it for everybody. Such students would be working full time to cover the cost of their rent, the access requirements further than the point of entry, and books and stationery. If we remove the full Covid payment from that cohort, who would be working full time now, it will have a terrible consequence for them. I therefore appeal to the Minister to stand up for students at the meeting he will have tomorrow with the Taoiseach and say that those who would be working full time now, students or any other cohort, will be impacted by this measure. It is simply not acceptable.

I wish to talk a little about the 993 students who did not register for predictive grading. The Minister mentioned them in his opening address, and I respect that. We cannot let this cohort go. We need to find out who they are, find out the reasons they may not have registered for calculated grades and ensure we offer them every single opportunity to be treated the same as any other student.

The Minister has mentioned his and his Department's engagement with schools. We talk to schools all the time; they contact us. To give him an indication, the last contact I had from a school was just this morning. A school rang me up asking about school bus places for when students go back to school, if they are to go back in September. The school asked simply about getting their students onto buses. Are these matters being considered? In an urban environment, that, for me, is a Dublin bus being crammed at 8.30 a.m. I am sure it is different in a rural context, but under social distancing that will simply not be possible, so I hope the Minister is considering that also.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I reassure the Deputy that bus transportation is a key factor in our deliberations as to what the end of August and September will look like. We are looking at the practicalities of that for the summer programme as well. The feedback from the teachers and

the teacher representative bodies is that they are looking at everything. They are looking at the set-up in the morning and what will be needed in terms of hygiene and sanitisers, and all sorts of criteria and instructions for training and guidance for teachers. I accept there is a sense of urgency and that teachers, principals and boards of management need to know what August and September will look like as soon as possible. That is why I committed at last Friday's Cabinet meeting to set out a timeframe. The timeframe is very specific. Towards the end of next week we will have guidelines published for schools for a roadmap as to what the end of August and September will look like. It is really important that schools plan because there will be a lot of planning.

The issue the Deputy raised with the Covid payment is a good and valid point. Many students, even leaving certificate students now, including from my county and my parish, rely on tourism. They are getting no payment. However, not all students got the Covid payment, so there was an inequality there. It was only the students who were in part-time jobs who got it. There is therefore an annoyance among other students who may have been in part-time employment, perhaps a couple of months previously or whatever. There is an inequity there among all students.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** The Minister and I have spoken about the issue of July provision and special needs education weekly. I do not know whether the Minister saw the report on the RTÉ news on Tuesday. It was heartbreaking to see those two families in that situation. It was terrible to see the stress and anxiety parents with children with complicated needs are going through. They have no outlet or routine. It is very difficult. Not having that routine is extremely difficult not only for the children but for the family as well. The sooner there is structure, the better. Can the Minister give structure and a definitive answer in respect of the July programme to those families? Will there be a July programme come July? Families in that situation simply cannot take any more.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** The answer to the question is "Yes". There most definitely will be. It will be different to previous July provisions because it will not only be exclusive to autism. We are widening it out. We have upwards of 8,000 students in our autism spectrum disorder classes. We have 8,000 students in special schools. That is 16,000 straight away. We want to add to that number. We want to look at disadvantage and school completion programmes. We talked about that two weeks ago when we engaged on this issue. The answer is clearly "Yes" but I want to have it right. That is why we are going to continue to engage with public health officials because we need to comply with the guidelines. I want to give certainty to parents too. I want parents to be confident that this is the right thing for their children.

For some children it may be in the home. That option has to be there for parents. Last year, believe it or not, of the 10,000 students who participated in July provision a total of 70% were in the home. That requires buy-in from special needs assistants, tutors and teachers. My plea today is to the school leadership. At the outset the feedback has been incredibly positive. School leaders are really keen to make this happen. Out of 4,000 schools in our country only 232 opened up for July provision last year. It is not all about opening up schools *en masse*. It is about seeing what has worked in previous years and seeing what we can build on as well.

I want to make one point about special needs assistants. SNAs never gave up contact when the schools closed on 12 March. Deputies will know that from evidence of the schools. They have stayed in touch with students. I asked my officials for examples of good practice. I have a list as long as my arm of what some schools are doing. They are ringing parents. Some are

ringing parents every day. They are in touch with the son or daughter every day. They are keeping that connectivity going.

SNAs have participated in the redeployment scheme. There is a percentage of SNAs working under programmes of the HSE. There has been extraordinary and incredible interlocking between the Department of Health and the Department of Education and Skills. That bodes well for the future. I am sorry for going on. Deputy Kenny's question required a simply "Yes" or "No" response. The answer is "Yes".

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** Will it begin at the end of June or the start of July?

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** We will be looking next week at contacting the schools and we are looking to start at the beginning of July.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I have another question about children in disadvantaged areas. Will there be provision for that cohort of students, especially over the summer period? As we said last week, many students have not been in school since 13 March. It is especially acute around disadvantage. Some students will simply drop out. Significant resources will have to be put towards those students. What are the Department plans in this area?

I have read about online supports for July provision. What will that contain? Sometimes the outlet is the routine of going outside the family home. That is essential and it gives parents a break. What online provision is included in the July provision?

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I am reluctant to give a picture of what this is going to look like because we are not announcing it formally until next week. I am going to bring a memorandum to Cabinet and we are going to publish the guidelines. I will offer two examples in terms of disadvantage. We are looking at school completion. This will involve targeted disadvantage to try to get some form of school completion continued. We are also looking at literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools. At the moment only 70 schools do the summer programme in literacy and numeracy. I am looking to build upon that and extend it. They are two examples. Next week we will have more clarification.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** *The Irish Times* last Saturday reported the following: "It is also understood the department is exploring the idea of a "tapered curriculum" when schools return." It also reported: "Some elements of the junior cycle are also being curtailed, with incoming third-year students now required to complete a single classroom-based assessment in most subjects, rather than two." Will the Minister clarify whether this is the case? Is he considering a tapered curriculum for leaving certificate students of the class of 2021?

The Minister knows my position that the leaving certificate is unnecessarily stressful, biased against students from low-income families and an outlier in European second level education, that there should be a significant increase in State spending on third level to open it up and that the review of the leaving certificate should consider the exam's abolition and alternatives to it in time for the class of 2021. If he plans to taper the course for fifth years, though, might I suggest to him that it would need to be a significant tapering, giving that those students have lost one third of their classroom time in the 2019-20 year?

The world watched with horror the police murder of George Floyd, and many, myself included, watched with admiration the multiracial uprising of young people in the US against its President, police forces and an entire system that was riddled with inequality and racism.

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Demonstrators across the world have not only expressed solidarity but have pointed towards the racism that exists within their own societies. In Ireland, many young people of colour and Travellers who have joined the protests have highlighted the issue of racism in our society and education system. It exists and it needs to be tackled.

We know that migrant children are over-represented in larger schools, schools in urban areas and schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. We also know that school outcomes are far from equal. For example, 20% of migrant children drop out of school, which is double the rate for non-migrant children. A mere 1% of students from a Traveller background go on to third level education.

We must look at the experience of the education system through the eyes of students from minority backgrounds. I would be interested to hear from students from minority backgrounds about their experience of the education system. While schools officially have an anti-racism ethos, to what extent is this really followed through on to become a thoroughgoing ethos that pervades all aspects of school life? For example, how much black history would be learned by a black student in an Irish school? How much Traveller history would be learned by a Traveller student as well as non-black and non-Traveller students to raise their level of understanding of these issues?

Will the Minister comment on his plans to improve the anti-racism ethos in the education system and anti-racism outcomes?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Minister has just one minute.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Less than one minute. Let me be clear - we have an inclusive educational model. It is not just an urban issue or a rural issue. In my town of Letterkenny, I believe that one of the primary schools has 38 nationalities. It has all ethnicities from around the world. It is a global school. When I attended an event, one of the students summarised the school by saying that it was an international school steeped in the history of Letterkenny. We have something really good going on in this country in terms of inclusiveness and ensuring that we embrace all ethnicities, the new Irish and new citizens. The students I have met over the past 19 months in this job know that they are safe in that environment. It is important to point out the positives in what is going on in this country in terms of education. Yes, we can do more and improve, but there are many good aspects and the inclusive nature has been transformative.

The Deputy referred to speculation in a weekend newspaper about the curriculum being tapered. What I will confirm now is that there are discussions ongoing between the NCCA and my officials regarding the curriculum. I am conscious of the fifth years, who have been mentioned by a number of Deputies. Deputy Barry has been consistent in raising the same issue over and over again. Fair play to him for raising it because by doing so, it keeps it on my radar and that of my officials and keeps it on the agenda. In terms of the fifth years, we are looking at the benefits of "Home School Hub" for primary schools and are having discussions with RTE to see if there is a space there for fifth years in terms of what they have lost out on this year. There are discussions going on between the NCCA and my officials on this issue.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** First, I welcome the indemnification of teachers by the State in the context of this year's leaving certificate. Aontú has been calling for such indemnification for weeks and welcomes the good news in that regard. I would like the Minister to tell the Dáil what money has been set aside for the indemnification and whether it will come from the De-

partment of Education and Skills.

My next question relates to concerns that still exist within the teaching community about the new leaving certificate system and its potential to be corrupted in the future. I must emphasise that I believe wholeheartedly that the vast majority of the stakeholders within the education system are going to see this new process through to the best of their ability and try to ensure that everybody gets fair marks. However, in every system human nature obviously plays a part and a minority of situations may lead to difficulties. I can foresee whistleblowers coming forward with information on such difficulties in the future. It has already been reported to me that some principals and boards of management have sought to elevate grades. Further, it has also been reported to me that some parents and students have sought to elevate grades. The latter will be very difficult to deal with in small towns and villages across the country. I am also conscious that a negative relationship between a teacher and student may result in lower grades for that student. It has been reported to me that a teacher who was giving paid grinds to the students of another teacher's leaving certificate class openly attended an alignment meeting and commented on the students' grades. What can we do to make sure that this does not happen in the future? I have been told of schools insisting that teachers attend meetings with colleagues in person even though departmental documentation states that such work can be done remotely. Younger teachers and those in need of contracts of indefinite duration hours for next year may be put under pressure to be compliant.

I reiterate that these allegations refer to a minority of cases and I acknowledge that most of the stakeholders in the system are going to do their job to the best of their ability and to the highest level possible. However, the Minister has embarked upon this marking system and has ignored the requests of the unions to rely on more concrete aspects of the education system, including summer and Christmas exam results and the results of mock exams. What is in place in the process to prevent these problems from arising or to address them as they arise? Given the fact that we are likely to be living with this virus not just for this year but also next year, is the Government working on a system other than the *ad hoc* one we have currently, that will give more reliability and stability to teachers, parents and students?

The second issue I wish to raise with the Minister is the fact that teachers and parents are none the wiser with regard to the reopening of schools in late August or early September. The media is awash with speculation but there is precious little detail and this is causing massive stress for parents. We are hearing about pods of four, tapered classes and courses and partial openings, with some children remaining at home while others attend school. If the brand new schools in my constituency use the 2 m social distancing rule then at most, this will allow for about ten students per classroom but most of the classrooms in my constituency would not come near to that level of space. Indeed, there are heaps of schools right across all constituencies that have been waiting for years for additions to their school premises so that they can properly facilitate the students who are already there under the old regime. Will the Minister provide proper clarity with regard to this? The uncertainty from the Department is really strange given that the WHO has actually said that Ireland already meets the criteria for schools to go back now. The Taoiseach is on record as saying that the schools are among the lowest-risk categories in society for Covid-19. In an effort to stop this constant speculation, will the Minister provide concrete clarity and clear up the confusion?

I have a question about children with special needs and the July provision. I know the Minister has answered some of the questions so I will not go over them. Obviously, children with special needs and their parents have been particularly badly hit by the lockdown and the can-

cellation of education. Children with special needs do far better with structure and when they have regular engagement with a highly trained professional educator. We have seen in news reports and elsewhere how parents are really struggling with the pressure of minding and educating their children 24-7. We have seen children with complex needs suffer greatly from the lack of education so they are radically disadvantaged, more so probably than any other category of schoolchild. Will the Minister see to it that education starts now for children with complex special needs and will he guarantee the return of the July provision? I know he said that he is looking at it. I have been here for ten years and words like “endeavouring to do” and “looking at” often hide the fact that there are no concrete plans and decisions have not been made so what I am looking for is a guarantee to be sent out now to the parents of these 10,000 children that some educational structure will come into the lives of these children.

It is really important that Departments and Ministers make decisions with all of the facts that have been given to them. What research has been done by his Department on the cost in educational terms to students of what has happened? Could he refer specifically to at-risk students because we know that the school system is a great space for at-risk students to have some level of monitoring to make sure they are safe? What are the financial costs to the State?

A university for the north west is obviously of massive interest to the Minister. People in Derry are looking for it as well. We know that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael mentioned it in their manifestos. Negotiations are ongoing. Will it appear in the programme for Government?

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** The Deputy is correct in saying that the alignment process has started in terms of estimating grades. There is daily interaction between teachers, teaching colleagues, deputy principals and principals so that work will continue. The executive office that has been set up in the Department is up and running. We have an independent monitoring group chaired by Dr. Áine Lawlor. There are a lot of checks and balances in there. I know we will hear different examples and anecdotes but the general feedback I am getting is one where teachers are working collaboratively with the whole school community. Words like “conscientious”, “committed” and “dedicated” are used. They want to get it right. It is a difficult space to be in. Think if someone was to walk down the main street in Navan 12 weeks ago and say the leaving certificate was not going ahead this year and that we were going to introduce a whole new calculated grades model in 12 weeks. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the dedication of departmental staff and officials for all their work and their ability to adapt. I assure the Deputy that there are checks and balances. I agree with the Deputy that it is not the perfect system. It is not the one I wanted - I wanted the written exam - but it is the fairest system in the circumstances.

Next Friday, I will bring a memorandum to Cabinet around the criteria and guidelines about schools reopening. We will provide parents and school communities with that certainty.

On special educational needs, what will be provided will not be the normal July provision. I propose to widen it such that it will not be exclusive to autism but will include educational disadvantage and other students as well. The Department of Health will have a role in regard to 600 children with complex medical needs. The memorandum, which I will bring to Cabinet next Friday, will include information in this regard as well.

I will be in this House next Wednesday, but as it will be the end of next week before I bring the memorandum to Government, I will be reiterating the point next week that a memorandum will be produced in two days' time. I encourage the Deputy to take the opportunity of the de-

bate next Wednesday to put his proposals in regard to what he believes should be incorporated in the provision.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** We must move on.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I would like a response to my question on the cost of the indemnification.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** The cost of the State indemnification will be dealt with by the Office of the Attorney General. Teachers are indemnified. That has been guaranteed. A Cabinet decision provides for indemnification to protect teachers in this process. Whatever costs arise will be borne by the State.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** The next speaker is Deputy Michael Collins who is sharing with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. The Deputies have five minutes each.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Island living has not been easy throughout the Covid crisis. With eight great islands in west Cork, every effort must be made to keep young families living there. Sherkin Island national school closed its doors in June 2016. For four years it has been trying to secure adequate access to education for the island's children. Its successes over these four years have been hard won. It has secured additional ferries for primary school children, the departure and arrival times of which line up with school times. It is hard to believe it has taken four years to achieve this. However, there is still a way to go to have mainland equality when it comes to access to education for island children.

Deputy McHugh is the Minister for Education and Skills. There are many emotional and physical aspects to this situation, which I will attempt to lay out for the House. The main barrier is the cost of sending a child to school from the island, in this case Sherkin Island. The maximum a family on the mainland pays for access to primary education for a family, irrespective of the number of children, is €220 per term. Island families are paying this sum in a two-week period, increasing with the number of children. There is a clear discrimination between access to education from an island and from the mainland. The primary school in Sherkin Island closed, yet there are four children from the island in the local mainland school, with a further six children to do likewise in the coming years. This type of financial burden on island families in the current climate may ultimately result in them moving off the island. The islands are in real danger of losing their families. If they are to survive, this needs to be rectified with immediate effect. Will the Minister rectify this clear anomaly in regard to access to education for an island child in comparison with a child from the mainland?

In west Cork, some leaving certificate students appear to have fallen through a crack in the predicted grades system, namely, students who want to study medicine next year and require a third language to get a placement in a course but did not study a language at leaving certificate level but chose to learn French through home tuition. Many of these students had studied French up to fourth year, with some having achieved a B grade at higher level in the junior certificate, and so they were confident in their ability to achieve a pass in ordinary level at leaving certificate level. However, as they are self-taught and they have no teacher to award them a predicted grade, all of their work may have been for nothing if they are to sit a written examination, whenever that becomes a possibility, and they will miss out on a year of university due to a fault in the system. Can anything be done for these young people who have had the initiative to teach themselves?

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The parents of secondary school-going children in Bandon are sick to the teeth of promises, many of which have been badly broken down through the years. Only a few months ago, they were told to educate their children in Cork city as there were no placements in Bandon in September. Another announcement has been made in regard to the construction of 19 general classrooms, three science laboratories, five special education teaching, SET, rooms, two prep areas, an art room, a textile room, a home economics room and two mainstream classrooms in an already overcrowded area in St. Brogan's. When will the shovel turn on this project and when will the new school open? What are the plans of the Department of Education of Skills for Bandon schoolgoing children this year and next year?

I welcome the Minister's announcement that the July provision will go ahead next year. It is welcome news.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I acknowledge the Sherkin Island community. I have visited the island twice. I commend the community on its creative and innovative approach to issues, including its involvement with DCU on an art project.

*4 o'clock*

A great example is Glenroe national school in Limerick which is looking to open up in September. There is nothing to say a school cannot open again in the future. I have confidence from looking around my own county at places like Arranmore where there are two primary schools and a secondary school and nearly 50 students come from the mainland daily to go to the island school. They have set up a new digital hub which will attract people back to the island.

While it is only a prediction, my prediction for the future of islands is a positive one because of broadband being available on the islands, whether those in Kerry, Donegal or west Cork. I think we will be looking at positive changes in the movement of people because Facebook and Google in Dublin have announced that people can work from home and there is no reason they cannot work from the southern or northern parts of the country. The Sherkin Island community is already seeing a progression from four students to six over a few years. There is a school in Donegal that had 11 students in 1999 and now has 85. Momentum happens once it gets started. I would never discount the idea of a primary school on Sherkin Island, and if we can give help or advice on that process, I would be happy to get my officials-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** I am going to let Deputy Danny Healy-Rae in now.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I am sorry. I thought I had the whole time for myself.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** We might get the rest of the answers on Bandon in writing.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** We will do that.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank the Minister for being engaged and responding as best he can to every query. He seems to be on top of everything. For my part, I emphasise that schools need to know as soon as possible what the picture will look like at the beginning or September or in late August. There is going to be a massive difference. Are we going to reduce the rule to 1 m as opposed to the 2 m we have at present? We need to know what it is going to look like because people are worrying that if it is still 2 m distancing, all classes will not be

entertained in school on the one day like they used to be. That needs to be clarified. The Minister might not be able to say next Friday whether the 1 m or 2 m rule will apply, but surely he should be able to say that it will look like this with the 2 m rule and like that with a 1 m rule. We need to know, as do teachers, schools and management because they will need more room. Room is available in community halls in places like Gneevgullia, where there is a local community group that has a lovely hall. It is called a teach fáilte and is only a step away from the school, which is already overcrowded. We need time to interact and to see how those matters can be resolved.

Regarding school buses, we need to know how many children will be allowed to sit in a 30-seat bus and what the story will be. Surely someone somewhere will be able to define how many each type and size of bus - large, medium or small - can take. We need to know those kinds of things, as does Bus Éireann. We need to get out there and let the private contractors and Bus Éireann know. That has to be known, sooner rather than later.

I thank the Minister for his work on special needs education. We asked him to include children with Down's syndrome and I hope they will be afforded the July provision as well and that it will be one to one rather than online or anything like that because that is not sufficient. Parents of special needs children have had a really tough time for the past three months. Some have two children, which is double the effect. We need to know what is going to happen because if children have to stay at home for days their social development will be compromised. It has already been compromised by the fact that they have not met each other in schools for the past three months. I appeal to the Minister to do what he can to open up the schools and let people know what the picture is going to be like. The Minister can respond in writing if he cannot answer all my questions now. I thank him.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** There was a very important question about school transport.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** It is like closing time. I have a short window here. The Deputy is right. Schools need to know the picture. That is why I will bring a memo to Cabinet next Friday with that picture, not just for schools reopening in late August and early September but in regard to children with special educational needs and disadvantage. I know there is a big debate about the 2 m and 1 m restrictions and all of that. We all live in the real world in terms of what a junior or senior infants class looks like. If we expect children in junior or senior infants or first or second class to look at the societal parameters we have laid down, we need to look at the science around students. We already know that those aged under 13 do not have to wear PPE gear. I do not want to see PPE gear in secondary schools, but I am not a public health official. That is my personal opinion and what I would like to see. I have seen photographs from South Korea, where there are pods in canteens and so on. I will not say what it was like, but it was a very difficult thing to process.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** I will have to stop the Minister because we only have a few minutes left for our last two speakers. I am up against the clock.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** On Down's syndrome, services will not be exclusive to autism. We will widen the programme out. The most important word for parents is choice. If they want education provided at home, it is possible to explore whether we can get a tutor or teacher to do that. We can also consider whether it is possible to open a school. The most important word from the point of view of a tutor, SNA and teacher is voluntary. One of the positive aspects of

the July provision was that it was always voluntary and that is why it worked.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** To conclude we have Deputies Harkin and Connolly. I presume they are taking five minutes each.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank the Minister. I welcomed his last comment. As he said, he dealt with the reality of what it is like in schools. I am conscious of the Covid-19 restrictions and listened to the debate in my office. I heard all of the Minister's answers, including a reply on July provision. I thank him and those in his Department who worked to make this happen. It is very important. Some schools do two or four weeks and others do none. When can parents expect to get some information? Who will communicate that information to them if a school is not involved?

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** We will make formal contact with schools next week. The memo I will bring to Government at the end of next week will be a comprehensive guideline for schools and parents to let them know what options are available to them. I want to acknowledge the INTO, which has been very proactive on this. I have spoken to Mr. John Boyle a number of times. It is reaching out to its schools and is doing great work.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** The Minister is absolutely right. They have done great work and parents are very happy about that.

I heard the discussion on the south-east technological university and the Munster alliance, and I notice the Minister mentioned the Connacht-Ulster alliance twice. He said that the designated start date for Munster is January 2021, and good for them. As far as the Connacht-Ulster alliance is concerned, and given the current timetable and assuming everything goes to plan, there is some flexibility. Two of the three institutes can go together if they are ready but the third is not. It is important that that flexibility is used because it is in the plan. One way or another, let us assume that the current timetable holds. When does the Minister expect a start date? Will it be six months, 12 months or longer?

My second question has also been raised. It relates to the retention of teachers, especially in small primary schools. I mention one in my constituency, Termon national school, which has 15 pupils and is trying to retain its second teacher. The Minister said there is an appeals system and I accept that. I want the Minister to consider two points. In the context of Covid, the difference between having one teacher for 15 pupils or two teachers for 15 pupils is significant. It will not be necessary to put any extra supports or anything into small schools because they can do the social distancing much better with two teachers. In that context, I ask the Minister to waive that requirement for schools due to lose that extra teacher because otherwise the Department will need to provide extra supports for those schools. That is just one part of it.

The other point is that as the Minister knows, many of these small schools are rural schools and it becomes a cascade. In recent years seven rural schools in County Leitrim have closed. In the context of the Covid pandemic and more people working from home, whose children are more likely to attend national school, I ask the Minister to apply that flexibility for small rural schools.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Regarding the Connacht-Ulster alliance, we now have GMIT, Sligo and Letterkenny in agreement on where they want to be, which is to have an application ready for quarter 4. I will not give a timeline after that because there is toing and froing in that process.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** Approximately how long does it take for the other universities?

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** If we are getting applications in towards the end of 2020, we are looking at 2021. I will not give a time, but that is not being overly ambitious because 2021 is 12 months to run then and we will keep the momentum going there.

I feel the Deputy's pain on the retention of teachers. It is such a difficult time. Principals and boards of management put in so much energy in trying to-----

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** Can the Minister send it to me in writing?

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I ask the Deputy to send me the detail on Termon national school and I will be happy to follow up.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Táim sásta go bhfuil dul chun cinn ó thaobh na scéime faoi leith i mí Iúil. Chaith mé a lán ama sa Dáil seo ag cur brú ar an Aire agus ar an Rialtas chun rud a dhéanamh. Táim ag tnúth leis an díospóireacht an tseachtain seo chugainn. I am looking forward to next week's debate on the July provision on special needs. I will not spend any more time on it, but certainly it was utterly neglected. I thank the Minister for the progress in that regard. Special schools, just like nursing homes and residential centres, should have been at the top of the agenda for any committee with a broad range of experience from day one.

I wish to zone in on universities. They have been mentioned today in many guises. I refer to two articles I read recently that set me thinking all over again. One was by Diarmaid Ferriter, the professor of history at UCD, and the other was by Deirdre Heenan, the professor of applied social policy at Ulster University. Diarmaid Ferriter wrote: "How old-fashioned it appears now to strive for a university that is a pleasant place in which to work and study, with pride in its self-made identity and producing independent thinkers who can conserve, create and transmit knowledge." I would add "to transmit a love of learning." Deirdre Heenan wrote: "Irish and British universities have to ask themselves whether they are educational institutions focused on the public good, or primarily businesses focused on revenue raising".

We are talking about learning lessons from Covid and not going back but I am very concerned about how the universities are making it normal for students to learn from home on computers. It is absolutely abnormal and unacceptable, but it is something we have to do at the moment. For example, the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology in Galway has received instructions that this will go on for the year. I am not sure why that type of teaching should go on for a year. The same also applies to the university. I would have expected it to last for a month or three months with a built-in review. Any decision like that should also be based on analysis of student needs. I took the precaution of reading the executive summary and I glanced at the rest of the report from the Higher Education Authority, HEA, which draws our attention to the huge drop-out rates at third level. It is complex and based on complex factors, but it is a big issue. The HEA draws our attention to the fact this is a big issue, certainly in the context of gender - it is more boys than girls - where one comes from and how many points one starts with. It is mostly related to the failure to prepare those students going to third level and the failure to give help.

I am looking at this report and I am extremely concerned. The Minister will probably not have a chance to answer me, but I want to use my time to raise this because I have not heard it raised. Third level institutions should be places of learning. I have read the letter from various scientists. The number has increased to 1,500 compared with 1,000 in 2015 when they

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made their concerns known. I am worried, however, that the sciences are going in one trajectory while the arts and humanities subjects are going in another, when both of those should be together. If we learned anything from NPHE, we learned that the consensus mentality is not right. We also learned that from the banking crisis. We do not need a consensus mentality. We need questioning. If we had had questioning on NPHE, we would have done something regarding nursing homes from day one.

It is similar with universities. There is a cry that they are underfunded, and of course they are. I have heard the announcements and I have seen that funding is now 40% less than in 2008. This is the time to look at how we fund universities, and it should certainly not be through student loans. We fund universities because they are essential to democracy and learning. They are essential to a questioning and a healthy society, and we must make funding conditional on dealing with the huge drop-out rate and the lack of inclusiveness. I pay tribute to the National University of Ireland Galway, NUIG. It has done its best with inclusiveness, but it has a long way to go.

In addition, we have a statement from the Postgraduate Workers Alliance NUIG regarding what it sees as the misuse of PhD and other postgraduate students in Galway because they are being asked to give so many hours teaching per year, as part of their postgraduate studies, for very little pay.

We have serious issues at third level besides the absence of funding. We have a crisis regarding what a university should be and what we should value. We should never value the powerful voices who have access to Government over the other voices who do not. If we have learned anything, we have learned that we need a whole range of voices at our third level institutions and at various committees.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I asked similar questions on universities, and on fixed-term research. I ask the Minister to respond to those questions when replying to Deputy Connolly, or perhaps he might answer them in writing afterwards, if he can accommodate that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mary Butler):** We have to conclude because we are over time for the two-hour limit. It would be much appreciated, however, if the Minister could facilitate answering those questions in writing. That concludes the statement by the Minister for Education and Skills on Covid-19 and questions and answers on Covid-19.

*Sitting suspended at 4.15 p.m. and resumed at 4.35 p.m.*

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

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We now move to the statement by the Minister for Health on Covid-19 and questions and answers on Covid-19. The Minister has ten minutes for his opening statement. After that the usual order prevails. Fianna Fáil has 15 minutes and everybody else has ten minutes.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** I very much welcome the opportunity to once again update Dáil Éireann on the Covid-19 pandemic and our national response to it. First and foremost, I wish to express my sympathy to the families and friends of those who have been

lost to this disease since I was last in the House. My thoughts are with all of those who have been bereaved.

We are in the third week of phase 1 of our Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and tomorrow we will decide whether it is safe to proceed to phase 2. I have now received the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team in that regard and I will bring it to Cabinet tomorrow morning for its decision.

Throughout this pandemic the people have shown resilience and strength in the face of turmoil and challenge. Today NPHE met and it considered the impact of the pandemic on two age groups in particular. This virus has been difficult for everybody, but it has been particularly difficult for our children and for older people in society. Tomorrow I hope and expect that Government will be in a position to consider how we can support these two age groups who have borne particular challenges on the basis of National Public Health Emergency Team advice.

After so many weeks of hardship and sacrifice, I am conscious that we all have a strong wish to leave this disease behind us and to move forward to better times, but I am also conscious of the reality we live in. The progress that we have made against Covid-19 has allowed us to begin reopening our country, but we absolutely must remain cautious and clear-sighted about where we are. We have successfully interrupted the transmission of this disease but it has not gone away. It has not been eliminated. It is still here with us. The WHO has said that it may be with us for a long time to come, either at lower levels of transmission or as waves of higher infection rates. The number of new confirmed cases each day continues to be lower than it has been in previous weeks but it is still at a similar level to what it was in mid-March, when we had to first bring in our public health measures. We interrupted the transmission of the disease in circumstances where so much of our society and our economy was effectively closed down. The task of maintaining this virus at a low level will be harder as we start to open up again. Let us be clear on that: it is going to be tougher to manage and maintain this pandemic as we begin to go about what will be a new normal.

I can confirm to the House that our modelling work has now shown a slight potential increase in the R-rate. This week the data suggests that the R-number in Ireland is between 0.4 and 0.7. This is a key metric and, as this House knows, we need to keep the R-number below 1 and cases low to minimise the force of infection. Otherwise, we carry the risk of an increase in cases and larger outbreaks of disease. While we may have seen a slight increase in the R-number, it still remains below 1 and that means we are still collectively as a country effectively suppressing the growth of this virus.

Other key measures of severity also continue to fall. There are 37 people in intensive care and there were 166 people in hospital on Wednesday this week. We have made progress. We have saved lives but we cannot get complacent. We cannot stop now because the day we do that is the day we go backwards. We have to continue to make and maintain progress or we risk the disease getting ahead of us. Our roadmap is clear but progress in reopening our society and our economy is not always inevitable. It is dependent and will remain dependent on the threat of the disease. We do not have a vaccine or an effective treatment for Covid-19. Having said that, we are not powerless. We have now learned how to protect ourselves and others in this country from this disease and we will make progress only if we continue, day in and day out, to practice and do what we know works. If we wash our hands, cover our coughs and sneezes, respect the 2 m rule - it is 2 m - we will make progress. If we keep the number and the duration of our contacts low and we stay away from crowds, we will make progress. Just to dwell

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on that point, we have seen in figures published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, HPSC, that, speaking from memory, about 59% of new cases of Covid are coming from close contacts. We know that as we begin to move about and develop more close contacts and increase the number of close contacts, that does increase the risk of the virus spreading. We need to make a very conscious effort. Regardless of what restrictions may say or what public health rules may be, there is an individual responsibility on all of us to try and keep the number of our close contacts low to slow down the spread of this virus. If we keep ourselves informed of the symptoms of Covid-19, put ourselves forward for testing if we develop those symptoms and self-isolate as we await that testing, we will continue to make progress. If we practice what we have learned and continue to show consideration for each other, particularly for groups most at risk, we will make progress.

We are making progress. Figures from HPSC show that, as of midnight on 30 May, 110 outbreaks in residential care facilities have been closed. That is 110 residential care facilities that had an outbreak of Covid-19 that have now been Covid-free for 28 days or more. Of these, 61 are nursing homes. That figure was just 29 last week. That is a very significant increase in a week in the number of nursing homes that are now able to say they are Covid-free after having a Covid outbreak. It is 32 nursing homes in our country that had Covid that now have not had Covid in over 28 days. I pay tribute to the staff in those nursing homes, the nursing home owners and the local health service for the collective work to make that progress. It shows great progress across our long-term residential facilities, which have been the front line in the battle against this virus.

This will come as a huge relief to families across the country who have been apart from their loved ones for almost three months now. They have not been able to visit a mom or dad, a granny or grandad, an aunt or uncle or a brother or sister in a nursing home. I hope the Government will be in a position tomorrow to consider some issues in relation to trying to ease visitor restrictions in a way that is safe.

On the issue of non-Covid care, I met with the CEO of the national screening service this morning. I appreciate the need to resume screening is causing real anxiety for people, particularly women, when we consider CervicalCheck and BreastCheck. I want to assure this House, and the people who use our screening services, that a plan for the resumption of service is under way. Extensive work is ongoing and I expect real progress shortly. I have asked that our screening service liaise and meet with, virtually or otherwise, the advocacy group, the 221 Plus group, the Irish Cancer Society, the Marie Keating Foundation, and others in this regard.

I want Deputies to know that our screening service and the clinicians leading these programmes are working incredibly hard. I was left in absolutely no doubt of that. They are not just waiting. To give an example, already CervicalCheck has carried out trials of the new HPV test. It invited women to come forward through both the Irish Family Planning Association and the Well Woman Centre to see how our new HPV test is working. BreastCheck is currently working with infection control specialists to modify their mobile units. We have 20 mobile units around the country. We need to change radically how people go in and out of those facilities. Extensive work is being carried out in that regard, and also on bowel screening and diabetic retina screening. A huge amount of work is being done here. It would be wrong of anyone in this House, because no clinician can do this, to promise a return to screening as normal. Screening will have to change, and we will all have to prepare for that change. It will have to be done in a way that is safe and effective, but we will work with clinicians and staff to ensure they are protected in their duties, and that women and, indeed, men have the confidence to come

forward for our screenings, and to work with our service users to ensure they are protected in trying to provide these services in a Covid-19 world. We must and will get this right, and it will be safe. I expect the National Screening Service, whom I hope Members in this House will have an opportunity to engage with, to be able to update in concrete terms how it intends to resume each of the four screening programmes, and that they will be able to provide much more detail in that regard during the month of June.

As we open more of our economy and society, and I hope that tomorrow Government will be able to recommend and proceed with phase 2 from Monday, our individual actions will matter more than ever. The Government, and the health service, can and will take appropriate measures. It will prepare for every eventuality, but we will need individuals more than ever, because the first and best line of defence is all of us as individuals, that is, the people of Ireland following the advice, continuing to wash hands, practise social distancing, and keep their number of close contacts to a minimum. This is the best chance we have of success, so let us do it for each other. Let us work together and protect each other, and in doing so I am confident we can move forward and not backwards when it comes to our roadmap.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Thank you, Minister. The next party to speak is Fianna Fáil which has five speakers lined up to share 15 minutes.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will take the first five minutes.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Deputy Donnelly will take the first five minutes, and after that-----

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The remaining speakers will take two and a half minutes each.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Should the Minister reply to everybody at once?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Everybody would prefer to have his or her own slot, if he or she could.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** They will do their own thing.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** We might rely on your laser-like focus to make sure everybody gets his or her time.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I will nudge you in a positive direction.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I want to ask the Minister about two different areas. One is the screening services, and I thank him for the update on that, and the second is the contract with private hospitals.

The screening services obviously had to be closed down. We screen approximately 3,000 women and men a day. Closing them for three months has meant that 170,000 screenings, or thereabouts, have not happened. We all back the screening services. We know early detection saves lives, therefore, unfortunately delayed detection can cost lives. Many doctors believe they can open now. I will give the example of cervical screening. In the past three months 70,000 women will not have been screened. GPs and scientists are contacting me saying that GPs are ready, that social distancing measures are in place and they can take tests now. The labs are saying they can do the tests, and the colposcopists and specialist are saying they can take

referrals from the labs results now. When are we going to have a date? Doctors are anxious about this. I want to read out what one GP wrote to me this week. The GP stated that we have a tentative date for opening of hairdressers and pubs, but not for cancer screening, and that it is alarming and extremely concerning. I welcome the Minister's update today and that he is engaging with the screening services, but what the clinicians are asking for is a date. When are we going to have a date when they can get back to providing this lifesaving service?

The second question is about the contract with the private hospitals. As the Minister will be aware, I was fully in favour of the initial decision, but not of the ongoing use of it. I do not think it worked well, and welcome the decision to end the contract. I hope we will have some replacement capacity put in place for public patients but I do not understand why it is being run through June. We will still pay more than €115 million. My understanding is that the reduced capacity stemming from this effort to do both at the same time will result in approximately 10,000 fewer surgeries under general anaesthetic - serious surgeries - for public and private patients. It was also revealed at the committee that no effort was made to ask the private hospitals whether they would consider ending the contract sooner. Why was no effort made to end it sooner such that we could try to get patients the care they need more quickly?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Let me be clear that I, the Department, the HSE and the Oireachtas wish to be in a position to recommence our population screening programmes as soon as possible. It is a collective priority for us all. I am glad to inform the Deputy that the four programmes - obviously, there are four parts to our screening service - will report on their final plans for restarting in the coming days. Yesterday, I had a very good meeting with the CEO of the HSE, Mr. Paul Reid, and its chief clinical officer, Dr. Colm Henry, and I had a very good meeting today with the chief executive of the National Screening Service.

I emphasise that although some people state that certain things can open - I know the Deputy did not mean it like that - there is a complexity in respect of getting our screening services right. It must be safe for patients and staff and give people the confidence to begin to come forward again. We must remember they are often healthy people who volunteer to come forward into the health service. Screening often involves tests or examinations that can present challenges for staff running these programmes in light of the need to comply with physical distancing measures.

A working group has been established and it is chaired by Dr. Caroline Mason, a clinician. I thank her for her work. It reports to the chief clinical officer, Dr. Henry, and is reviewing the individual programme plans for recommencement and developing a framework to support the safe restart of all four programmes. For example, Deputy Donnelly referred to CervicalCheck. There are three parts to it. First, there are the sample takers, who are largely GPs and nurses. I accept they are probably in a good place to go. Second, there is making sure we have treatment pathways from a colposcopy point of view and, third, there are the laboratories. We need to ensure each of those three parts are lined up in order that we can have a seamless recommencement.

On the issue of private hospitals, I wish to ensure we use the time left, that is, to the end of this month, to put a successor arrangement in place. I explained last week in the House that several services have transferred almost entirely from the public health service to the private health service, particularly in the space of cancer care. I listed them last week. I wish to ensure we use the time available in order that we do not hit a cliff edge and have no agreement or a vacuum. That is why we decided to use the time between now and the end of June to negotiate

what I think will be a better and more fit-for-purpose deal.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I wish to revisit the issue of cancer screening services. I wish to put the point across from a woman's point of view. Women are worried. I encourage everyone to avail of screening when it is available to them. When a woman turns 50, she gets, for the first time, a letter inviting her to avail of the BreastCheck service. I know of a lady who availed of that service two years ago. Unfortunately, she was diagnosed with cancer. However, she had a great outcome because it was found so early.

Smear tests and CervicalCheck are very important for women's health. Women who are genuinely concerned phone me on a regular basis, as, I am sure, they contact many other Deputies. I acknowledge the answer provided by the Minister to my colleague, Deputy Donnelly, on this issue, but it is very important that we get clarity. We need to reopen cancer screening services as quickly as possible. I understand the obvious health and safety challenges posed by the pandemic. In light of the answer provided by the Minister, can he clarify whether people who were tested prior to the suspension of cancer screening services in March and April have been receiving results in the interim period? I know the laboratories have been under pressure due to the pandemic, but surely administering results of those who were tested prior to the suspension should be the first step. All Members are aware that the earlier one catches cancer, the easier it is to treat. If people do not get their diagnosis, they could, in turn, be in serious trouble down the line.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I wish to emphasise my very strong belief that we need to address the Covid-19 pandemic issues to the greatest possible extent on an all-Ireland basis. Having a memorandum of understanding between the health Departments North and South is welcome, essential and needs to be built upon. Perhaps we need more measures to be implemented at sectoral level through the North South Ministerial Council to give out a clear message on the value and importance of the all-island approach across different areas of our daily lives. The gradual re-opening of the economy, North and South, which we will all welcome, will entail more movement of persons, goods and services, with attendant risks. In Border areas such as Cavan-Monaghan, my constituency, the people need to be assured of the similarity of approaches and implementation of strong measures, North and South, to deal with this pandemic for the benefit of all on this island. That message could help to emphasise the continued need for a prudent and diligent approach.

I raised previously the need for a compatible app system for tracing purposes, North and South, between the HSE and the NHS. For some weeks, unfortunately, Cavan has recorded the highest incidence of Covid per head of population and Monaghan the third highest; this has been a trend since the third week of April and continues at present. There is a considerable difference in incidence rates between my constituency and the two counties with the lowest rates, Waterford and Wexford. An investigation, which I have called for through parliamentary questions and in other debates, should be carried out by public health officials to determine the reasons for the virus rates occurring in the Cavan-Monaghan area. If particular deficiencies are identified in healthcare provision in this area, I would appeal to the Minister to ensure that the necessary resources are provided to the public and private healthcare providers to address such deficiencies.

I appreciate the good reasons for the cancellation of routine hospital work at the onset of this pandemic. With more speed now, we need to see both public and private hospital capacity being put to much greater use, as referred to by my colleagues, Deputies Donnelly and Butler. I

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spoke to clinicians who are very concerned that they have been unable to attend to patients who need assessments or treatment. They believe very strongly that a balance can be found between increasing hospital capacity very substantially and retaining a necessary complement of beds for Covid patients. Again, I welcome the Minister's reference to the cancer screening services, but we need a timeframe for all of those services to be restored.

**Deputy James Browne:** I ask that the Minister would answer the questions of the last two speakers before I come to mine.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I might write to Deputy Butler with more detail on screening so as not to use up her colleagues' time. I know how important this issue is and how many times she has raised it. The national screening service is holding daily meetings on this. I am very satisfied with the work being done by Dr. Caroline Mason Mohan, who is the interim director of CervicalCheck and a public health doctor as well. She is leading the working group and I think it is appropriate that this is led by clinicians. I believe, however, that they need to link in with the advocacy groups and inform them as well. I am hopeful we will have more news on that very shortly.

In response to Deputy Smith-----

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** The Minister can communicate with me in writing.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I will do that. I agree with the Deputy in regard to the importance of cross-Border measures and I can send details on what we are doing. I will also write to the Deputy in regard to the statistics on Cavan and Monaghan.

**Deputy James Browne:** I have a number of questions. First, will the Minister confirm whether the refreshed A Vision for Change will be brought to Cabinet this week for the purposes of publication? Second, has there been any progress on establishing a cross-departmental task force on mental health, which will be very badly needed? Third, can the Minister give clarity on physiotherapy? I have had a number of requests from physiotherapists, including neuromuscular physiotherapists, and those in similar professions, who seem to have a lack of clarity as to when they will re-ope. Fourth, on a similar question with regard to screening programmes, it would appear that all non-essential retail services can reopen at the end of the month and that would appear to include sunbed facilities. It would be quite grating for the public if people could get a sunbed at the end of the month but are not able to get cancer screening.

*5 o'clock*

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I echo my colleagues' calls on screening. On the turnaround time for the results to come back, we have heard stories of women having to wait weeks and months on end without any clarification on their tests. This is important when we talk about screening.

I want to remember all of those who lost their lives to Covid-19 and the terrible impact this has on families and friends, including not being able to spend the last hours with loved ones, not being able to say goodbye, and the deep sense of grief of those who cannot celebrate these lives in the usual funeral rituals that are so important to the grieving process in Ireland.

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on hundreds of families, not least those in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, as the Minister has just heard. The Minister will be aware that Cavan and Monaghan, unfortunately, have had the highest number of cases in the country. Cur-

rently, Cavan has 844 cases and Monaghan has 515 cases. Will the Minister explain the reason identified for this? We have seen mapping for Ireland where Cavan really stands head and shoulders above any other county for the very high number of confirmed cases. What has the Government, the Minister and his Department done to support Cavan General Hospital and the Monaghan Hospital, which are on the front line firefighting these cases? How is the Minister assisting them in dealing with this high number of cases? Will he indicate where the clusters are occurring and reoccurring? Is it the meat factories or is it family clusters? We heard Dr. Ilona Duffy speak about this yesterday. There are questions over this but I am sure the Minister, his Department, and his team may have possibly identified that. What is the Minister doing to suppress the spread? Are extra resources being put in place for testing and tracing to stop the spread? I would like to hear the Minister's response on that.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I will answer as many of the Deputies' questions as I can in the time available and I will write to the Deputies on the other two queries.

On Deputy James Browne's question on A Vision for Change, I have heard very clearly the calls on a cross-party basis in this House for the publication of the refreshed A Vision for Change. It is my intention to bring it to the Cabinet this week, I hope this evening, with a view to my colleague Minister of State, Jim Daly, briefing the advocacy groups early next week and publishing the document next week. It will be for approval by Government this week for publishing next week. It will be a matter for the new Government to implement it, but I believe it makes sense. Colleagues in this House persuaded me of that also. The cross-departmental piece falls into that also. When talking to Mental Health Reform and others, it is very important that whatever structure we put in place links in with A Vision for Change.

I note Deputy Niamh Smyth's comments on screening and I will write to her on that. I note also her comments on funerals. I hope that as we move to phase 2 next week, we might be able to see if there is something we can do to increase, even in a slight way, the number of people who can attend funerals. Deputy Kelly raised the issue here last week also.

On Cavan General Hospital, I will send Deputy Smyth a note and the statistics for Cavan and Monaghan. I believe there are a number of reasons, as opposed to any one reason, a county can see spikes at certain times. I will write to the Deputy on those items this week.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Last night I received from the Minister's Department a reply to a parliamentary question that advises me the bed capacity in the public and voluntary system, not including private beds, has increased to 11,907. This means that because of Covid-19 we have been able to increase the capacity in our public hospitals by 1,407 beds compared with what the bed capacity review said we had in 2018. This is an increase of just over 1,400. The Minister will be aware, because I have been saying it to him for a long time, that along with the health sector unions - the INMO, the IMO, SIPTU, the IHCA, Fórsa and others - we have been calling for all closed beds in our hospitals to be opened. It is very frightening to think that when we had more than 700 patients on trolleys in our hospitals, more than 1,000 beds remained closed purely and simply because the Minister would not tackle the recruitment and retention crisis to ensure we could get the necessary staff to be able to open those beds. It beggars belief when one considers that very often it did not even make the news. It is hard to conceive of it now. When one speaks of waiting lists, it is a little like *déjà vu*. It hardly even made the news unless it was close to 700 or more. That was a daily occurrence and now we find that the beds in the system did exist and what they simply needed was the staff. I am looking for a breakdown of where these additional beds are, by hospital, and I will take that in writing if the Minister can

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provide it. I want a commitment from him that, as we exit the Covid-19 crisis, he will ensure that every hospital bed which has been opened in the public system will remain open because they will all be needed.

I am also seeking an update from the Minister on how many beds will be temporarily set aside in the public hospital network to take account of the additional infection control measures. I am being told informally that this could take up to 25% of the beds out of the acute hospital system. That is deeply worrying. To be cognisant of infection control measures, will the Minister provide an update? Is the figure of up to one quarter accurate? Will he confirm that as these beds start to be reopened, and some will, this will happen in accordance with the safe staffing level agreement reached with the INMO? It is just over a year since nurses and midwives were on the picket lines looking for safe staffing. There is an existing agreement that has set the benchmark on what is safe, and I and others seek confirmation from the Minister that he will adhere to the agreement.

I am also seeking an update on the restarting of care. I appreciate what the Minister said in respect of screening. This is an issue I have raised on many occasions with him. I welcome the confirmation but what we need to see are dates, firm timeframes and a commitment that the missed care will be caught up on. Will the Minister confirm that there will be a twin-track approach to this? Will there be a catch-up programme? Most importantly, will there be an information programme for women? Many of us will be nervous and anxious going back to the screening service. We know how important it is, and we have spoken at length about it, but I want to be able to say with confidence - and I want to have the confidence myself as a user of the service - that people can go back. We need that information campaign. It is absolutely imperative.

With regard to restaurants opening up in June, will the Minister confirm that pubs with restaurant licences will be able to open at the same time? Anyone who is as old as I am will remember in the late 1980s and early 1990s when we had to get a bag of chips or a plate of manky curry for the venue to be able to continue to serve alcohol.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I remember it well.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** The Deputy is showing his age. Will this be the case? Will the two be linked?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I bet the Minister never ate the mushy peas in those places.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** He was not around in the early 1980s.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Chicken in a basket.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I do not think we ever did that in Greystones at any stage. We will have to ask Deputy Donnelly as he is a little bit older than me.

I thank Deputy O'Reilly for the questions. I had a really good meeting with the INMO and SIPTU health on Monday and I am due to meet both again next week. We have started to discuss with them the issues raised by the Deputy on how we prepare to provide non-Covid care and for winter in the knowledge that the virus will be with us. Many of the issues the Deputy has raised are issues they have started to discuss with me.

I will get the Deputy a the breakdown of those extra beds no problem and I will send it

to her in writing. The Deputy asked me whether I can give a guarantee the beds will remain open. If I remain as Minister, that is certainly my intention. I am conscious of the fact that at some point the House will elect a new Government and these will obviously be matters for that Government. There is no doubt that we will need all of the extra capacity we have opened and that we will need more. The conversation I had with the unions, although they did not need me to explain it because they know it because they are on the front line, was that it will be about more than this. It will be about a new model of care. It will be about all of the things we speak about every year but we are really going to have to actually do them. I refer to moving care out of the hospitals and keeping as many people as possible out of them, looking at how we try to interrupt the flow of older people who end up in hospital every winter or reassessing how some procedures can be done on an outpatient basis. There is a big body of work that will need to be done in this regard.

Yes, the safe staffing levels will have to be adhered to. I use the figure of approximately 20%, but up to one quarter of beds is a real possibility in terms of infection control. This is something the CEO of the HSE is bottoming out at present. We discussed it only this week.

With regard to non-Covid care, and I acknowledge the many times the Deputy has raised screening with me, I want to be careful. I do not intend to give any commitment on the floor of the Dáil regarding how the programme will be resumed because it has to be clinician-led. In the past, perhaps I have given commitments that people have been critical of in respect of screening and I will not do that again. It has to be clinician-led. The Deputy's point on the need for an information programme for women, and for men who use some of the screening programmes, is vital. I would like the Irish Cancer Society, the 221+ group and the Marie Keating Foundation to be invited to meet those who operate the screening service. Many of them have been in contact and I have asked for that to happen.

On the issue of pubs and restaurants, I cannot get ahead of the Government decision-making process. We will have to consider this as we get to the further phases. I will come back to the Deputy on the curry and mushy peas. I will write to her about that.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** More than 1,000 people in nursing homes across the State have been killed by Covid-19, at least that is according to the HSE figures. Over 112 of these deaths occurred in my constituency, Kildare North, where we paid a remarkably heavy price. We learned from the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response last Tuesday that the HSE, the Department of Health and the Minister for Health had no proper plan for protection in place in nursing homes, despite knowing that our elderly were at particular risk, despite having the advance warning from Italy and despite health care workers begging for PPE. Our elderly could cocoon in their own homes but if they were living in nursing homes, they had to take their chances with the virus. This is a devastating inequality for those who died without having their hands held by their loved ones, the families grieving without the comfort of a traditional Irish funeral and the health care workers who risked their own lives to protect these dying patients without adequate PPE.

The Minister was right to seek additional acute hospital beds. I would have done the same but he was wrong to relegate the nursing homes to an inferior position and to allow age to place a discount on people's lives. The Department was careless, so much so, according to HSE figures, that the equivalent of three jumbo jets crashed across our country and everyone on board died. If planes had actually crashed, we would have had days of national mourning. Luckily, there has hardly been a murmur so far. The story in *The Irish Times* this morning about the

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HSE figures make it even more important to have an independent investigation. Any investigation must be independent because, in view of the loss of lives, we cannot have the HSE and the Department of Health investigating themselves. These tragic deaths were not inevitable. In Kildare North and across the State, people want to know the hows, the whys and the who's, not for blame - because that is just finger-pointing - but in the context of accountability. Accountability makes us hold up our hands, take responsibility and learn. History shows us that we need this from the HSE and the Department of Health.

I previously asked the Minister to publish details of the fair deal private nursing homes pricing mechanism review. Despite sending a reminder, I am still waiting for a reply. We should have this information in order to establish whether there is a correlation between homes deemed unviable by the review and clusters of Covid-19. If there is a correlation, I ask the Minister to take these private nursing homes into public ownership. Care of the old people should not be commodified, privatised or monetised. Will the Minister establish an independent investigation into the deaths at nursing homes? Will he agree that in the case of a correlation between these figures that these nursing homes will be taken into public ownership? That would be a first step towards the single-tier health system that would befit a real republic.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy. I am not sure that she wants an independent investigation because she seems to have already delivered the verdict, which is rather disappointing. To endeavour to say that there was no proper plan and that nobody did anything-----

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** That is what came across from the committee meeting.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** -----does not reflect the reality of what I have seen as Minister. I have seen the most incredibly dedicated people in the HSE, at local level, and in the Department of Health working 24-7 against a global pandemic. As I stated last week, the villain here is not someone working in the HSE or even some bureaucrat, or even a Minister; the villain is a virus - the worst we have seen in a century - that has taken the lives of so many people, particularly older individuals. I think 90% of people in this country who have died as a result of the virus had underlying health conditions. We know how infectious this virus is and we know how hard it is to keep it out of anybody's home.

I do, however, agree with the Deputy on several points, particularly on the lessons learned in terms of the model of care.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister's time is up.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I will revert to the Deputy in writing on the last few points.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** I wish to address the waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, in County Kildare, where I come from. This is more important now than ever. It has always been important. There is an ongoing crisis in CAMHS. The waiting list comes up every year. The Minister and his predecessors have wrung their hands and promised that things would improve but all the evidence shows that they have not. There is a recruitment crisis, ongoing delays and children are being turned away from the service because their symptoms do not match the severity that the service is struggling to cope with. Children continue to be admitted to adult services and there is no 24-7 service. This is even more shocking in the context of the €17.4 billion, and rising, health budget.

I spoke to a father during the week who told me it would have been better for his son if he

had presented with cancer because at least there would have been a swift diagnosis and a clear path to care for him. This is a shocking indictment of the reality of mental health services for young people. I also spoke with a mother who sleeps in her teenage daughter's room. She sleeps there because of fear and because she feels that if she does not sleep there that daughter will take her own life. These people are being left behind by a system that is broken, that can barely deal with the most serious cases and that certainly cannot stop the rising tide of cases that become serious much more quickly because of neglect. Many people with mental health issues are trapped in a vicious circle. This circle sees them discharged from the system as quickly as possible with a handful of tablets. Inevitably, they return in a worse state and we need a lifelong approach to ensure their health is maintained. Health is about mental health and about keeping it maintained.

I urge the Minister to start taking this crisis seriously. Urgent action is needed to address the situation. It is important that we get full implementation of A Vision for Change. We need fully staffed child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, teams, investment into mental health primary care and a school curriculum for positive mental health. We also need these changes to begin today. We do not need more reports, meetings and passing of the buck. We need this to be looked at now. Sadly, the delay in addressing this crisis is costing lives. This needs to stop now.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for raising the very important issue of mental health, particularly youth mental health. This week, the Government will consider the new A Vision for Change document that the Deputy referred to. A lot of work has been put in by a lot of expert people on this and I hope, subject to Government approval, to be in a position to publish that next week. I know that is something the Deputy and her colleagues have been looking for as well and they have written to me in that regard.

I want the Deputy to know I take this crisis extremely seriously. This pandemic will have had a real and lasting impact on the mental health of all people in this country, particularly younger people. I will not go through all the funding allocations in the time available to me but I will write to the Deputy about that. I agree with the Deputy about the need to try to provide more mental health supports at primary care level. We have introduced a new grade for an assistant psychology post within the HSE and we have seen significant and positive impacts come from that. We had seen the CAMHS waiting lists fall before this pandemic. We need to see more progress in that and I will write to the Deputy this week detailing what further measures I intend to take.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I commend the Minister, his officials and in particular, our health-care and front-line workers for their unwavering commitment to those who they treat. I am conscious that Ireland's response to Covid-19 has been a momentous effort and one that has brought many communities together, even while physically remaining apart. Everyone I meet acknowledges Ireland's swift response to the crisis in comparison with other countries which are experiencing greater difficulties.

The mental health crisis triggered by Covid-19 is escalating rapidly. Flattening the mental health curve is the next big coronavirus challenge. While all population groups are affected, this crisis is especially difficult for students, particularly for those pushed off a college campus and now facing economic uncertainty. We have youths suffering from unemployment, adults with children at home and struggling to juggle work and carry out homeschooling, our elderly suffering with cocooning and physical distancing and our front-line staff and healthcare work-

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ers risking their lives to save others. With a concerted effort, clinicians and policymakers must meet this challenge head on, ensuring waiting lists are reduced and access to services is prioritised. How does the Minister intend to flatten the rising mental health curve? I welcome him bringing the new A Vision for Change document to Cabinet this week. We need to ensure our HSE statutory services, such as CAMHS, community psychology, adult mental health and the community service groups, such as those operating in my constituency like Mindspace Mayo and Mayo Mental Health Association and the various family resource centres are given direction.

The Minister may recall visiting Mayo University Hospital in November 2016 when he witnessed at first hand the excellent work being done by the hardworking staff there. Thankfully, as of Wednesday, I note that no new suspected Covid-19 cases have been admitted to Mayo University Hospital for a fifth consecutive day. I am aware of some physical changes to the hospital, including a new entrance. Having spoken to some local health workers, however, I wish to point out that concern remains about staff working within Covid and non-Covid patient pathways. Any information available from the Minister or the Saolta hospital group would be greatly appreciated. Are there any plans to update Sláintecare to include greater provision for isolation rooms and facilities to counter infectious diseases, in addition to an increase in bed capacity and further capital investment?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I remember visiting Mindspace in Mayo with Deputy Dillon. It has written to me a few times and kept in touch with me, and I am very taken by the work it does. The Deputy is right to highlight the issue of mental health as one of the next huge challenges coming down the track. The Ceann Comhairle and I have been in correspondence in this regard. I think there will be a big body of work that this House, collectively, whoever is in government and whoever is in opposition - all of us - will be duty-bound to do in how we deal with the mental health fallout of this pandemic. We know we faced many challenges regarding mental health before Covid. We know that that will be compounded as a result of Covid. Deputies on all sides of the House have told me that one of the first steps should be the publication of a new Vision for Change. That will then mean that the new Government will not have to spend months and months deciding whether to publish, amend, review or think about it again; it will be out there. The Government's focus can then be on the implementation. This House's focus can then be on overseeing that implementation. Then there will be no excuse for a programme for Government, whoever wishes to form a Government, not to address this properly. I will keep in touch with Deputy Dillon on that.

Regarding Mayo University Hospital, I commend the staff there on the really good work they are doing. In the interests of time, I will write to the Deputy on some of the work being done to ensure separate pathways of care for Covid and non-Covid patients in that hospital. I am delighted to hear there has been no new Covid case for five consecutive days. The Deputy is entirely correct that the issue of isolation has always been a challenge in the Irish health service. It will only become a bigger one now. The Sláintecare office in my Department and the HSE board are both looking at Sláintecare, what is ahead of schedule and what is behind schedule as a result of the pandemic, and where we now stand. A new Government will have the benefit of that work when it takes office.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** Like the Minister, I wish to express my sympathy to the family and friends of those who have been lost to this disease. My thoughts are with all those who have been bereaved. I thank again all the front-line staff. One section of the front-line staff I wish to thank is the Garda. Last night I was driving home to Sligo and was stopped by gardaí in Castle-

baldwin. They asked me where I was coming from and where I was going to. As a citizen of this country whose grandfather was one of the first gardaí in An Garda Síochána, I again thank the Garda for helping to dissipate this threat against our country and our citizens. It is not the first time since the foundation of the State that the brave men and women of An Garda Síochána have stood up and defended this country and its people and institutions against threats. I wish to put on the record how proud I am of the men and women of An Garda Síochána, past and present. I have said that here before, and sometimes we do not say it loud enough. The gardaí who stopped me were courteous and inquisitive but very professional, and again I thank them.

If staff go away on holidays and they are supposed to self-isolate on their return, are the employers responsible to oversee their staff in this regard, be it in education, hospitals or the public service? Is there an obligation on the employees or any mechanism in place?

Perhaps this is a curveball. The High Court has ruled that Gemma O'Doherty and John Waters must pay the High Court costs for the failed attempt to challenge the laws introduced by the caretaker Government. It is a five-figure sum. What are the Minister's views on that, or does he have any?

Finally, people have been applauding and criticising the Swedish approach. Sweden has a softer approach towards curbing the spread of Covid-19. It did not impose a strict lockdown, and there is for and against on that. Does the Minister have any views on the Swedish approach to Covid-19?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before the Minister comes in I wish to point out that in respect of the court case you have alluded to, Deputy Feighan, there is the prospect of a possible appeal. I think it would be unwise to make any comment at this stage.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I will respect your view on that absolutely, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to join Deputy Feighan in thanking our front-line staff in the health service, as we do, rightly, every week. I have had really good engagement with the unions representing several of those workers this week. I also intend to meet the general practitioner representative body, the Irish Medical Organisation, next week. We need to continue to keep the spirit of partnership going.

Deputy Feighan is absolutely right to thank the gardaí. As the Minister for Health I am keen to thank them as well. Not only have they done their job as gardaí in terms of enforcing the law and regulations - I thank them for that - but, most important from my perspective, they have been incredible when it comes to community policing, including checking in on older people, going to the shops and doing messages. They have been really helpful lookouts for vulnerable people in our communities. I join with Deputy Feighan in that regard.

Deputy Feighan asked about the issue of self-isolation. Self-isolation is a public health measure and public health advice. In the first instance the responsibility is on each person as a citizen. If a person develops a symptom, that person should self-isolate and ring the GP. The person need not wait for a test but should self-isolate while awaiting instruction from the GP and follow the GP instructions carefully on when it is safe to self-isolate no longer. The GP will guide the person through that process rather than any duty on an employer.

Deputy Feighan asked about the Swedish model. We are all learning more about this pandemic every day. There is a great effort to draw league tables and compare countries. We do it and everyone does it. It is difficult to do, though, because this pandemic is still ongoing. In

many ways, it is akin to asking the surgeon to come out of the operation halfway through to see how they have been getting on. We will know more about the different responses each country took, hopefully, when we are in a post-Covid-19 era. I have no doubt every Government, group of people, country and all public health experts will have done their best to protect their people. Which strategy turned out to be the best? Only time will tell us.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** Thankfully, the trend is going in the right direction but we must be mindful that, as of yesterday, 1,659 people have lost their lives to Covid-19 in this country. Behind that statistic are many broken hearts and bereaved families.

Once again I wish to put on record our appreciation of the work of the Minister and the Department and the work of all who continue to serve on the front line of the pandemic and its wider impact on our health services.

I support the comments the Minister made yesterday regarding the demonstration which took place in Dublin last weekend. Those of us who uphold values of respect and inclusiveness abhor the brutal murder of George Floyd and the disgraceful response of the President of the United States at a time when leadership was needed. I appreciate too that people here and around the world wanted to make it known that they were appalled by the Trump regime. Yet, surely there must be another way. For example, a petition on behalf of the people delivered to the United States Embassy could have made an impact. We cannot risk the gains we have made. We cannot put our front-line workers at any undue risk. We cannot put the lives of those over 70 years of age at risk. Like our President, I hate the term “cocooning” but our older folk have made immense sacrifices.

Those responsible for day services for people with disabilities are waiting on direction from the Department of Health and the national public health emergency team on how to open up their services. Many people who avail of these services have been at home since March living with parents. Many of these parents are elderly, struggling to continue with care and have had no respite in that time. Families want these services to re-open, the service providers want to re-open but they need guidance and support to do so.

Will the Minister give a brief overview on health services available to the Traveller community during the Covid-19 pandemic? Has the Department ensured that all Traveller families have access to a Traveller primary care nurse and healthcare team? Is the Department aware of the particular challenges faced by Traveller families during the pandemic on access to basic services, ability to maintain social distancing and good hand hygiene as well as access to mental health and peer-led support services? Several urgent items need to be addressed to support our Traveller community. I am mindful that there has been no increase in spending on Traveller primary healthcare since 2008. We need to publish and implement the national Traveller health action plan as a matter of urgency. This includes the establishment of a planning advisory body for Traveller health with dedicated staff and budgets to drive its delivery and implementation. We need the appointment of a senior-level official with exclusive responsibility for Traveller health within the Department of Health and the HSE. This person would prioritise Traveller health needs and ensure Traveller health is mainstreamed within all divisions and policies of the Department of Health and within the work of the HSE. The person would also support the implementation of the national Traveller health action plan. Sláintecare recommends access to universal GP care within five years. We recommend that Travellers be prioritised and fast-tracked in this process. Moreover, Travellers employed in primary healthcare projects are entitled to a medical card. The Traveller-specific health infrastructure, including Traveller health

units and Traveller primary healthcare projects, should be protected and receive increased resources for its expansion and development. A clear budget should be allocated and protected to address Traveller health inequalities at national level.

I commend the Minister's Department on the partnership approach it adopted early on during the pandemic to Traveller advocacy and development organisations to ensure that information was forthcoming and Traveller specific, and on the way in which local authorities responded to accommodation needs. My main concern, however, is that there has been an historic underfunding of services, leading to poor health outcomes for children and families. This needs to be an ongoing priority for the next Government.

Regarding Covid, I have heard no discourse whatsoever about our Roma community. Like our Traveller community, members of the Roma community are particularly vulnerable, if not more so due to an absence of any infrastructure to support them. Out of an estimated population of 4,000 people, 60 have contracted Covid and, sadly, there have been eight deaths. What specific healthcare supports are on the ground to support the Roma community during the Covid pandemic?

When will the roadmap for the opening up of full medical services be made available to the public? Many patients are waiting on services and surgeries that, although elective and possibly non-urgent, would have a major impact on their quality of life. Last week, I mentioned video fluoroscopy services at Temple Street. Thankfully, they will be up and running in June. I welcome that development and thank the Minister for it. His Department has indicated to my colleague, Deputy Ossian Smyth, that the roadmap has been developed. The Minister indicated in the Dáil on 21 May that he expected the roadmap to be available within two weeks. As such, I would be grateful if he could inform us of his Department's progress. Clear and effective communication to patients is highlighted as one of the key principles of the roadmap, but there is currently no such communication.

I attended the Covid-19 committee meeting on Tuesday and was happy to hear that work had resumed in respect of orthopaedics, rapid access cancer services and actively growing the number of cardiology and stroke attendances. I understand that private hospitals are being utilised in that respect. It is good to hear that their capacity has increased to 54%. Will the Minister provide some clarity on the number of patients to whom this relates? As outlined to the committee, the aim now is to increase this capacity for the remaining weeks of the deal. Will the Minister clarify how this is to be done and what services will be resumed?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Noonan for his questions. I echo his comments on the protest. There is an onus. It is easy to criticise a protest when one does not agree with its cause or the reason behind it, but it is more difficult to do so when one does support the cause. That does not mean we can be silent on it, though. What happened to George Floyd disgusts and repulses everyone in this country and probably all sane-thinking people across the world. At the same time, we must be conscious of the fact that any gathering, no matter how worthy the cause, is a danger to public health at the moment. As the Deputy mentioned, there are other ways to make our voices heard. The Deputy's party has a proud tradition of protesting and highlighting social issues, so I appreciate the call that he is making for people to adhere to public health advice.

On the issue of disability day services, there was a good meeting with Inclusion Ireland yesterday where this was one of the topics we covered. I expect that the HSE will have an update

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this month on how it will begin resuming those services. We might have some encouraging news in respect of children with disabilities as part of the move to phase 2. On the general issue of reopening day services, however, a great deal of work is being done with various organisations. Helpfully, some of them had redeployed their staff to assist us in the Covid effort. There remains a bit of work to do.

I appreciate the Deputy raising the issue of Traveller health. It has been one of my great regrets that we have not got the Traveller health action plan published yet. I urge whoever the next health Minister is to get that done quickly. It is nearly there. It is a good piece of work that has been in the making for quite some time.

I will write to the Deputy on this matter, but many measures have been put in place to assist the Traveller community during the pandemic, including regular meetings between Traveller health units and the HSE's social inclusion units. They were initially occurring at three times per week but now happen once per week. A national helpline has been up and running since March. There is a specific website resource page as well as extra communications. Under the criteria, Travellers have been classified as a priority group for Covid testing by GPs. There is a Covid Traveller response team. Travellers have been included in specific guidance for vulnerable groups. There are posters and videos. There is a digital partner pack on the HSE's website. The primary healthcare professionals in Traveller health units continue to work. I am satisfied that a great deal of work has been done, but I will write to the Deputy in detail.

Similarly, the HSE has produced specific guidance on preventing and responding to Covid-19 in the Roma community. While the Roma do not live in congregated settings such as homeless services, they often reside in overcrowded accommodation in the private rented sector, which can pose a similar risk in the spread of Covid-19. There is a national helpline for queries from the Roma community and more than 700 calls have been made to it. We have translated information in booklets and on posters into Romanian, Czech, Slovak and Romani. The HSE produced a Roma information video and outreach work in the Roma community was done in CHOs 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. I will write to the Deputy with more details on this.

On the issue of non-Covid care and the plan for same, the Deputy asks a very valid question. The Secretary General of the Department and I met the HSE's CEO, chief operations officer, chief clinical officer and the chairman yesterday. The HSE plan was to go to the board of the HSE yesterday evening and it will then be shared with my Department. My understanding is that the HSE board was considering the plan yesterday evening. I expect the HSE to be in a position to update us on that in the coming days. Really good work is being done by the HSE in that regard.

In the context of how we utilise the private hospital capacity, the HSE has identified a number of additional patients who may be suitable for treatment during the month of June. It amounts to over 4,000 additional patients but I will write to the Deputy with some more detail on that. The NTPF has identified the patients in question.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** We need to watch the clock to make sure that the Minister does not overstay the two hours again this week-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for his concern.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am very concerned because I would have been a close contact according to the Minister's logic.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am in the full of my health.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am glad to hear it. I have two sets of questions and would appreciate it if we could block them into two sets of five minutes each.

We have been promised the HSE's roadmap on numerous occasions. It is late at this stage. Will it be published tomorrow? This is singularly the most important issue in Ireland now, without a shadow of a doubt. It is more important than anything else. We need to get services back up and running. Surely the Minister knows when the plan is going to be published. Everything relating to non-Covid healthcare is dependent on this plan. I refer here to people who cannot get screening services, for example. It is no good for the Minister to say that he had a great meeting with the director of the national screening service unless we have dates. I would like to know when they will start the process of re-engaging to set up the services. Women and men in this country know when they will be able to buy a pint but they do not know when screening services will begin. We all know that there will be challenges but we do not even know when they will begin which is downright ridiculous and wrong. We also need the plan to deal with many sensitive issues across healthcare and I will pick one in particular. I plead with the Minister on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities for whom the lack of services is having a massive impact. I have raised this week on week but still nothing is happening. We cannot just leave these people isolated. When will the plan be published? What are the timelines for screening and the resumption of services for those with intellectual disabilities?

I have a few other questions in the first round, one of which is on modelling. We are doing modelling on everything related to Covid but I presume modelling is also being done in respect of all non-Covid matters. In that context, I ask the Minister to tell us about morbidity and mortality modelling in the context of the lack of health services over recent months. How many additional people will be affected in terms of morbidity and mortality? I am sure that the Minister has that data in front of him. That would be obvious information for the Minister of Health to have, in my view. How are we using Covid-related data from other countries to inform our decision making?

Questions relating to acute care were asked previously. I do not want to go over the ground again, but I will ask, in light of the decisions that the Government has made on service provision, whether modelling been done on community and acute capacity and how that will be affected across the various regions.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The first point I would make, which the HSE would make if its representatives were here, is that the HSE is not waiting for a point in time to resume non-Covid care. I know that Deputy Kelly knows this too and is aware of it from hospitals in his constituency. The number of vacant hospital beds has significantly decreased, despite the fact that the number of patients with Covid-19 in our hospitals has also, thankfully, decreased.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** There are 35 people on trolleys in Limerick as I speak.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Without getting into the discussion about trolleys, the fact that we are seeing more people attending accident and emergency departments and GP surgeries and occupying more hospital beds this week compared with last week - fewer of them have Covid-19 - is a sign that the health service is getting busier and is trying to get back to as much business as usual in a very different way. The Deputy made the point to me in this House and to the Taoiseach that the non-Covid care plan had to belong to the HSE, not NPHET. I agree with

him - it does belong to the HSE. I do not say that to pass the buck. The HSE is doing a great job on the plan, which went to its board last night. I expect it to be in a position in the coming days - and before I appear in this House next week - to be able to share the details of that, but I am satisfied that it has done a huge amount of work. I do need to say that the number of vacant beds is falling significantly.

On the national screening service, it is not unreasonable for the Deputy to ask for a date. Dates for when programmes will be resumed will be provided in the calendar month of June. However, I have been down this road of screening before and I will not give commitments that cannot be stood over. It will involve screening being done in different ways. It may involve a phased recommencement and clinical decisions as to who is to be called first. Those decisions should be made by clinicians. There is a working group. I will write to the Deputy regarding the date on which it was established because, truthfully, I do not know. It is chaired by Dr. Caroline Mason Mohan. The Deputy made a point about buying a pint but I know that he knows the screening service far better than that. We could say today "You can turn back on screening because the sample takers are ready or the labs are waiting" but all we will do is create a backlog if we do not have all parts of it ready. We need to get that right as well.

Regarding intellectual disabilities, the Deputy is right. I do expect that we will be in a position to recommence some of them at the end of this month. On the issue of morbidity and some of the data, I will have to write to the Deputy because I do not have the relevant information to hand.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** What communications and meetings took place in respect of the roadmap and the parameters NPHET set for the HSE? The HSE can only work within the parameters set by NPHET. For example, 2 m instead of 1 m would have a significant impact on any roadmap.

Dr. Anthony O'Connor, who the Minister knows quite well, appeared before the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. He stated that because the Minister made a political decision to get rid of the private hospitals, there is a backlog of over 1 million people waiting. Those are his figures. Time and again, the Minister has stated that he follows public health advice. I have a number of statements here from Paul Reid, the chief executive of the HSE, who said that he wanted to keep that contract in place. Why did the Minister go against the chief executive and board of the HSE in the context of that decision? Remember, it is a political decision. I do not have time to read Mr. Reid's statements to the House but they are all on record. Why did the Minister go against the chief executive and board of the HSE regarding that decision considering that he consistently says he goes with public health advice?

The second issue relates to the vaccines. I asked the Minister last week whether he would ask the Chief Medical Officer about this matter. On the question of whether it would be better to give free vaccinations to everyone rather than what the Minister introduced, the Minister wrote back to me saying that the current programme represents the maximum impact we can have within the resources available to us. I take it, therefore, that this is the view of the Chief Medical Officer because I asked the Minister to ask him. The Chief Medical Officer is saying that it is the maximum impact we can have within the resources available to us. I find that amazing. In light of where we are at the moment with Covid-19, surely any chief medical officer would advocate for a vaccination programme for the flu because we do not want Covid-19 and the flu arriving at the same time. We must limit infection as much as we can.

Will the Minister confirm if a joint order for PPE was made with the Northern Ireland Executive? On 27 March, the Minister of Finance for Northern Ireland indicated, in an address at Stormont, that a joint order with Dublin had been secured. He stated: "This is a joint effort with the Dublin Government, the order has been placed." On 3 April, the HSE stated that no joint order was made. Can the Minister confirm to the House what happened before 27 March or whether there was any communication before 27 March with the Northern Ireland Executive regarding the joint purchase of PPE? Remember, a memorandum of understanding regarding such a possibility was not signed until 7 April. What is going on here? How could the Minister of Finance in Northern Ireland say on 27 March that joint order for PPE involving the Government and its counterpart in the North had been secured? Could the Minister clarify the position in that regard?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am certainly not aware of any joint order. Obviously, the HSE would be fully informed and I fully endorse the position of the HSE in respect of this matter. There is no joint order between the Republic of Ireland Government and the Government of Northern Ireland. There has been excellent co-operation between myself and my counterpart, the Northern Ireland health Minister, Mr. Robin Swann, who is a very decent and hardworking person. Along with the two chief medical officers, we have had excellent engagement in what is called the Quad. The engagement between myself, the Tánaiste, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, the First Minister, deputy First Minister and the Minister for Health in the North is really good. There is an memorandum of understanding, MOU, but there has not been a joint order, to the best of my knowledge. I am happy to clarify that for the Deputy.

On the 2 m versus 1 m issue, as has been made clear by the CEO of the HSE, Mr. Paul Reid, the health service will operate within the public health parameters and public health advice. The Deputy is correct that there is a difference between 2 m and 1 m in terms of the impact on capacity in hospitals but, again, we do not want to end in a situation where a person in a hospital bed ends up getting sick with Covid.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The two remaining questions were around the vaccine and the reason the Government went against the HSE's position in regard to the private hospitals

**Deputy Simon Harris:** On the private hospitals issue, it was a political decision. It was a decision taken by the Government of Ireland on a memorandum brought to Government by me. There is no passing the buck. It was a decision taken by the Government, which decision many in this House advocated from a variety of political spectrums should have been made. It is not for me to speak for the HSE but it wants to know that there is additional capacity available should it be required. I have made clear that any new agreement would have to include the ability for us to step in and take 100% of the private hospitals should we need it.

On the issue of a vaccine, the letter I wrote to the Deputy reflects the position in terms of trying to maximise the amount of vaccine that we can acquire within the resources available to us.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** It is a very strange that the CMO would say that.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I welcome the Minister's announcement that the review of A Vision for Change will be published next week. The next step is to urgently establish the implementation group so that action can be commenced in regard to existing challenges and the very substantial Covid-related mental health challenges that are emerging. I urge the Minister to make an early announcement in that regard.

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On Tuesday, the IMO appeared before the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response, where it made a very strong case for urgent attention to be paid to where we go from here. We were reminded that our hospitals have been overwhelmed and operating at dangerous levels of capacity for many years and that this is the result of the neglect of successive Governments of the public health service. The IMO made a number of proposals on the basis that it is untenable that we would continue with the historic deficits in manpower and bed capacity in the context of the growing waiting lists. The point was made that between inpatient and outpatient lists there are now 800,000 on the public waiting lists. The point was also made that while there is much talk about a surge in regard to Covid, which thankfully we have not experienced, there is a surge that is the norm in our hospitals every winter. At this point in the year, we need to start preparing for the regular surge that takes place in our hospitals at winter time, when, hopefully, we will not also be catering for, or preparing for, a surge in regard to Covid.

The IMO also spoke about the roadmap and expressed regret that the arrangement with the private hospitals is to end. It also expressed the view that for the remaining period we need to ensure that private and public services open in tandem based on patient clinical need. I have also made the point to the Minister that for the remaining period of the agreement there should be a single list, with every bed in the private sector being utilised every day until the deal ends to progress through that waiting list. The point was also made by the IMO that it was hoping that when the current deal ends whatever arrangement is reached with the private hospitals it would not include the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, because the IMO is of the view, as am I, that this would deprive the public system of investment and enable the continued neglect of public services. That is a very strong point, one that those involved in negotiations for government should take on board. The IMO is calling for a different approach. There are possibilities for the UK model in which some targeted purchasing is negotiated.

I regret that the Government is going to end the deal at the end of June. The Minister admits it is a political decision, but it is the wrong decision. A deal could have been renegotiated that would serve the interests of public patients. Given that a single list operated for Covid patients, we should now be operating a single list for non-Covid patients as well. The situation is regrettable because there was potential for doing something worthwhile by continuing with a form of agreement. Let us hope that, whatever new arrangement the Government enters into, it is not one like the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, but something fairer and more meaningful.

Regarding the underprovision of hospital beds, it has been recognised that we need at least 2,000 additional public hospital beds. Let us start moving on that now. Much can be done with temporary modular builds, as was done in Tallaght and elsewhere. The IMO called for this Government and the incoming Government to really start moving on modular builds. It is fine to talk about big plans for the future but we need action now and we urgently need additional hospital beds in the public system.

Manpower is another issue which was raised by the IMO. There are now 500 vacancies among consultants and much can be done in improving and increasing manpower at that very important level. The IMO said we should acknowledge, in particular, our non-consultant hospital doctors, NCHDs, who have been at the front line of care for Covid-19 patients. Our public health specialists also play an invaluable role in health protection and should be awarded consultant status, in line with the recommendations of Dr. Scally. That is a really important point and an awful lot could be done about that matter now. NCHDs who were due to finish various contracts in July have not been guaranteed any post to stay in the Irish system. It is crazy at

this point, given all we know about the shortcomings in the public health service, to see another generation of Irish-trained doctors leaving the country. They are available now and many of them came back to help in a time of crisis, so contracts should be offered to them. NCHDs going through the training system who are due to finish in July should also be offered acting-up contracts. Those are very practical proposals from the IMO and I hope the Minister will take them on board. Let us not go back to where we were before. Let us build on what has been done in recent months and embed some of those changes into our public health system.

Strong points were also made by the Intensive Care Society of Ireland. As the Minister knows, the baseline critical care capacity in this country is very low by international standards, with only 5.2 ICU beds per 100,000 people. It is the lowest *per capita* level in Europe and that must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Finally, the issue of screening programmes is really urgent. There has been a lot of slippage in the production of the roadmap, but the whole screening area must be given absolute priority.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Shortall and acknowledge that it was she who called for me to publish the Vision for Change document. We ran the risk of setting up *ad hoc* structures, special committees and the like, and the Deputy counselled against that. Subject to Government approval today or tomorrow, we will publish that document next week and the Minister of State, Jim Daly, will engage with stakeholders and advocacy groups in advance of publication. The Deputy is right that the next big challenge will be implementation. I presume that, at some point, some of this will fall to a new Government. I think at least by having it published before a new Government takes office everyone can form that Government with their eyes wide open in terms of the work that needs to be done in that regard.

I thank the Deputy for making the points on the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO. I heard much of what it had to say at the committee this week. I am due to meet it next week. I will make a couple of observations. I share the view regarding public health specialists. Seeking recognition has been a long and arduous road for them. That will now fall to a new Government and is something that should be acted upon quickly. I do not think it should be pushed into an elongated process. They have been heroes in this regard and we have seen the benefit of them ten times over. We could have done with an awful lot more of them. Had things been even worse in our country in terms of a surge we would have needed even more of them. There is a lesson to be learned.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Let us not lose them.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Let us not lose the ones we have. It would be an appropriate recognition of the work they have done. I am in their corner on that and if I have a role to play in the next Government I would like to advocate to make progress there.

Deputy Shortall made a fair point on non-consultant hospital doctors. I will discuss that with the HSE. Obviously we made a decision to bring forward a number of graduations to get more medical students into intern years and I will establish the facts on that.

In regard to the Intensive Care Society of Ireland, I always listen very carefully to what its president, Dr. Catherine Motherway, says. With the additional capacity now in place, we have a chance to try to regularise some of that. It would be a crying shame if we did not.

I hear the Deputy on screening. She has not played politics with it in the House. I am not

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going to. I am going to follow the clinical advice on recommencing the programmes in a safe way.

On people power in the health service, the Sláintecare contract provides an opportunity. It was hard fought to get agreement on it and arises from the Sláintecare committee. We now need to hire new consultants on the basis of the Sláintecare contract. I will reflect on what the Deputy said about private hospitals and put some of my thoughts in writing to her in that regard. I hear what she is saying in terms of trying to come with a new and imaginative way of doing things rather than continuing with the old way.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Gino Kenny is sharing time with Deputy Paul Murphy.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I have questions for the Minister. Before speaking about them I want to pay tribute to and remember Melanie Hill Rutherford, who sat in the Gallery three and a half years ago to observe the passing of legislation on medical cannabis. Unfortunately, she passed away two weeks ago. She was a great advocate for medical cannabis and used it for her pain. If she was still here, she would ask the Minister please to get on with the programme because people need it and are being denied it or have to go elsewhere. I want to send my condolences to her family at this terrible time.

My first question concerns the 8,000 healthcare workers in this country who have contracted Covid-19. We have one of the highest rates in the world. Would the Minister support the INMO in its call for an inquiry into the level of infection among healthcare workers? As of 26 May, over 35% of the 8,000 workers affected were nurses. The rate of infection is quite high. Will the Minister call for an inquiry?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I offer my apologies to Deputy Kenny for the fact that we never got to have a debate on Spinraza. I am following up on some of the issues we discussed and which the Deputy raised with me in the House last week. I join with him in extending my sympathies to Melanie and her family and acknowledge the advocacy work he did with her. Perhaps it is a conversation we can pick up at another time and I would welcome that opportunity.

The Deputy is quite right to highlight the issue of healthcare workers. They have been at the front line at a time when the rest of us have stayed at home to protect our health. They have gone into work environments where they are more susceptible to catching the virus. We think of each and every one of them, in particular the seven healthcare workers who have lost their lives during this pandemic. We have prioritised the testing of healthcare workers in this country and have a broader definition of healthcare workers than some other countries, but that is a matter for another day when we look at the statistics. I had a very good meeting with the INMO on Monday and with the SIPTU health division. They have agreed to meet the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, HPSC, this week, presumably tomorrow or in the coming days, to get the data they are looking for and the answers to their questions. I am due to meet both again next week to check whether further information needs to be obtained. I am very happy to facilitate that. What modality that might take depends on how the meeting with the HPSC goes and whether their questions are answered satisfactorily.

*6 o'clock*

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** My second question is on the screening programme, particularly BreastCheck. I know the Minister spoke about this today. I have been contacted by a number of women in Dublin Mid-West about the length of time it takes to get an appointment which

is not acceptable, either post-Covid or pre-Covid. There is no logic in women having to wait so long. We now need to look at the long term, the short term and so forth. Based on what Covid has done to society, we need to increase capacity regarding resources, nurses and access to public healthcare. The two-tier system is simply not sustainable. Even people who might have believed it before the pandemic are saying that public healthcare systems such as those in mainland Europe and in Britain are actually better for society. They are the fault lines the next Government should fix. Particularly with BreastCheck, of course there are issues with the 2 m distancing in confined spaces. Would the Minister call for more capacity for BreastCheck because many women are experiencing anxiety while awaiting an appointment?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** In addition to my meetings, I read at the weekend a comment from the clinical director of BreastCheck in one of our national newspapers outlining her hope that the programme can resume in the autumn. The priority at the moment must be symptomatic people. I urge anyone with a symptom of cancer to come forward. The GP surgeries are open, and the GPs want to see such patients. If it is an emergency, people should call 999. The Deputy is correct in saying we will need extra capacity. We have about 20 BreastCheck mobile units. We need to do that in a safe way so that healthy people do not go to BreastCheck and end up getting the virus. We need to get this right so that women can have confidence to use the service.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** For more than two months I have been saying that we have been paying over the odds to private hospital owners like Denis O'Brien and are being ripped off. I pointed to evidence that suggests we are paying four times as much per bed as was being paid in the UK and I have repeatedly asked for a breakdown of costs. The Minister refused to publish those costs and instead tried to dismiss what I was raising as being some sort of conspiracy theory.

On Tuesday at the Covid committee, Mr. Martin Varley of the Irish Hospital Consultants Association also said that this deal was poor value for money and agreed with the call for complete transparency. I believe the Ceann Comhairle has been in contact with the Minister over his non-answer to a parliamentary question of mine, but I think has had no response yet.

Does the Minister accept that these concerns are valid? Does he accept that given the history of sweetheart deals with various big business people, people want to see the cost breakdown published? Does he accept that he should now publish the breakdown of costs so that people can see it for themselves?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy comes into the House and makes valid points as a Member of the Oireachtas, as he has a right, duty and obligation to, and I have an obligation to answer his questions and give my view. I find it very frustrating that he then puts in little loaded terms like "sweetheart deals".

We need to remind ourselves what was happening here. I know the further it gets away from that possibility he might hope people will forget, but I do not believe the people of this country will forget. We were looking around the world at people gasping for breath and a shortage of ICU beds and ventilators. People on all sides in this House were asking regularly, "Will we have enough ventilators? Will we have enough isolation beds? Will we have enough ICU beds?" We did everything humanly possible to secure as much capacity as possible. I am delighted beyond belief that we did not have to use some of that capacity. I am delighted that some of the best the Deputy can hurl at me is that we had vacant beds that we paid for because that meant we did not have Irish people in those beds desperately sick and fighting for their

lives.

The HSE's financial advisers have received the information on costs. It includes the management accounts for the hospitals for the six months prior to the arrangement. The information is as set out in schedule 2 of the heads of terms I laid before the House. The information has been verified by a firm of accountants working on behalf of the HSE. On the basis of the information, the cost of the arrangement for April was €87.5 million. As these hospitals are private enterprises - the Deputy and I might not like that fact - the details of payments to individual hospitals and groups are regarded as commercially sensitive and, therefore, in accordance with the heads of terms, the details have not been published. In the interests of transparency, it is intended to publish more summary financial information. I think that will be useful because I agree with the Deputy regarding the need for this House to scrutinise that information.

There were no sweetheart deals. Those are loaded terms to let them deny it. This was a situation where private hospitals were providing their facilities to us on a cost-only, open-book model, whereby the hospitals would be reimbursed only for the operating costs properly incurred during the period. I assure the Deputy that many of his constituents did benefit from procedures. Many were public patients who got an opportunity to darken the doors of a private hospital for the first time.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Minister can talk about other issues if he wants to, and I will go on to talk about other issues. The reality, however, is that I have been looking for these figures for two months now. The idea that they are commercially sensitive in a context when all the private hospitals are in on the deal just does not seem credible. We have a situation where €300 million of public money is going to be handed over. To be clear, and I think the Minister knows this, it is not that I am against having these beds being part of the public system. I am for these beds being part of the public system, but I am not for being ripped off to have them.

The problem I have now is that we are going from bad to worse, in the sense that the Minister is giving up on that deal but we are going to lose the capacity of these beds. We are going backwards as opposed to going forwards to a national health service. I refer to nationalising the private hospitals and bringing them into the public system. My point is that the Minister said we must have equality of treatment for the coronavirus and that we should not treat people based on the size of their wallets. Why, then, is it okay to do that for patients with cancer, heart disease or depression?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I would like to create a universal healthcare service in line with Sláintecare. I think the Deputy's group is the only one that possibly has not signed up to Sláintecare. We both agree we need extra capacity, but Deputy Murphy wants me to just go in and take it. I recognise the reality of the world and that we might have to pay for it. The Deputy did not like the deal we had. We ended that deal, and he is not happy now that I am going to do a new deal. We are going to do a new arrangement, and it will be an arrangement that will enable the State to step in if, God forbid, there is a second surge or wave of Covid-19. It will also explore how we can secure extra capacity for non-Covid-19 care. When I have that arrangement agreed and brought to Government, we will share the information with this House.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I have several questions regarding nursing homes. They have been, sadly, the epicentre of deaths as a result of Covid-19. At the beginning of this health crisis, the decision was taken by the HSE to clear hospitals of older people and transfer them to nursing homes in anticipation of the surge of Covid-19 patients. This was deemed by the

HSE “as a necessary risk”. I believe, however, that this was deemed “a necessary risk” solely to avoid bed blocking in our hospitals.

I would like to know what measures were taken to assess the risk posed by these transfers to older people already residing in nursing homes. Will the Minister direct the HSE to publish the risk assessment which deemed this transfer of patients to nursing homes a so-called “necessary risk”? I asked the Minister’s Department, via a parliamentary question, for the publication of this risk assessment more than two weeks ago. The response I received referred to the fourth revision of the discharge guidelines and not the original version, which was entirely focused on getting people out of hospitals.

My fear is that no risk assessment of the impact on nursing home residents was carried out before the decision was taken to move patients from hospitals to nursing homes and, as a result, the proper protections for nursing home residents were not put in place. Some of those discharges, sadly, became the vector for the spread of Covid-19 in those nursing homes.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Naughten for raising this issue, and I will direct the HSE to share with him any information it has. The HSE should do that and it should want to do that, because I believe it did everything it possibly could in this situation. I do not share the Deputy’s view that the transfers were done to reduce bed blocking, or any similar phrase.

If we think back, there was a view that our hospitals were going to be very dangerous places, and often places where infections would be picked up. The idea, after looking at other countries, was to get people out of that situation. I will, however, certainly direct that that information be shared with the Deputy.

I do not wish to use up the Deputy’s time. Obviously, there are many ways an infection can get into a setting. There is the fact of visitors. The CMO has shown evidence regarding how that does not work. There are people being admitted and there is also the fact that staff must go into the setting to provide essential care and services. We need to avoid predetermining how the virus gets into those settings.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I agree with the Minister that staff were clearly another vector. However, it took weeks before staff and residents of nursing homes were screened for Covid-19. As he is aware, 21 days ago I asked that all residents and staff be rescreened due to the inordinate delays in returning the original test results. The Minister promised me that would happen. When will the residents and staff of nursing homes be retested? I am so concerned by this failure to retest because the time delay between taking the original test swabs and receiving the results is undermining the credibility of the screening programme. In one instance, a front-line nursing home staff member had to wait 13 days to receive an asymptomatic positive result, during which time she continued to work in the nursing home. She worked in a large nursing home in the east of the country. Amazingly, the HSE had no plan to retest the residents or employees of the nursing home in question. What was the purpose of testing in that nursing home?

In other instances, people waited three weeks only to be told that no test result was available and they had to be retested. What is the benefit of testing when it can take in excess of 24 days to inform someone that they are asymptomatic positive? Testing and delivering results in the shortest time possible is key to success in managing Covid-19. The delays we have seen are totally unacceptable and contribute to the spread of the disease. What are the current turnaround times for informing people of test results? Does the Minister believe these are now acceptable?

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**Deputy Simon Harris:** To be clear, I am told that since 18 May the average wait from swab to result is one to two days, with overall end-to-end turnaround times of within three days. I will share the data I have with the Deputy rather than taking up his time now.

He made the very important point that testing is only a point in time. I think he would acknowledge that we have built up a lot of extra capacity that we can put to work in trying to manage and suppress the virus further. The ECDC has issued very important guidance relating to the testing of staff in particular in the nursing home setting on a regular basis. The national public health emergency team met today specifically on this matter and will make an announcement later today if it has not already done so while I have been in the House. My understanding is that this will result in all staff in nursing home settings being tested on a weekly basis for a month. We know that when we did the last widespread test of all staff and residents, including those who were asymptomatic - I think we are one of the few countries to do so - thankfully, the positivity rate was very low. In addition, the current policy is that if a facility has a first case, all residents and staff are tested, regardless of symptoms.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I welcome the figures provided by the Minister in respect of the turnaround from test to result. That must be not the case just for positive results. Rather, it must be for positives and negatives. I have already given an example of a situation where a negative result delayed people being informed that there was no result for them and, as a result, there was a delay in providing a positive result. It is important that there is a swift turnaround time from testing to the receipt of results for both positive and negative results. I welcome the Minister's comments in that regard.

I also welcome the commitment to test all the staff on a regular weekly basis for the next month to try to eradicate this virus from nursing homes. Regardless of from where it came, the important thing is to get it out of nursing homes. I acknowledge that a tremendous amount of work has been done in building up testing capacity. Credit must be given in that regard. I have been so critical on this issue because the contact tracing system has fallen down fundamentally. I do not have confidence in it, based on the evidence I have received. With regard to the meat plants, I am informed that, in some instances, only about one third of the close contacts of those who have been identified as positive within the meat industry have been followed up. That is completely unacceptable. It is creating a significant community risk and it is, I believe, down to the failure to have an effective contact tracing system.

This day two weeks ago, the Minister wrote to me in the context of very serious allegations I had made to him in writing regarding meat plants and nursing homes. He informed me that NPHET was to consider the report of the national outbreak management team on 22 May, which is now two weeks ago. On foot of that, the Minister was going to be in a position to address the very serious issues I had raised with him. Two weeks later, I am still waiting for answers to some very serious questions.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** In the interests of time, I suggest that I respond to the Deputy in writing on the matters he raised. I am reluctant to disagree with Deputy Naughten because he is often right, as I find out in this House, and he highlighted very important issues here before. My information, for what it is worth, is that when it comes to contact tracing of meat plant staff, and I specifically asked this on foot of contact from the Deputy, the amount of contact tracing is much higher than one third and is between at least 60% and 70%, although there are a number of cases in which there are contact and communications difficulties. We have a national outbreak team chaired by a very good doctor, Dr. Mannix. I suggest that I put the Deputy directly

in contact with her for a briefing on the work being done in regard to the meat plants, considering the Deputy has highlighted so many important issues.

With regard to the negative test results, I should have said that, in order to speed up the process, since the middle of last month we have been delivering negative results by text message. I am told by the HSE that, in the community and the hospital, these text messages are now delivered within a couple of hours of receiving the lab results. The HSE has advised that an end-to-end turnaround time of two days for negative cases is now being achieved in about 80% of cases.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I acknowledge what the Minister has just said. However, I took my concerns regarding the meat plants directly to the HSE six weeks ago in advance of bringing them up in the House. It was well aware of this a long time ago. That is all I will say.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, who is sharing time Deputy Michael Collins.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I need to talk to the Minister again about nursing homes. I asked him on the last occasion when I was in the House for questions to open up the nursing homes to family members so they can visit their elderly parents or relatives in a controlled fashion. The situation is becoming clearer. The worst aspect of the whole pandemic was that elderly people, after having spent all their lives working for their families, working for their communities and working for our country, had to die alone, with nobody holding their hand or able to talk to them for a few minutes. I think that was the saddest and the worst part of the whole virus. I am asking the Minister to open up the nursing homes to allow relatives to visit in a controlled fashion and to give them access. I know of elderly people who are asking their daughters and their sons, "Why are you not coming to visit me?" I ask the Minister this again.

With regard to Cahersiveen and the refugee and asylum centre that was opened there, it has become clearer that the HSE did not give the approval for this centre. Is the Minister satisfied that the well-being of the people of Cahersiveen and of the residents is not being compromised? I ask him to please check it out and make sure. I ask him again to move those people out of there. They want to get out of there themselves and the people of Cahersiveen are not happy, so I ask the Minister again to do that.

On testing, which Deputy Naughten raised earlier, it is clear that the testing being done is taking too long and there are too many delays. It is well over 20 days before some people get notified. This is not satisfactory. One cannot have efficient contact tracing when it has been going on for that long. The Minister needs to address this.

I ask the Minister, and I also asked the Taoiseach today, to reduce the distancing requirement from 2 m to 1 m. We will not kick start our economy or get our local economies going again if we do not do this. The World Health Organization, WHO, has suggested that 1 m will do. Why do we have to maintain the 2 m? We need to give hotels, pubs and the hospitality industry in Kerry a chance to get going. Spain is opening up for tourism on 1 July and if we do not allow our industry to open their doors on 29 June they will clean this country out. People who have given their lives and their fortunes and who put the whole of their efforts into the tourism industry will not get going this year. The Minister for Health is a member of the Government and is a very important part of the Cabinet. I ask the Minister to ensure the wellbeing of those people who gave so much to tourism in Kerry and around the country, including west Cork and Clare

and all the other places. This is our one chance to open up tourism for domestic holiday makers because they have only those six or seven weeks. After 15 August families will be going home to get ready to go back to school. If Spain is opening up, and we are all under the one sky, then why can we not help our people and allow them to open their doors to get economic activity going? We need income and we need the benefit of the income from these places to trigger and kick start our economy. I appeal to the Minister as a member of the Government to do his best to ensure this. If the WHO has said that 1 m will do, why do we have to have a 2 m distance? That is my question. I am eating into Deputy Collins's time. I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Bantry General Hospital has been a centre of excellence through this Covid-19 crisis and before. It covers more than 80,000 people in west Cork, many of whom are three hours away from Cork University Hospital, CUH. Yesterday I was informed by a family member in Bantry, who is only 1 km from our hospital, which is a centre of excellence, that their 88-year-old mother fell at 10 a.m. The family member rang the ambulance service at 10 a.m to take her to Bantry General Hospital, to be told their mother would not be taken by ambulance to the hospital next door and would instead be brought to CUH. The family insisted but to no avail. Three family members lifted their 88-year-old mother to the car and drove her, in pain, to Bantry hospital to find out she had a broken pelvis. Thanks to all in Bantry hospital she is making a great recovery and the family is truly grateful to the staff there for the way their mother is being cared for. I put it to the Minister that the game is over here. What is the plan for Bantry General Hospital? The buck stops with the Minister and we need answers. The HSE has sent experts to west Cork for the past nine months trying to sell alternative plans to the doctors and politicians but no-one is buying this plan. It would cost lives. The HSE cannot keep hiding behind Covid-19 and pushing the appointment of an anaesthetist down the road until we are in a crisis situation in Bantry. Will the Minister give me a cast-iron guarantee here today that the emergency services at Bantry General Hospital will not be reduced in any way going forward? In all fairness, the hospital should be getting an upgrade because it serves some 80,000 people in west Cork and parts of Kerry.

I shall now raise issues around the HIQA standards for care of the elderly facilities, specifically the bedroom and sleeping accommodation. In care of the elderly facilities, public and private, 80% of the bedrooms should be single bedrooms, with no more than three to four patients in multi-occupancy rooms. Infection control, privacy and the dignity of our elderly in nursing homes and community hospitals are the reasons given by HIQA for the need for these standards. I understand that the implementation date for the 80% single-occupancy standard was 2016. This was extended by statutory instrument to January 2021. Who signed this statutory instrument? What date was it signed on? Was a risk assessment done on infection control before the statutory instrument was signed? If so, will the Minister supply it to me? In terms of State-owned care of the elderly facilities, such as community hospitals, did financial consideration play a role in the decision by the Minister to defer the implementation date of these HIQA standards? Does the Minister accept that multi-occupancy rooms make infection control very difficult, especially for old and vulnerable people? Does the Minister accept the statutory instrument has probably cost lives? Will the extended date of January 2021 be met in all of our community hospitals?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Collins. Deputy Healy-Rae made a very valid point on nursing home visits. I have been speaking to residents in nursing homes via FaceTime and I know how lonely people are feeling. I know how incredible the staff are in trying to ease that loneliness. I know how relatives go up to the window of

a bedroom and phone from outside and have a conversation with their mother or father. People are trying very hard and it is very tough. The visitor restrictions were introduced to save lives and I am eager that if it is safe to allow visits again in some circumstances it will happen. The National Public Health Emergency Team considered this today and will be providing me with some advice tonight, and I will brief the Government tomorrow. I will keep the Deputy informed. I hear what he has to say.

With regard to Cahersiveen, I do not want to take up all of the Deputy's colleague's time so I will write to him directly on the issue. No one should be waiting 20 days for testing. I hope it is from a different time. If the Deputy has any cases where people are waiting I ask him to send them to me because I am very clear about what the HSE says about its turnaround times.

I am absolutely sympathetic and understanding of the very big challenges that sections of our economy face, the tourism sector being one. We have to follow the public health advice, I get that, but the Government will consider all these issues as we continue to work through our roadmap.

To respond to the Deputy Collins on Bantry General Hospital and the National Ambulance Service, I am glad his constituent is doing well and I am sorry to hear it happened. I will certainly seek a report from the HSE and the National Ambulance Service in this regard. Obviously, I am not familiar with the details and I thank the Deputy for bringing it to my attention. I can give a guarantee, and I gave it during a campaigning time when the House had been dissolved, that there are no plans to reduce current services in Bantry General Hospital. I have visited it and I look forward to visiting again and to the programme of investment there continuing.

With regard to the statutory instrument and the HIQA standards, in the interests of accuracy I will write to the Deputy on his specific questions.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** As a nation we have done very well in dealing with the Covid-19 to date, primarily due to the huge sacrifice made by our people but I do not take from the crucial role the Minister has played in this regard. We will have a very difficult time ahead as we look to what will happen next winter. As the Minister knows, our hospital sector is set up in clusters. In the mid-west, the area I know best, we have University Hospital Limerick in Dooradoyle, which is a tier 4 hospital that takes acute patients. We also have hospitals in Ennis and Nenagh and St. John's Hospital, which are tier 2 hospitals. All Covid patients in the area who require hospitalisation are sent to University Hospital Limerick, which places a huge burden on that hospital as it does in all such hospitals. There is almost segregation in the accident and emergency unit between Covid patients and non-Covid patients. Obviously, the two cannot come into contact with one another. If we have patients in corridors there is almost an inevitability of cross-infection and that people who go to hospital with a broken hip, such as an elderly person who has fallen, will come into contact with Covid, which could have disastrous repercussions for them and the broader community if they go back to it. There are huge challenges lying ahead.

University Hospital Limerick has been consistently the most overcrowded hospital in the State. We are not second-class people in the mid-west. One hundred years after the foundation of the State we deserve a decent healthcare system. Today, in the middle of summer, 35 patients are on trolleys in Limerick. I bring this to the Minister's attention now because I can only imagine what lies ahead for me, my family, my neighbours, the people I represent, and, most of all, the patients in the hospital and the doctors and nurses who have to work in those conditions.

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We know that only people who need acute care should go to University Hospital Limerick and all others should be treated in the tier 2 hospitals. This is what we were promised when the structure was set up but it is not what has happened to date. I am not here to apportion blame for the past and for what has not happened up to now. This desperately needs to happen now. In the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response, the representative of the Irish Hospital Consultants Association, IHCA, was sitting exactly where the Minister is sitting now and he said it was not because hospital consultants were not prepared to provide care and outpatient services in Nenagh, Limerick and St. John's. What is now planned to make sure that only those who need to go to Limerick go to Limerick, and those who can be treated in the other hospitals are treated in them? That will involve a huge escalation in the capability of Ennis to deal with the local injuries unit and the medical assessment unit as well as outpatient facilities so that we do not have the overcrowding that looks almost inevitable now. It is like looking at a car crash from six months away.

There is a minute and a half left and I urge the Minister to provide some succour to the people of Clare.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy McNamara for his questions, for his work on the Covid-19 committee, and for his engagement with my Department and the HSE. I acknowledge that the mid-west has been failed for decades in terms of bed numbers. I am not here to apportion blame either but we all know the story. Changes were made, beds were promised but beds never came. I can go through the list of the beds coming now. I will not do that but a 60-bed modular unit is being built now and there are 48 other beds - 24 now and 24 due to come on stream this summer. That is a big help.

The Deputy is entirely correct. Capacity in and of itself will not be enough because the hospital was already extremely busy. These are legacy beds that it should have had years ago. We know that in addition to the hospital being already busy, the capacity constraints of Covid-19 will place further pressures on it. I agree with the Deputy that there will need to be a change in patient flow. I am just being honest. I am not proposing reopening emergency departments and the like. I am proposing that we make better use of our model 2 hospitals. I have spoken to the chief executive officer of the HSE about this. I have also started to engage with the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and the SIPTU health division will be meeting with the INMO about different pathways of care to keep people out of the level 4 hospitals in the first instance, where it is appropriate to do so, and I will be happy to engage with the Deputy more substantively on this.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I greatly welcome the fact that there is movement towards treating those. I accept that not everybody will be able to be treated in Clare but those who can need to be treated there. We need more facilities there. I do not wish to take time from my colleague.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I thank Deputy McNamara. My question is related to his. The Minister is probably fielding questions from all over the country and about every hospital in the country.

Much was made in the early stages of the Covid-19 crisis about the Ireland's call initiative asking health care workers to come back and work in the health service. The idea had some merit but there was very little thought put into how it would be carried through. That is the problem. I know of one doctor who registered for the Ireland's call initiative, returned, and

weeks after coming home had not heard from it. She went out and got about four jobs herself and still has not heard from the Ireland's call initiative. In this past week a nurse in Donegal spoke on local radio saying she had returned home 11 weeks ago having registered for the Ireland's call initiative and has not received any word from it. That is being repeated throughout the country. The Minister probably will not have the figures now but he might provide them to me. How many people applied for the Ireland's call initiative? How many were accepted? How many shifts or positions have been offered to staff in each county? That is vitally important. It is disappointing to hear stories like this, given the crisis and the fact that so many people did return.

Now we are getting to the point that hospitals are starting to reopen for normal health care, if we can call it that, and some will have difficulty, through lack of staff and infrastructure, in having a Covid-19 stream and a normal stream, which will be necessary to ensure that the health services can work through some form of new normal. Will additional staff be hired? I know there are budgetary constraints but this is a very different time and budgets will have to be different. We need to address this because our hospitals will face a big crisis. A crisis is coming if we cannot deal with Covid-19 and normal healthcare because normal healthcare will have to resume and will have to continue on, regardless of what happens in the future. I would like to hear the Minister's thoughts on that.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I agree with the Deputy. The fear of any Minister for Health, including myself or any successive Minister for Health, and the collective concern of this Oireachtas should be that at any moment in time people will decide that the pandemic has passed when it has not. We have to try to get back to living alongside it in a safe way for the sake of the economy and all those important things but we will be in a health emergency for the foreseeable future. We all have to start thinking like that, whatever our political traditions or persuasions or whatever side of the House we sit on. This will require a new way of doing things and it will cost money. It will not just cost money, however, it will also require us to do things differently and in fairness, our staff have been up for that and they have shown that willingness in so many ways. I agree with the Deputy in that regard.

On the issue of Be On Call for Ireland, I also heard that story about a nurse. I read about it on my social media feed and I have asked for a report specifically linked to that. I am not in any doubt about the story but I was not happy to hear about it so I want to find out what went on there and I will revert to the Deputy on that directly. I will also provide the Deputy with the information he sought that I do not have to hand but I have information to hand to the effect that 1,976 people have been successful in interviews for Be On Call for Ireland. Some 124 of those have been placed and 1,203 are in clearance. Those figures are as of 29 May so that is about 1,300 so far and in addition to that we have hired 1,082 student nurses and midwives. It is important to remember that we offered those student nurses and midwives employment as well. We have hired 80 medical scientists and there have been 98 rehired retirees. Some 926 newly graduated doctors have been hired in addition to 1,412 posts that have been filled through the HSE national recruitment service. Those are some of the figures but I will try to provide the Deputy with the county breakdown and the specific hospital breakdown he is looking for.

*Sitting suspended at 6.35 p.m. and resumed at 6.55 p.m.*

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## **Covid-19 (Justice and Equality): Statements**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** We now move to the statement by the Minister for Justice and Equality on Covid-19 as it relates to community policing, to be followed by questions and answers.

**Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** I very much welcome the opportunity to address the House again on issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. Two weeks ago, only a few short days after I last spoke in the House about Covid-19, I attended a ceremony at Dublin Castle to mark the annual Garda Memorial Day, which commemorates gardaí who have lost their lives in the service of the State. It would be fitting at the outset of our debate to put on record some of my remarks from that occasion. As I said then, I take tremendous pride in the everyday work of the more than 14,700 women and men now serving as gardaí in communities all across the State. There are now more gardaí than at any time in the history of the organisation. In my three years as Minister, I have had the privilege of working in close contact with the membership of An Garda Síochána as well as others in front-line roles in the emergency services. I admire hugely the bravery of gardaí and their commitment to public service of the State. I also admire their connection with the people.

I am sure the House has been looking at the events unfolding in America with as much horror as I have. The death of George Floyd was a tragedy. Its aftermath has been horrific and very difficult for decent law enforcement officers across the United States of America. As we sympathise with the family and friends of Mr. Floyd and watch the subsequent unrest, we should all take note of how unreal it seems to us in Ireland and how far the situation appears from our own reality, in large part, I would contend, because of the close relationship the people have with An Garda Síochána and their local gardaí. At times of crisis we are protected by the largely unarmed women and men of An Garda Síochána. They work to shield us all from harm. They connect our communities. Often they are also the ones to break difficult news. They support us in moments of intense grief. It is that commitment to family, community and country that defines An Garda Síochána at its very best, which brings us to the heart of the topic we are to discuss this evening, community policing.

Community engagement has been a feature of An Garda Síochána since its inception as an unarmed service almost 100 years ago.

*7 o'clock*

Yet, I imagine there are many different perspectives on what exactly community policing is and what it means in operational terms. The House will be aware that in September 2018 the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland published its report outlining a vision and roadmap for strengthening An Garda Síochána and the broader national framework for policing, community safety and security. The report followed extensive consultations with communities and a wide range of stakeholders over 15 months.

Indeed, the Government endorsed the commission's report. A four-year implementation plan, A Policing Service for the Future, is now progressing. The report of the commission and its implementation plan present the vision of a modern and effective police service with human rights as its foundation and community safety at its heart. The commission envisaged a new model of policing where community policing is the backbone of all policing activities. In other words, all gardaí working at a local level should see their overarching collective function as

working together to solve problems impacting community safety in the local area.

Yet, as the commission's report also stated, policing is not only about detecting and investigating crime, crucial though this function is. It is also about preventing harm to those who are vulnerable and this important responsibility is not the responsibility of An Garda Síochána alone. This is why, in addition to setting out a new governance and oversight framework for An Garda Síochána, the policing and community safety Bill, which is currently being drafted, will redefine policing to include prevention of harm, in particular to those who are vulnerable. It will place an obligation on relevant State agencies to co-operate with the Garda on community safety matters. Work is well advanced.

Yet, even ahead of the development of community engagement and these new structures and approaches, I call on Deputies to agree that a striking feature of the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the extent to which gardaí have stepped up with community outreach and engagement throughout the country. In addition to the critical role that gardaí are playing in supporting public health restrictions as well as regular policing operations, Covid-19 has reinforced the manner in which proactive community engagement can improve the condition of people's lives. In all our communities, urban and rural, Garda members are reaching out to those who are most vulnerable, alone, fearful and afraid. Gardaí are encouraging anyone who needs help to call the local station and seek assistance, which will be forthcoming. In recent weeks and in the extraordinary circumstances in which we find ourselves I have heard of Garda members calling to check on people who are cocooning, dropping off shopping and dealing with prescriptions and dropping them to people in isolated areas. They are serving as a lifeline by delivering other necessary equipment or materials where needed, for example, personal protective equipment for use by home carers in Letterkenny and care packages to elderly members of the public cocooning in Blanchardstown. Up and down the country they are saving humans and wildlife in danger, from ducklings in Dublin to lambs and foals and, in one remarkable event in April, rescuing a beached dolphin in Donegal. In this way, the long-standing community ethos of An Garda Síochána has been brought even more to the fore. I believe it is true to say that in many cases the public have never felt as close to their local gardaí as in recent times.

It is notable that a number of recent public surveys by external bodies have found strong support and satisfaction for how An Garda Síochána has operated during the crisis. These high levels of public support and satisfaction with gardaí can only be helpful as we move gradually towards a full reopening of society.

As Deputies will be aware, in addition to weekly reports by the Commissioner, the Policing Authority is, at my request, assessing and reporting regularly on Garda action in the context of Covid-19. I requested these reports in the interests of transparency and public confidence and to ensure the new and temporary Garda powers were implemented in a proportionate and human rights-compliant manner. The authority's most recent report specifically addresses community engagement and documents the overwhelmingly positive reaction at community level to the breadth and depth of Garda engagement. I understand that these and related matters will be explored further in the next report of the authority, which I will receive in the coming days. I appreciate the Policing Authority's detailed engagement with a range of stakeholders in this task and I thank the authority for this helpful analysis.

Combating domestic abuse and sexual violence remains a priority during the pandemic. Deputies will be aware that, at an early stage, the Garda established a proactive initiative in this regard, Operation Faoisimh. The first phase of the operation involved gardaí making proac-

tive contact with victims who had reported domestic abuse in the past and actively following up on that. The second phase has now begun, and I understand from the Commissioner that it targets perpetrators. The operation builds on other victim-centric approaches that the Garda is implementing, including the roll-out of the divisional protection services units. I understand that 16 of these have been established across 15 divisions. The roll-out is continuing and will be completed shortly. These proactive measures are most welcome. Sadly, they are all too necessary. The Garda indicates that there has been a 25% increase in reporting of domestic abuse incidents. However, I want the message to go clearly out to the women and men who suffer these dreadful crimes that supports and services are available despite the pandemic and that the civil and criminal justice system will continue to prioritise their support and safety.

I hope that I have, by means of my remarks, provided a brief update on community policing in the context of Covid-19 and a flavour of the impact the new approaches and emphasis can have. I see a real sense of purpose in Garda members as they serve and protect us in these unprecedented times. I am conscious also of the sacrifices often made by the families of gardaí. It is not easy knowing that a loved one's working day can expose him or her to danger on a continuous basis. The reality is that the actions of the Garda during these difficult days are creating a new and positive entry in the proud history of the service. When we have emerged from this pandemic, which we will, and had the chance to grieve fully for those who have been lost, I hope that we will also have the opportunity to reflect on what lessons and positive innovations, including in policing, we can draw from this period and take with us into the post-Covid world.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** I thank the Minister. We will move on to the Opposition. Deputy Jim O'Callaghan is sharing time.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** Those of us who are interested in community policing should watch carefully what is happening in the US. Recent events there reveal what occurs when there is a toxic relationship between a certain section of a community and its police officers. Not only have the brutal killing of Mr. George Floyd and the consequent protests underlined the toxicity of the relationship that exists between certain groups in the US and its police officers, they have also have underlined the importance of having a police force that serves with the support and co-operation of the public that it polices. Regrettably, large numbers among the black community in the US look upon police officers as being members of an organisation that is committed to discriminating against and oppressing them. That is not the case with the majority of police officers, but it is significant nonetheless.

Fortunately, we in Ireland do not have such a toxic relationship between An Garda Síochána and the members of the community that it polices. When one speaks to communities about policing in their areas, be it in the flats of the inner city or in rural Ireland, one of the noticeable features is that they want to see more gardaí on the ground and in their communities. The reason for that is because the Garda is viewed as a community police force that provides community policing. It is not viewed in the same way as a police force in the US, that is, as a law enforcement agency.

I am conscious that we as policymakers need to be constantly vigilant about what is happening in policing in this country. As we know, the Garda can change and public attitudes to the Garda can change. As our society changes, it is important that the Garda change with it. If the Garda is to achieve success in community policing as our society becomes more diverse, it is important that it reflect that diversity. This is why it is important that the Garda continue to recruit from different races and all socio-economic backgrounds. Diversity in Ireland is hap-

pening and it should also happen within the Garda. As policymakers we must ensure that gardaí continue to police by placing the principles of equality, diversity and respect at the forefront of their work. Of course, the problems in the United States go far beyond the toxicity of the relationship between certain black communities and certain police officers. The history of that country is overshadowed by issues such as slavery, segregation and racism, issues that are too complex to go into here. It is fair to say that people who observed the civil rights movement in the US or the great legislative achievements of President Lyndon Johnson, as President and as a Senator, will be extremely disappointed at the fact that in the 21st century, the progress of black people in America is not where it should be.

As I said at the outset, we need to be conscious of racism in this country. We must also be conscious that as a country, we are hugely impacted by events that happen in neighbouring countries. We have a very large country to our west and another to our east and we must be extremely careful that we do not allow the polarisation of politics that has occurred in the United States and the United Kingdom and regrettably, that has existed in Northern Ireland for decades, to happen in this country. The purpose of polarisation in politics is to divide people into different antagonistic groups through the presentation to them of the idea that their issues can only be resolved by affiliation to one political group. What polarisation seeks to do is to convince people not to look at the substance of a political issue but to just affiliate themselves with a particular group. It further holds that anyone outside that group is antagonistic to their interests and should be opposed. I hope we do not see that fragmentation of politics happening in Ireland. As politicians, we all have a responsibility to ensure we confront racism where it exists in Ireland, and it does exist. We also need to ensure we do not facilitate polarisation because one of the extremely negative consequences of polarisation is that it allows the extremes to flourish and on the extremes are the racists.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** For years to come we will reference the Covid-19 era and reflect on how it has changed so much in our everyday lives. An unexpected consequence of the lockdown is that for the first time in many years, we have been able to focus on the quality and number of garda personnel that should be on the ground and on patrol in rural Ireland. Trainees from Templemore were dispatched nationwide in an effort to support and supplement the policing effort in the face of the Covid-19 challenge. As part of that process, eight probationary officers were assigned to County Longford and for local policing, this was transformative. In Longford Garda station, for example, station management was able to move from a traditional six ten-hour shift roster to a much more effective and productive four 12-hour shift roster.

Our good friends in the media are fixated on gangland crime, often glorifying the protagonists. Yet, when the same excesses and savagery are visited on rural towns like Longford, we as a community are pilloried and scorned. As a town and county, Longford has been wracked by feuding over the past year, not unlike Drogheda in County Louth. Unlike Drogheda, however, we did not get the immediate and rapid response that the north east got in terms of resources and numbers of garda personnel. It is a sore point but we also did not get a high-profile visit from the senior echelons of Garda management at the time. Notwithstanding all those challenges, however, one of the hardest working Garda units in the country now has as many as 70 feuding-related court cases due to come before the local courts in County Longford. It is an outstanding achievement and piece of police work but that difficult process will, unfortunately, eat up Garda time and resources over the coming months. As a starting point, therefore, I urge the Minister to ensure the number of garda personnel in County Longford is augmented with eight new officers when the next batch of graduates from Templemore is allocated. We need to see a recruitment

drive following on from that too.

Commentators tell us that Covid-19 is going to transform how and where we live. Obviously key issues will be transport and access to services but if one asks small business owners, small farmers or beleaguered pensioners in County Longford, they will tell one that the foremost issue is crime prevention and the need and desire to live at peace in their own community.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** One of the strongest tools the State has in building strong communities is community policing. We only have to look to the US to see the disastrous consequences when the relationship between the police and communities breaks down. One issue that constantly undermines community policing in my constituency and that has become more acute during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the need to share public space more is required, is that of illegally driven scrambler bikes. It is something that is tearing residential streets and parks apart and needs to be resolved. At local policing fora, in replies to parliamentary questions, at joint policing committees and in response to Private Members' Bills from my party and others, we are told that the solution is complex. We accept that. However, we do not accept that the problem is unsolvable. As Lord Mayor of Dublin, I established a working group on this issue that involved all stakeholders. What was apparent was a definite need for a change in legislation and a change in Garda procedures. Some of the recommendations included broadening the road traffic legislation to cover public parks, greater control in the context of points of sale, implementation of crush orders for seized bikes, working with industry to limit the sale of petrol, providing better Garda vehicle training to allow safe pursuit and identifying youth diversion programmes.

The previous Dáil established a working group under the Department of Justice and Equality to examine this issue but how many times did it meet? Was a report, even a draft version, published? My constituents do not believe that the Department is taking this matter seriously and it is undermining the relationship with the police in my community. People feel that those in here do not care because they do not have to face the issue every day. They do not live with it. They feel that Members of this House do not care because they do not face the issue of scrambler bikes being ridden on Christmas morning or of football pitches being torn up. I have only two questions. Do officials in the Department care about this issue? What are they going to do about it?

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I echo the sentiment with which the Minister began regarding the conduct of An Garda Síochána throughout the pandemic. We are all aware of stories in our own communities where gardaí have excelled at what they do.

I wish to raise the widespread issue of public drinking. It is found in every constituency but has become increasingly prevalent. It is now commonplace to see gangs of people congregating and drinking, often causing much nuisance to nearby residents and littering of the local environment. On occasion, this is leading to acts of violence being perpetrated. We all saw the carry on in Salthill the other day and the increasingly precarious situations in which gardaí find themselves. Strengthening our community policing structures would go a long way towards tackling this issue head-on. The fear factor from antisocial behaviour like this can be reduced through public education, high-interaction patrols, problem solving and enforcement focused on nuisance crimes. Positive relationships between An Garda Síochána and our communities need to be cultivated. Unfortunately, we have seen a continual decline in the numbers of community gardaí in the State over the past decade. What efforts are the Minister and his Department making to curtail the decline in the number of community gardaí?

My second question relates to the phenomenon of Covid parties and lockdown parties. Is the Minister aware of the rise in reports of groups deliberately renting traditional student accommodation to which it is alleged people are travelling significant distances, thereby breaking our social distancing guidelines, having all-day binges and terrorising neighbourhoods? I specifically reference Magazine Road in Cork, which also featured on “Drivetime” this evening, where there is considerable evidence of these lockdown parties occurring. Has this matter been discussed by the Government and are there any emergency measures that could be taken to tackle what is happening? Our gardaí need full support and increased resources to protect elderly neighbourhoods and front-line workers who are bearing the brunt of these parties.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I take this opportunity to record my utmost concern at the ongoing situation in the US, as the Minister has done. The death of George Floyd has shocked and disgusted us all. Brutality should have no place in a modern society. Subsequent events, particularly the treatment of peaceful protesters, have compounded the problem. A quote from Dr. Martin Luther King comes to mind: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” The rights of peaceful protesters must be upheld. An Garda Síochána is at the heart of upholding the rights of those in the communities that its officers serve. Our community gardaí do great work, much of it unnoticed. I thank the gardaí in my constituency in the community policing unit for their tremendous efforts, in particular during this pandemic. They led the way in the early stages when they helped vulnerable people get groceries and prescriptions. They also assisted with the excellent work of the community call service operated by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, with the assistance of sports clubs such as Cuala and other groups. I thank everyone involved in this superb community initiative.

One of the positives of the pandemic has been the increased Garda visibility across our communities. I hope this will continue throughout the summer. Covid-19 restrictions have been difficult, in particular for the cocooners. I wish to put on record our appreciation to them because they have had a very difficult few months. Equally, our young people have had to go through tough times, with no schooling, no examinations, no part-time work and so on. Many of them want only to hang-out with their friends and understandably so. However, since the easing of restrictions the public has witnessed large gatherings in parks, fields and open spaces. The Garda are doing their best to deal with this and the impact the continued restrictions are having must be considered by Government. Where possible, the Government should allow sports clubs to begin training again and to run summer camps as these provide vital activities for our young people. Shutting down activities for another two or three months is not acceptable. In my view, it would be a recipe for disaster. I ask the Minister to raise these concerns and those of my colleagues with the National Public Health Emergency Team and his colleagues in Cabinet.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I acknowledge what the Deputies have said and I thank them for their contributions. I welcome Deputy Flaherty to the House, although I note he has left the Chamber. As a fellow midlands Deputy, I wish to assure him that I will work closely with him on the matters raised.

In response to the question posed by former Lord Mayor, Deputy McAuliffe, that we do care about the issue of scramblers. I was pleased to receive his observations in his capacity as Lord Mayor. I will respond to the Deputy in writing tomorrow, but I invite him to join me and the Acting Chairman, Deputy Lahart, whose involvement in this area I am aware of, in finding a solution to what is a complex issue. I am confident we will find a solution.

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I apologise to Deputies Pádraig O'Sullivan and Devlin for not responding to their questions. I will respond to them in writing. House parties in particular is an issue about which I have been speaking to senior Garda.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** Deputies might indicate at the start of their contribution if they expect a reply from the Minister so that we can build in time for it.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** If there is time for a reply that is fine, but I am also happy for the Minister to respond in writing.

I commend An Garda Síochána for the good work that many thousands of gardaí have done across the country during this pandemic. For many people, they have been a lifeline. This needs to be recognised and acknowledged.

I too want to comment on what happened in the United States to George Floyd. When one compares policing in the United States with policing in many other places the contrast is very stark. Many of us have watched the video of the policeman with his knee on the neck of George Floyd, holding him down for eight minutes, which resulted in the tragic loss of George Floyd's life. Had he not lost his life, would we be talking about the incident? How many hundreds more people have been in the same position and lived through it? This case has become a touchstone because of one man's death. Thousands of others have suffered similar inhumane treatment but did not die and thus did not reach the same touchstone as a point of contact in regard to the issue of racism.

Racism begins with fear. That fear quickly moves to hatred which in turn moves quickly to aggression. This is evident anywhere it develops and evolves. As has been acknowledged by other Deputies, we have a problem with racism in this country that needs to be recognised and acknowledged as well. There are people here who move in a particular direction and feed that type of attitude. We need to stand firmly against it. I acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, and his departmental staff, including on the hate speech legislation. It is hoped that whatever the formation of the new Government it will continue that work.

In regard to An Garda Síochána, as I said, I commend it for the huge work it has done and continues to do.

It must be acknowledged that community policing is at the core of keeping people safe and the service the police provide needs to be easily accessible to everyone. In the vast majority of cases, that is true, As many Deputies will acknowledge, however, in many parts of both rural and urban Ireland, there is often difficulty contacting members of An Garda Síochána when they are needed. That is something we need to recognise. I have certainly come across people in the past, though not during the present pandemic, who contacted An Garda Síochána and faced long delays in getting a response. That is simply due to not having enough bodies on the ground. That also applies to resources such as patrol cars and so on. In many areas, there are not even adequate communication services in place. All those issues need to be acknowledged and worked on into the future in order that they might be resolved.

The reality is that if we are going to build toward resolving such issues, we need to have more gardaí in place. We also need to recognise that while the work done by community gardaí in many places is excellent and they have done very well, there are some situations, which we have all come across, where they have a little bit of an attitude, especially towards young people who come from particular backgrounds. I do not think that helps and some work needs to be

done on that. I spoke to senior gardaí about training officers in how they deal with youngsters who are vulnerable to going in a particular direction in order that their attitude towards them does not push them further in that direction, because that can sometimes happen.

I am sure the Minister is aware of the report by Dr. Johnny Connolly, Building Community Resilience, which looked at an area in the south inner city and found that only 1% of people in that community were involved in criminality. Yet, that area would be considered a black spot. This means that 99% of people there are law-abiding citizens who go about their business properly and they are also very damaged by the situation in many of those areas. Will the essence of that report and the lessons to be learned from it be put in place as part of a process to deliver a better service for the communities in places like the north inner city or Coolock, which my colleague will speak about, where huge damage has been done to those communities by a tiny minority of people? What can be done in order to address that?

One of the key things that can be done is implementing much more resilient engagement by the community police service and making sure gardaí are on the ground, are known and are part of the community. In many parts of rural Ireland in the past if someone travelled a rural road, he or she might be afraid to have a bald tyre or a bad tail-light because he or she would come across a Garda checkpoint somewhere. That does not happen anymore. They are not there and people say they travel everywhere and never see a garda.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** There have been many in the past few weeks.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** During this pandemic there has been an upsurge in the number of checkpoints placed on main roads and routes. That is understandable but in many other parts of the country people will often say that they do not have that fear anymore because there is never going to be a Garda checkpoint anywhere. We have to recognise that there needs to be a little more work done by An Garda Síochána on the ground to ensure we change that.

Finally, the youth diversion programme needs more resources and needs to be spread out much more, particularly throughout those black spots where we have difficulties with drug crime.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I am proud of my community and of my constituents who make it a great place to live. I thank the community groups, educators and gardaí for working as hard as they do to try to make our society a better place. However, there is an ongoing drug feud in my area and communities across my constituency are dealing with a never-ending cycle of living in fear and under intimidation. While I understand that particular pressure has been put on the Garda to implement the emergency legislation that was passed in March, the day-to-day crimes in my area have not ceased as a result of lockdown. Most recently, there have been incidents of a more violent nature and some very vicious attacks have been carried out, including stabbings, shootings and young lads attacked with hammers. They have rocked our communities.

I have raised with the Minister in the past the fact that the number of community gardaí in Coolock dropped dramatically compared with the number assigned in 2012. Communities and constituents in Dublin Bay North should be able to go outside their doors without worrying about whether they will be caught up in any of these incidents. They should be able to feel safe in their own homes and communities. I have been contacted by numerous constituents in recent weeks and people are afraid. Grandparents who are worried about their grandchildren have contacted me. Young people have contacted me because they are afraid to go out with

their friends.

The most effective crime policies focus on prevention, and community policing is key to this approach. This means intensive and systematic social investment in marginalised areas. Victims of crime must also be given better supports and follow-up on their cases. This means providing intervention and support services for individuals and families at risk, accountable community policing, and a proactive, routine and continuous engagement with local communities and authorities.

As elected representatives, we all know from working with community gardaí the significant difference a good community garda can make in an area. He or she can build up trust with people at risk of offending, improve public confidence in policing, and ingrain themselves in community activity. However, significant damage has been done to the resourcing of community gardaí in recent years.

Gardaí acknowledge they are overstretched and need supports. Will the Minister write to the Garda Commissioner to seek that he increase the number of community gardaí as a priority? Are we anywhere closer to establishing a task force for my area similar to what was established in the north inner city?

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** The principle of community policing is of course a good one. However, where gardaí are present in stations for only a few hours each week, there are no visible foot patrols and very few community group meetings with gardaí, then the actions on the ground do not match the principle. An analysis of the force's station directory shows that almost 60% of stations are open for less than three hours per day, Monday to Friday. The number of Garda stations open across the State has decreased by over 20% since 2011 when approximately 703 stations were in operation. The station directory also clearly shows that just over 20% of all stations are currently open on a 24-hour basis. In my county, Meath, there are 300 gardaí for a population in excess of 200,000 people. This represents one garda per 600 people. Most other counties with similar populations have almost double this policing ratio. Even during Covid-19, available gardaí are doing an excellent job, but they are clearly under-resourced in terms of overall numbers and are operating in a very pressurised scenario due to a poor policing ratio.

Community policing is also heavily affected by resources and personnel being routinely redeployed to other activities. In terms of dealing with illicit drug use and trafficking, community policy can come into its own. While canvassing in the recent general election, it was very clear that the issue of illicit drug use and trafficking was uppermost in people's minds, with the obvious knock on effects of an increase in antisocial behaviour and crime rates. This was a key issue in every town and village, with constant reference to the lack of a Garda presence in local stations or on the beat. This view was shared by young and old alike, and there was considerable support across all age groups for the idea that urgent action needed to be taken.

While we need to increase the provision of community-based facilities for younger people and properly funded addiction and rehabilitation services, the absence of a strong community policing presence sends out the wrong signal entirely. It indicates that the State is not serious about tackling the drugs and associated crime problems, and that the concept of community policing is spin and has no substance.

If we do not put the necessary resources into dealing with these problems, particularly in our

smaller towns and villages, we will be allowing the same drug-fuelled gangland-style mentality and crime rate to develop in these towns as exists at present in some of our larger towns and cities. We have an opportunity to prevent this, but only with improved community facilities backed up by strong community policing.

Will the Minister commit to properly resourcing the Garda, particularly in rural areas, to provide a workable community policing initiative? Will he further commit to ensuring resources and personnel assigned to community policing activities are ring-fenced to that activity and not regularly redeployed to other activities?

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I thank the Deputy for his comments. I remind him that I do not engage in operational issues with An Garda Síochána; that is a matter for the Garda Commissioner. However, I meet the Garda Commissioner regularly. While I do not have up-to-date figures with me now on the situation in Meath, I would be happy to provide the Deputy with these figures tomorrow and he will see an increase in the number of gardaí in Meath compared with five years ago. I would be happy to convey his views directly to the Garda Commissioner.

I thank Deputy Mitchell for raising the issue important in her constituency, which is also an important priority for me. I visited the area with the Garda Commissioner and with senior gardaí and I know the Taoiseach also did so. I acknowledge the urgency and importance of what the Deputy raised. I actually have figures for Coolock. While I will provide them to her in writing tomorrow, let me say that at the end of April, a few weeks ago, we saw a 20% increase in garda numbers compared with the end of 2015. A total of 247 gardaí are assigned to the Coolock district, which represents a 25% increase compared with 2015. There are 62 Garda staff, an increase of 63%.

Deputy Mitchell has raised the issue of the task force with me previously and I am keen to see progress made in that area. As I said in my opening comments, dealing with issues such as those in the Deputy's constituency is not a matter for policing alone; we need to involve the other agencies in this regard. A former assistant commissioner has been tasked by Dublin City Council with investigating, engaging and reporting. This fits into the common theme of the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, which indicates that ensuring a reduction in crime in communities involves a multi-agency approach. I would be happy to engage further with the Deputy, but I thank her for raising it.

Deputy Martin Kenny raised some other issues that I am sure will arise between now and the end of the debate.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I do not need an oral reply; I will accept a written one.

I join others in expressing my appreciation of An Garda Síochána in the manner gardaí have deported themselves in dealing with the community, involving themselves with the community and supporting the community along with all other members of the public services who have been on the front line for the past two or three months. We greatly appreciate what they have done, and I hope we will remember it.

That is in dramatic contrast to the disgraceful scenes we have witnessed in the United States where it would appear the 1950s and 1960s seem to be still with us regarding prejudice, racism and all that goes with it, and the suspicion and violence that follows it. It is no harm to reflect on that. It could happen anywhere. We all know people who say "I am not a racist, but..." even in our own society. The "but" is what alerts me to what might follow.

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Time and attention have been given to direct provision in recent times, which is as it should be. Many efforts have been made to provide adequate direct provision and accommodation for refugees, as it should be. Those efforts have not always been greeted with full support, however. There have been several disgraceful scenes throughout the country where there were indications that perhaps the support that one would have liked was not there. This comes about as a result of what we have seen on our television screens right across Europe, when children have been washed up on shores and people have said “No”, that refugees cannot come there, there is no space and they do not want them. I do not wish to have a written reply, but at a later stage we should have a debate on this very important issue.

My last point concerns organised crime and the drugs business, which has already been mentioned. I believe there is no way to deal with that issue through the community. The kingpins of the organised criminal gangs have to be put behind bars, and whatever legislation is required to do that should be undertaken without delay.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** In December 2015, the former Minister for Justice and Equality, former Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, stated that funding for a new Garda station for Sligo would be identified in the 2017 to 2021 capital plan. In January 2017, the Office of Public Works, OPW, issued an advertisement for a site for the new station, along with Macroom and Clonmel, as part of a public-private partnership project, PPP. In mid-2017, gardaí had to leave the station in Sligo on health and safety grounds. This makes the issue worse. Also in mid-2017, remedial health and safety works were progressed in Sligo Garda station and a new station was still a priority. At the end of 2017, the Minister for Justice and Equality reaffirmed the commitment to a new Garda station for Sligo. In mid-2018, a new site was acquired by the OPW for a new Garda station at Caltragh in Sligo.

On foot of that, I put in a parliamentary question last week:

To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the provision of the new regional Garda headquarters in County Sligo as set out in the capital plan of his Department; the stage the project is at; when a planning application will be submitted; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

The reply I got stated:

[S]ignificant remedial works have already taken place in the existing Garda station in Sligo, including the complete upgrade of the three floors in the building containing the public office and the provision of new locker facilities. Further upgrade works are progressing and involve the provision of new cells and custody management facilities.

The Garda Commissioner has decided that rather than construct an entirely new building, as was originally intended under the PPP model, the upgrading of the existing station to a high standard will continue. I have been assured that the upgrades will continue ... [and] ... that accommodation needs are addressed and that the station is upgraded to meet the future operational requirements of Garda members, staff and the public who use it.

I have several questions. This is a huge shock to and setback for me, and it seems that the politicians, the people and the gardaí in Sligo were misled. Why are Macroom and Clonmel deemed to be more in need of a new Garda station than Sligo, which is at the centre of the Project Ireland 2040 capital plan as a regional growth centre and the capital of the north west? What has changed since the former Minister for Justice and Equality, former Deputy Frances

Fitzgerald, said that we badly needed a new Garda station in Sligo? Are gardaí being punished for taking a public stand by leaving their unsafe Garda station? What will happen to the site that was stated would be purchased in Sligo? What do we have to do to finally get a state-of-the-art facility for the brave men and women of An Garda Síochána who serve the citizens of Sligo and the north west? This is an absolute disgrace. Commitments were made and I believe those commitments should be delivered upon.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I join my colleagues in the House in condemning the brutal murder of George Floyd in the United States and all that has gone with that since then. One positive thing to come from this is a coming together of a range of different people and races peacefully, as has been shown in recent days, to stand together against the abuse of and discrimination against black people.

It is worth putting on the record of this House the concept of white privilege and how that can be normalised in our own lives. As we develop as a more racially integrated society, we need to become more conscious of that within our politics and the advantages white privilege has brought. I refer to the concept of the “invisible knapsack”, a term coined by Peggy McIntosh in 1990 in respect of white privilege. The concept is not about racism being something that disadvantages others, but the corollary that whiteness is in itself an advantage and the need to really try to understand that idea.

On social media, which is so useful in this way, we have seen many different memes of white privilege and associated tests. That is not to be tokenistic or to try to diminish the seriousness of this issue. They are a useful check of our understanding of ourselves, our place in the world and the advantages conferred on us, not just in this House, this country or this Parliament. They highlight how difficult it can be for people of different races who are not in a majority situation and have not had the inherent advantages that come with that. I stress that I do not wish to be tokenistic but, rather, to put on the record of the House that I have never been the only person of my race in a room or the victim of violence because of my race. Nobody has ever told me that I sound white or that they wish to check whether my hair feels real or anything of that nature. As I stated, I do not wish to be tokenistic. Sometimes there is value in these things being created as a picture or in reference to oneself in order to try really to understand the nature of race and race relations, particularly as we become a more integrated society.

On a more local matter, there were significant public order difficulties in areas of Dún Laoghaire, my constituency, including in Seapoint, Sandycove, Dalkey, Killiney and Shankill, where, naturally, children or young people who were mad to get out of the house congregated. It has caused a significant public order issue. I thank the Garda for its actions over the weekend to try to help and intervene. I hope those difficulties will not be an ongoing feature of the summer and that the Minister will provide every support to the Garda as it tries to deal with the issue.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I thank the Deputy for raising the latter points. She will be pleased to hear that the Garda is currently investigating public order issues, which were also raised earlier by Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan. I understand that several investigations are ongoing in the context of the Covid-19 regulatory framework. It would not be appropriate for me to comment in any detail, but I assure Deputies that such investigations are under way.

I agree with Deputy Carroll McNeill on anti-racism. Along with my Government colleagues, I, particularly in my capacity as Minister for Justice and Equality, abhor racism in all

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its forms, wherever and however it arises. The Government and I, along with the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, who has specific responsibility in that area, are fully committed to ensuring that Ireland is a safe and secure place for everybody and that appropriate tools are in place to address racism or xenophobia in any form. I make no apologies for indicating my intention to introduce a specific crime of hate speech, thus developing further protection against hate crime. There is a working group on the issue and I intend to report progress on that at the earliest date in the form of proposals for legislative change. As far as the Garda is concerned, there is very positive and active engagement to ensure that the Garda diversity and integration strategy is fully rolled out and upheld. In addition, there is the migrant integration strategy and, of course, community integration funds which will help communities to support integration and diversity and allow people to be fully engaged.

On Sligo Garda station, I am happy to provide further information to Deputy Feighan. The Garda Commissioner has decided that rather than construct an entirely new building as was the original intention, the existing Garda station, which I visited some time ago, will be the subject of a multi-million euro renovation programme. I am very keen for that to get under way at an early date.

I agree with Deputy Durkan on the need for ongoing and further debate on our immigration policy.

**Deputy Patrick Costello:** I thank my colleague, Deputy O’Gorman, for allowing me to usurp some of his time. I will be as quick as possible. I ask the Minister to reply to me in writing if he feels the need to so do, rather than taking up more of Deputy O’Gorman’s time.

I echo the views expressed by many other Deputies regarding the murder in America and the horrendous racism we are seeing there. I am conscious that we must also look to the beam in our own eye. Like many other Deputies, I receive many emails regarding direct provision, the treatment of Travellers and the need for hate crime legislation. This is an area where we need to be aware of our own issues and look closely at them, instead of simply patting ourselves on the back and saying that at least we are not as bad as America, where things are truly bad.

I would also like to ask the Minister about the divisional protective services units. These are an excellent development within An Garda Síochána. While I am aware they are being staffed by gardaí with specialist training, what engagement has there been with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla to ensure social workers are sitting at the same table as gardaí? When they are sitting together, there is an overlap between their work in regard to sexual violence, child protection and domestic violence. International studies have shown that it is best when social workers and law enforcement are sitting at the same table, talking the same language and pulling in the same direction. I have raised this with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and while it is important that Tusla ensures it pushes its way into those units, it is important that we invite it in as well. That is why I am asking the Minister for Justice and Equality as well as the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

In my own constituency, there have been issues of antisocial behaviour and there is a great need for improved community policing. We need to look at creative ways to ensure there are more police on the beat - more police walking or cycling through these estates or cycling up and down the canal, as I have said.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** I was pleased to hear the Minister specifically reference the

work of gardaí in Blanchardstown during the Covid-19 crisis. I would also like to pay tribute to them, particularly the support they have given to voluntary and sporting groups in the area in the context of Fingal's Community Call scheme.

Under the current regulations, recruitment to An Garda Síochána is limited to those of 35 years or younger and the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland has recommended that this age bar be scrapped. The Minister responded to a parliamentary question I put down recently by stating that the age barrier is being considered as part of a broader review of the entry into and recruitment to the Garda. Will the Minister provide more detail about this, particularly who it is envisaged will sit on this working group and what is the expected timeline for its commencement, for its work to take place and for any changes to be made to the age barrier?

In the United States this week, we saw and we are seeing what happens when a police force systemically fails to represent the communities it polices. Within the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, it was stated very clearly that the idea of community policing has to be the policing model that Ireland adopts. It is vital the Garda reflects the very diverse communities in which it operates. I know this is something the Minister has acknowledged and it is also acknowledged by the commission's report. The Garda diversity and integration strategy, which was published last year, commits to the identification of barriers to recruiting and retaining people from diverse and minority backgrounds as Garda members, Garda staff and Garda reserves, and to work to mitigate or remove these barriers. Will the Minister give us statistics on the number of officers from diverse and minority backgrounds who are currently serving in the Garda? Will he outline what work is being done right now to implement that goal from the diversity and integration strategy? Will this work form part of the broader review of entry into the Garda to which I referred earlier?

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I thank Deputies Costello and O'Gorman for their contributions and questions. Deputy Costello indicated he might opt for a reply in writing in order to give me the opportunity to reply to Deputy O'Gorman, and I acknowledge his generosity in that regard. I agree with the points raised by Deputy Costello and would be happy to commit to a detailed reply in writing.

I acknowledge what Deputy O'Gorman has said with particular reference to the expert review group on recruit education and entry pathways into An Garda Síochána. That, of course, is a key action under A Policing Service for the Future plan. An Garda Síochána hopes to form that group very shortly. I would be happy to engage further with the Deputy on the make-up of the group. I invite any suggestions or observations he might have. I would be very happy to feed them along the line because I think that is important.

I agree about the age barrier. It is one of a number of recommendations under the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, all of which are part of the implementation plan, the implementation group of which is chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach. This group meets regularly. The challenge of engagement in recent weeks has resulted in the initial deadlines not being absolutely met. I would have preferred at this stage in the early summer of 2020 to be introducing the legislation. I am not in a position to do so, but I assure the House that work is ongoing in my Department. I anticipate the legislation would be ready for publication in autumn of this year and then be subject to the appropriate level of debate.

On Garda recruitment and diversity, I assure all Deputies, as this issue was also raised by Deputy Martin Kenny tonight, and not for the first time, that under the current Garda Com-

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missioner there has been specific, active engagement on his part to broaden the composition of An Garda Síochána to reflect society. This involves active engagement of a new nature, for example, in visits of members of An Garda Síochána to schools, through direct liaison and engagement with careers guidance officers, and with active engagement by the distribution of information leaflets in different languages. A recent advertisement for Garda recruitment was placed in Arabic, which I very much welcome. I feel that these are issues on which Deputy O’Gorman would like to see a greater level of progress. I will give the Deputy figures on composition. I know from my own knowledge that at the last two Garda attestation ceremonies in the Garda Training College in Templemore there were a large number of international flags across the college courtyard denoting and highlighting the countries of origin of the graduates on those occasions, including Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Australia, the UK and further afield. I am happy to obtain an actual breakdown of the composition from the Garda Commissioner at an early date.

I must also acknowledge the language skills within An Garda Síochána. This helps engagement to take place at a very intense level within communities. The migrant integration strategy, under the direction of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, commits all public bodies, including An Garda Síochána, to the type of engagement that means communities are well represented among the Garda and that we can continue to engage in the type of community policing that differentiates, as I said earlier, the Garda Síochána from most police services throughout the world. This is very much a theme of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. I am happy to engage further on that. I have visited Blanchardstown Garda station, which is in Deputy O’Gorman’s constituency. I also had the opportunity of viewing the highly entertaining and very informing TV series recently, which brought out the best of An Garda Síochána, with regard to the work its members do in communities and in protecting us all from harm daily and nightly.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** The best asset the Garda has is the community policing and community garda unit.

*8 o’clock*

As we are all aware, it has been a difficult decade for the Garda. Trust has been damaged by a number of incidents and issues which have been well debated in the House down through the years. As have many other public representatives, I have witnessed the benefits of good community gardaí when they come to a community centre to meet local residents and explain how the local gardaí work, the organisation’s limitations and what gardaí can and cannot do. It makes a huge difference. A good community garda is worth his or her weight in gold, and I join everyone here in pleading for a focus on providing more of them, setting higher targets for Templemore, and having it meet those targets of getting trainees and recruits through. We need a strong and compassionate police force, and community gardaí are on the front line of this.

I have a number of questions on the request made by Deputy Ó Ríordáin, among others, including Deputies who have spoken in this debate. This is for a task force for the north side of Dublin with regard to the feud that has been going on. It is greatly needed. What is the update on this? We need a Mulvey-style task force for the north side of Dublin. I also seek an update on the Minister’s commitments on being 100% behind the community of Drogheda in tackling the multifaceted and complex issues in that town.

The debates in the House this week have reflected the anger and passion we have for tack-

ling racial discrimination everywhere we see it. Where we see it most vividly and most scarily at present is in the United States. When I was a teenager learning about the world, I was opened up to the dichotomy of the United States through a couple of songs recorded by Bruce Springsteen in 1999. Both songs taken together capture why the crimes of that country transcend its borders and affect us so deeply in Ireland and throughout the world. The first song is “Land of Hope and Dreams”, which speaks to the promise of America that it welcomes all, that it welcomes saint, sinner, loser, winner and lost soul, and that for those who invest in its promise, that faith will be rewarded. However, this is a false promise. It is the false promise of the United States. The reality of the United States is in the second song from that same year, “American Skin (41 Shots)”. That song was about the killing of an unarmed black man named Amadou Diallo. Forty-one shots were fired by four police officers, 19 of which hit him and killed him. The song’s lyrics speak of a mother warning her son that if he meets a police officer, he should always be polite and always keep his hands in sight, because the reality of that country then and now is that people can get killed, as the song says, just for being in their American skin.

I am so thankful I live in a country where, for all the problems we have and the challenges we face, we are not there. As Deputy Jim O’Callaghan mentioned earlier, we cannot take it for granted. A polarised society is never too far away. I ran in two elections this year, a by-election and a general election, in which a far right candidate ran purely on a platform of division and racial hatred. It is here. Only today I had to report a Twitter account purporting to represent a town in my constituency that just tweets out racist bile and division and horrendous stuff. It is here and we are dealing with it every day. It is not a million miles away.

We did not place America on this moral high ground. It placed itself there. It said it was the land of the free, the home of the brave, and the leader of the free world, but it is absolutely none of these things and it probably never was. The murders of George Floyd two weeks ago, of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and of Amadou Diallo in 1999 are just three high-profile touchstone cases for killings that happen all too frequently in a country that has a long and shameful record in the treatment of black people and people of colour. I am so heartened by the expressions of solidarity not only by the Minister but throughout the House with the Black Lives Matter movement. It is vital. It is a global movement and one we should all support, not only with words and rhetoric in the House but with actions and practical solutions.

I was disheartened by the response of the Taoiseach today when discussing the direct provision system. The system is probably our most visible example of systemic racial discrimination. It is inhumane and outdated. As Minister of State with responsibility for equality in 2014, Deputy Ó Ríordáin tried to begin a process to have it dismantled. That process stalled. It needs to be restarted and the Labour Party will make a commitment to promise to support any legislation in the next Government that would seek to dismantle the system.

There are things that can be done now which are practical and would go a long way towards building trust with minorities in Ireland. I will put five proposals to the Minister and would love to hear his response to them. They were put forward by my Seanad colleague, Senator Annie Hoey, today. They can be delivered in a short space of time. One, we would like to see justice for undocumented workers, allowing them access to the employment permits system. If someone lives here, he or she works here, and if that person works here, he or she belongs here. We believe in that mantra.

Two, we would like SUSI grants to be extended to those living in direct provision. A ceiling that is not placed over others is placed above those children who have grown up in the Irish edu-

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cation system, have sat the leaving certificate or the leaving certificate applied but are denied access to third level education because they cannot get a SUSI grant. It locks them out. That must be stopped and can be done very quickly.

Three, legislate to give citizenship to children born here. We do not need a referendum. Children born here should belong here. My colleague, Senator Bacik, has introduced a Bill which would allow children to be considered for citizenship as independent applicants, irrespective of the status of their parents. That can be done through legislation, which, I am sure, would be supported.

Four, the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018 should be passed. We have a shameful relationship with the Traveller community. It is one of exclusion, and discrimination is rife. By making Traveller culture and history compulsory in schools, this Bill would go a long way towards mending that fractured relationship.

Five, expand the right to work protection. Barriers to entering employment continue to exist. People cannot obtain a driver's licence and have trouble opening a bank account.

These are things that can be changed very quickly. I believe these five requests would get the support of every grouping in this House. As a collective it would show a maturity in our politics. Bringing them forward would be real new politics. This interregnum between two Governments would not be a problem in moving them forward. I ask the Minister to consider these five proposals, examine them and get them through. I ask him to answer my earlier questions too.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** Deputy Smith raises several very important points that in one minute 48 seconds I will not have an opportunity to reply to in the type of detail that I would wish. I would of course be happy to engage on all of the points he raised. I note his representations on behalf of his colleagues, Deputies Nash and Ó Ríordáin, in respect of organised crime in their constituencies. I did have the opportunity in the Seanad, when both of those Deputies were Members of that House, to discuss that. I have noted carefully the comments and point to what I said earlier to Deputy Mitchell in respect of the Coolock-Darndale-Clongriffin area. It is an issue that has been the subject matter of intense engagement between me, local communities, the Garda Síochána and the former assistant commissioner, engaged on the ground now, with a view to seeing how best we can deal with community building and community engagement, more than just the important issue of An Garda Síochána. I said the same to Deputy Nash after a recent visit to Drogheda.

I am not happy with the current arrangements in direct provision. They are far from ideal and far from perfect. I am on the record as having said that on numerous occasions. I acknowledge some improvements. However, I understand the concern of Deputy Smith and share many of his concerns in respect of specific instances. I would be happy to engage on that matter further. Perhaps we will have an opportunity for a more comprehensive debate on that issue in the future. In the meantime, I am actively engaged with those in the direct provision centres, with the centre managers and with senior officials in my Department and in the agencies to ensure that significant improvements are made, and made urgently.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I acknowledge the role of the Garda in the community call initiative. A huge amount of unseen work has been done on that and some good relationships have been built up through that initiative that should be encouraged to continue after the Cov-

id-19 pandemic is over, and we hope that will be sooner rather than later. For some areas, it has been novel to see the kind of visibility of gardaí that there has been in recent times. This issue came up strongly in the general election. The lack of matching resources, including Garda resources, for housing developments has been a bone of contention for some considerable years.

The new policing plan is called Keeping People Safe. This plan has created new divisions and the model is based on community policing. That cannot be done without resources. For example, counties such as Kildare and Meath have had extraordinary levels of population growth. Meath has the lowest ratio of gardaí to population of any county. It only recently replaced Kildare in that bracket, which has the second lowest ratio of gardaí to population. While that is not the only metric one would use, it is an important one in terms of the distribution of resources. It is difficult to see how counties that need to catch up to a particular level will do so without a proactive approach and a deliberate strategy to achieve that aim. It was disappointing when the new divisions were announced. The announcement was made for counties Laois, Offaly and Kildare, but Kildare, with a population of 220,000, was not selected as the location for the new division. Laois and Portlaoise was the area selected. There is a feeling that what is out of sight is out of mind and that new resources will go to the new divisions.

The same thing happened in Meath with the selection of Mullingar as opposed to Navan for a new division. Again, the same disparity of population pertains in that instance. There are long distances between the main population centres and the areas the new divisions have been chosen for. It is important that there is a commitment to bring the resources up to an acceptable level because otherwise we will see a post-Covid-19 reaction to the lack of visibility.

I want to raise the issue of direct provision with the Minister. I listened to the Taoiseach this afternoon when he described some direct provision centres as being substandard. Will the Minister give us an indication of how many of those locations he regards as being substandard? I share the views that many Members of this House make about the system needing to be dispensed with and a more humane system being put in place. In the meantime, things can be done immediately. Will the Minister address the issue of how many direct provision centres would be deemed to be substandard? Where are those centres located? Would Miltown Malbay be included as one of those centres? I suspect that it is.

I refer to the emergency powers provided for in the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 that was enacted in this House by all sides. One of the areas of great concern was when those powers would end. I think there is a date in July when there will be a review. The concern was that once implemented, the powers might not be fully rolled back. I acknowledge that the Garda has handled this very sensitively, but at the same time we need to know how these powers will cease to be implemented as the roadmap is rolled out. The Minister might address that concern. I know this will come up for review. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties, for example, has called for a cessation of the Garda powers. Many of us are very uncomfortable with the powers, despite the fact that they have been sensitively handled by the Garda.

I too express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. The United States has become a powder keg, and it is difficult to see the tensions, which are not coming out of nowhere. The situation really makes us look at ourselves and how we handle things. We have to be particularly sensitive to people in direct provision and other vulnerable groups.

I have asked a couple of questions. I ask the Minister to respond to them.

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**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** There were a number of questions. I thank Deputy Murphy for her contribution and her support for the work of the Garda Síochána in the current challenging circumstances.

The Deputy raised the issue of Garda strength in her constituency of Kildare North. While I do not have the figures with me tonight, I would be happy to provide her with them tomorrow. They will show an increase in numbers in the north Kildare area on the numbers from five years ago. All this is part of a national recruitment campaign to increase numbers as a result of the record investment on the part of Government of €1.8 billion this year, every cent of which is being wisely spent by the Garda Commissioner and his team, allowing for record numbers of gardaí, with 14,750 currently engaged in every community across the State. Our target - my target - of 15,000 sworn members of An Garda Síochána and 4,000 civilian staff by the end of next year is well on its path. I would be happy to report to the House further on that. Only last week I spoke to the chief superintendent for the area, John Scanlan. While of course I acknowledge my role as Minister not to be engaged in any operational matters, I can tell the House and Deputy Murphy that the chief superintendent is actively engaged in ensuring there is not the type of disparity that Deputy Murphy hopes there will not be in the context of the new division and that specific attention is being given to numbers in the north Kildare area so as to ensure there is no imbalance.

On direct provision, I repeat what I said earlier. I am far from happy with the current regime. I do, however, acknowledge recent improvements. I do not want anybody in substandard accommodation. The Deputy mentioned one centre in respect of which I have requested an inspection in the form of an examination. I expect to have that to hand over the next 48 to 72 hours and, again, I would be happy to update the House on that. I do not want anybody living in substandard accommodation, and I will ensure that that is the case. I acknowledge the work of an independent committee, an expert group, led by former EU Secretary General, Dr. Catherine Day, examining best practice on the international stage and the provision of services, including accommodation. I have asked Dr. Day and the group whether they could possibly bring forward their reporting to ensure that I could have it at the early opportunity. Again, I would be happy to share that with the House.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** I thank the Minister. We are moving on.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** The Garda powers are temporary. I expect that there will be a full row-back and that normal service will be resumed.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I am not going to ask a question about gardaí because this opportunity needs to be used to address a matter that has been kicked around the houses. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, says it is the responsibility of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty. She tells me it is the responsibility of the Minister, Deputy Flanagan. I refer to the extension of maternity leave and benefits for women who are being forced to return to work. These women have recently had babies and have been on maternity leave. They are worried that they cannot return to work. I have been told repeatedly that this matter requires primary legislation. Frankly, I do not accept that. It was welcome to see last week that the Minister for Finance, having been forced into it, changed the rules relating to the wage subsidy scheme in respect of how it affects those returning from maternity leave. He stated that retrospective legislation would be required.

I do not accept that the Government cannot find a way, if it has the political will, to provide

a solution to a real problem for women faced with the option of having to return to work after their leave has expired in circumstances where they cannot access childcare, family support or other types of support or leave arrangements. We must extend their leave for the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and the benefits that go with it. Otherwise, we are flying in the face of the policy which states that no one will be left out. Thousands of women and children will be left out unless the political will emerges to find address that.

The Minister will know that new mothers have a petition that has been signed by over 23,000 people. We have a motion circulating through the Dáil calling for the Government to find a way to do what I have outlined. I am pleased to say that over 20 Deputies have signed up to the motion. I encourage Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin to co-sign it as a way to apply pressure on the Government. Legislation could be applied retrospectively, just as it has been in respect of the other maternity leave arrangements under the wage subsidy scheme. If we do not do this, we will be flying in the face of the logic of the whole emergency relating to the pandemic. We have changed laws on planning applications and suspended the Redundancy Payments Act. We have frozen evictions and other legislation has been either frozen or suspended. Women and children deserve the same respect. They need this legislation to cover them for the period of Covid-19 because, for many and various reasons, they cannot return to work. I call on the Minister to address this.

I also want to raise the question of the Miltown Malbay direct provision centre. I know the Minister and the International Protection Accommodation Service have received many letters from local citizens who have been providing blankets, food, clothes and support for those people the system has failed yet again. Yet, they have received no answers to the correspondence. They say that the building is unsuitable and requires extensive renovation. There is a litany of complaints about the centre, where the management have proven themselves to be unsuitable. This is not only about Miltown Malbay or the failings of one site, it is about the failings of the entire system of direct provision. That is why we are calling for an end to direct provision and an amnesty for all those caught within its net. It is a system designed to humiliate, punish and discourage others from coming to this country to seek international protection. It is one of 65 sites throughout the country run by a privately operated for-profit entity.

In the national media, the Minister told us that the people in these centres are his responsibility. I appeal to him to act like they are and stop the light-touch or no-touch regime overseeing these centres. The Minister has just stated that he requested an inspection of the centre in question. That is my understanding of what he has just said. The Reception and Integration Agency site states that every effort is made to inspect accommodation centres approximately three times annually. That centre has been open for one year. I checked the website. There is no record of any inspection of that centre. If the Minister is requesting an inspection one year later, then there is some fault in the system. If not, will the Minister please answer this question? We must look hard at the matter of direct provision. The system has been in existence for 20 years and we are constantly talking about getting rid of it.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** Next is Deputy Barry.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I am sorry, but I would like the answers now.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Sure.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** The Deputies are sharing time, so the Minister

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has approximately 45 seconds if we are to move on to the second speaker.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** If the Minister answers the question about the extension of maternity leave, I will take a written answer to the one relating to the Miltown Malbay centre.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I would be happy to provide the Deputy with a written answer, but let me say that I will not rush to judgment on any particular direct provision centre-----

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** The Minister is eating into Deputy Barry's time.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** -----until I have further information. It was difficult over the past few weeks to have the type of inspection that the Deputy would like with particular reference to the Covid-19 crisis. However, I expect to be in a position to make a further announcement on this issue within a matter of 48 hours. I will contact the Deputy directly.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I hope it is positive news. That would be great.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I have received the correspondence and am in the course of replying to it, but I want to do so with the appropriate level of information.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I made the point in an earlier debate that the world watched with horror the brutal police murder of George Floyd and that many, myself included, watched with admiration the multiracial uprising of young people in the US against its President, police forces and an entire system that is riddled with inequality and racism. In this debate, I wish to make some further points and bring that discussion back to Ireland. President Trump has repeated the phrase once used by a racist police chief, "When the looting starts, the shooting starts", giving a green light to white supremacists to bring their guns into the equation. However, the real looters are the American billionaires who have increased their wealth by an incredible \$485 billion in the past ten weeks while Covid-19 swept the country and put 43 million out of work. I hope and am confident that the new generation building the movement that we see in the US will reach back to and rediscover the best traditions of the black freedom movement of the 1960s, the traditions of the likes of Martin Luther King, who said, "[W]e are saying that something is wrong ... with capitalism ... There must be better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism", and the traditions of people like Malcolm X, who drew the conclusion that one could not have capitalism without racism. It is not just the four police officers, it is the entire system that is guilty. Clearly, it is time for change.

Of course, racism is not an American phenomenon. A young woman who participated in the Black Lives Matter movement in Dublin last Saturday, Judy Ehiguese – I hope I am pronouncing her name correctly – told the media: "It's not spoken about here because it's not as serious as what you see in America where people are shot or killed." Quite poetically, she stated: "It hides in the bushes and the trees here; it's silent." Another participant in the demonstration, Lawson Mpame – again, I hope I am doing justice to the man's name – said:

Many Irish people still refuse to accept racism is a problem in this country.

They think we're just making it up but I've experienced it at first hand, my family has experienced it and my friends too.

[...] Being black in Ireland should mean being part of the Irish community but sometimes we feel like we're not actually part of this community. It feels like we're second-class citizens and we don't have the same rights as you guys. That has to change and that needs

to start now.

I will just make a brief point on this. I believe that protests in the current period have to be organised with stewarding, social distancing, masks and other safety measures, but I am opposed to the decision of the Garda to launch a criminal investigation into the organisers of last weekend's demonstration. One of the reasons for doing this so publicly was to create a chill factor for the organisers of other demonstrations being planned over the next few days. Some of those organisers are young black people.

It amounts to a criminalisation of protest and the investigation should be dropped.

The words of those young people can be backed up by facts. It is a fact that the incidents of racism recorded in this State for quarter 1 this year were double the number for quarter 1 last year. It is a fact that a UN committee reviewing racism in Irish society found an increasing incidence of racist hate speech against Travellers, Roma, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. It is a fact that the UN is calling for proper human rights and equality training for State officials and that it made special mention of the need for such training for Ireland's policing and law enforcement officials. I do not have time to talk about the scandal of direct provision, nor how the housing and jobs crises are fanning the flames of racism by forcing people to compete for scarce resources. Clearly, these are issues in this country and they must be tackled.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The brutal murder of George Floyd in the US last week was heart-breaking to see on television. The fact that such racism exists in the US in 2020 is both heart-breaking and a cause of deep frustration. For a country such as ours that has such deep ties to the US, to see it burn night after night with such violence is distressing. It is radically important that there is justice for George Floyd and his family and that racism is systematically rooted out in the US and in every other country.

Aontú is an Irish republican party. We believe in the equality of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, that all of the children of the nation should be cherished equally. We radically oppose discrimination in every guise. However, it can be easier to identify the prejudice and racism that is abroad. Many people are rightly angry about what is happening in the US but are oblivious to what happens to Travellers in this country every single day. The societal inequalities that are a major ingredient in the trouble happening in the United States are alive and well in Ireland. We must fix our own failings in this country. That said, our response really needs to reflect the current pandemic. It is against public health policy for thousands of people to march in a manner where social distancing is impossible. Last week, elected representatives called on people to protect front-line workers from illness and death by staying at home. Is it logical now to dismiss such a threat and organise mass gatherings where we cannot guarantee social distancing? What does that say to workers, bereaved families and the owners of small businesses? Take the pain, financially and emotionally, of the lockdown and protect vulnerable front-line workers while we go out in our thousands to march. Are we really saying to the students who should have been sitting the leaving certificate this week "Come out and march in your thousands with us instead"? Political leaders need to speak with clarity. If the Chief Medical Officer can clearly state that these marches are a threat to public health, why can the Taoiseach not do the same? Public protest is a key element of a liberal democracy and I will fight for the right to publicly protest but common sense also needs to prevail at this time. Let us suppress the virus, get the country back to normal as quickly and as safely as possible and then let our voices for justice be heard in unison.

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I wish to broach another key issue with the Minister. Families in my constituency of Meath West, like families all over the country, are being terrorised by antisocial behaviour at the moment. The hot summer days have brought large groups of people, young and old, into public spaces for Covid parties, to drink and take drugs. These groups are damaging property, setting fires and physically threatening passersby. Many of them are holding Covid parties right up against other people's houses. When antisocial behaviour such as this happens night after night, it really takes over people's lives and can cost radically, not just in terms of broken windows but of sleepless nights and mental health. This summer's antisocial behaviour comes on the back of a radical increase in both crime and this type of behaviour in County Meath in recent years. Town centres have been hammered with drug dealing. Petrol bombs have been thrown at the courthouse in Trim. Hatchet attacks have happened in the middle of the day in housing estates and there has been a massive rise in incidents of sexual assault. There are restaurants in County Meath that close at 9 p.m. every night due to the anti-social behaviour that is taking place, while in other towns they stay open until midnight. People in rural Ireland have told me that they are sleeping with knives under their pillows. People who are walking home from pubs and nightclubs are ending up in accident and emergency departments. A significant reason for this is that Meath has the lowest number of gardaí per capita in the State. As previous Deputies have noted, Meath has lost its headquarters to another county. Large urban areas such as Johnstown in Navan have no Garda station. Ratoath has no Garda station. Finnea, Kilmessan and Crossakiel have lost their Garda stations. Where there are Garda stations, many are only open for a few hours a day.

The Minister said that Ireland has never seen so many gardaí. In real terms, per capita, there were more gardaí in 2011 than there are today. We have a lower number of gardaí per capita in this State than we did in 2011. When the Minister talks about Garda numbers, he gives 2015 as the baseline. For four years previously, there were radical cuts in the number of gardaí. Giving 2015 as a baseline for Garda figures is not a real reflection of the experience of people-----

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** We had a financial crisis.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Minister will have his time. Could he give me a second?

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** We had a financial crisis. The Deputy's party at the time did not recognise it and still does not.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Minister mentioned the increase in the number of gardaí in County Meath. Yes, the number of gardaí in County Meath has increased in the past couple of years but the population of Meath is skyrocketing so the same point stands. Per capita, the Minister is not maintaining the same pace of growth with the number of gardaí. It is very frustrating as well because the Minister says he has no operational hand in determining where gardaí are located but the Minister for Justice and Equality in this country can set policy objectives for civil servants and the Garda to follow. One of those policy objectives could simply be that there is a fair and even distribution of gardaí throughout the country and that the demographic size of a county has some bearing on and relationship to the number of gardaí it has. I have been here a number of times speaking about this issue. It is radically important that when the new Government is formed with Fianna Fáil, there is a fair distribution of gardaí across the country because if this does not happen, there will be communities and counties such as Meath and Kildare that will suffer radically in the future.

I wish to mention direct provision because it relates to the first point I mentioned. The

Minister mentioned that he was unhappy with the direct provision situation in this country. His party has been in government for ten long years. How many years does a party have to be in government for it to act on its unhappiness with regard to a certain issue? When it comes to direct provision, as I understand it, the protocol says that journalists must first ask permission from the Department before they are permitted to interview residents and staff in direct provision centres, so journalists are often refused permission and referred to other direct provision centres rather than the direct provision centres in which they express an interest. Surely in a liberal democracy, when investigative journalists want to talk to individuals, be they staff or residents, they should be able to do so without the Government intervening.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** In connection with the protest, it is important that we all recognise, as do I, the right to assembly and freedom of association, both of which are fundamental to any democracy. Having said that, we are in a crisis. This House agreed to the implementation of unprecedented legislation providing powers of a special and emergency nature for An Garda Síochána in the context of the public health expert advice. Similarly, I note the public health expert advice in respect of marches and the assembly of persons in large numbers. I hope that this advice will be followed by everybody.

Deputy Barry has left the Chamber. His remarks in respect of the protest last weekend are not entirely accurate. The matter is the subject of a Garda investigation. I will say no more about it, other than to point out that the organisers and the Garda worked constructively and positively together to ensure that every effort was made to comply with the appropriate regulations. I hope that there is not a repetition of it at any time in the future.

I will communicate with Deputy Tóibín on the matter of Garda numbers. I do not think it is unreasonable that there should be a direct correlation between Garda numbers and population. I am satisfied that the Garda Síochána is very much aware of that. Again, I would hope that in the context of the record investment these issues would be adequately addressed. As Minister for Justice and Equality, I do not intervene or interfere in operational matters and I make no apologies for that.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I thank the many gardaí, male and female, throughout this country who uphold law and order and carry out their duties, largely unarmed, in dangerous situations where they come across villains, thugs, drug lords and others involved in serious crime. I thank them for all that they do locally to help the elderly and people living alone and, in particular, for apprehending the villains that attack and rob those individuals in their homes. I sincerely thank each and every garda for his or her efforts in that regard. I also thank gardaí for their work to help control the virus. They are to be commended for their response to the call to control the virus.

I was not here when the session commenced but I heard the Minister mention inspections of direct provision centres and state that many of them are unsuitable. I have always maintained that Cahersiveen direct provision centre is not suitable. It was pointed out to me that the rooms, hallways and communal spaces are too small to accommodate the refugees located there, some of whom contracted the virus.

This morning, the Taoiseach spoke about reducing the €350 payment for part-time workers. I am calling on the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, as a member of the Government, to ensure that this does not happen. I am of the view that what is proposed is a calculated attack on hotel workers, particularly those on the X's and O's who work two, three and four days per week.

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These are not people who worked part-time by choice; they are the people who helped to keep hotels open and ticking over in the winter months and at quiet times. There should be no cut in the payment for workers to whom I refer. As already stated, they were working to keep the hotels open. I ask the Minister to ensure this is taken into account when the matter is again being discussed at Cabinet. These people want to work.

Restaurants and cafés will reopen on 29 June. I am calling on the Government to allow hotels, pubs and the tourism sector to open on that date as well. Spain and Italy are opening up again. The crisis was far worse in those countries than it was here. We need to get this country moving again and open it up to the people. We must ensure all the people in Ireland, at least those in the Twenty-six Counties and even those in the Thirty-two Counties, can go to the local attractions in places like Killarney, Dingle, Cahersiveen, Kenmare, Ballybunion and Ballyheigue, as well as places in other counties. We must ensure people who are cooped up in apartments in cities and urban places get the chance to go down the country and have some bit of a summer for four or five weeks. We must give the people who own these pubs and hotels the chance to open their doors, have faith in the ventures they have worked so hard to put together, and give them a bit of chance to have some bit of a summer, because if we wait until 10 August we can forget about it. The chance will be gone by then because that is only a week before the children go back to school. I am asking the Ministers to get together, open up the country and let the people get back working.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Community policing has served us well down through the years in west Cork with excellent gardaí such as Damian White and Brigid Hartnett who have been second to none in carrying out their duties and protecting the people they serve. This has not been made easy through the years due to the closure by the previous Fine Gael Government of seven Garda stations in west Cork, namely, those in Castletownshend, Ballygurteen, Ballyfeard, Goleen, Inchigeela, Ballinspittle, and Adrigole, saving a meagre €28,000. While the Government did all it could to backpedal on this highly dangerous decision for rural communities, the Garda station in Ballinspittle, for which I fought vigorously, was the only one reopened in west Cork. This was hugely important to the people of Ballinspittle, Ballinadee and Kinsale and was a great support to the excellent community garda, John McCarthy, in Kilbrittain. Has the Minister any plans to reverse the closure of other Garda stations in west Cork and to appoint a local garda in each of those stations? What plans has the Department for the Garda stations it will not reopen? Why can they not be handed back to the communities, rather than letting them fall into disrepair which adds to the shameful decisions to close them?

I understand that this next issue does not fall under the Minister's Department but it should, as our young people cannot get on with their lives while they are denied a driving test. It is totally unfair to them and to the driving test instructors who want to work in a safe manner but have no idea when, where or how to do so. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Shane Ross, has slammed the door shut and run off with the keys, leaving many unanswered questions. Can the Minister shed any light on a growing crisis which I am worried could force young people to break the law?

Gardaí in west Cork have worked tirelessly throughout this Covid crisis trying to get the message across and keeping people safe. Their job is being made difficult by having to police businesses that put a few tables and chairs outside a premises in a safe, socially-distanced way. For many people, this is their business's only chance of survival. While I urge the Minister to make sure the law is being enforced, where proper social distancing is being carried out by these businesses in west Cork they should be encouraged and not be made to remove their seating.

On the State hiring 210 additional vehicles for gardaí during the Covid crisis, how much has this cost the State and how many of these cars were allocated to west Cork, which is geographically one of the biggest Garda divisions in Ireland? I may be wrong but I can only see a couple. Where did the other 208 go?

Community policing can only work well when there is a good community alert group in place. I thank all the community alert and neighbourhood watch groups in west Cork and throughout the country that work tirelessly for the community in a voluntary capacity.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** I call Deputy Connolly.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The Minister might answer some of my questions.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** We are stuck on the two-hour time limit and are right up against the clock. If there is time at the end, I will allow the Minister in but health and safety rules apply here.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I refer to the direct provision centre in Miltown Malbay, which has been mentioned already. The Minister's response was that he will not rush to judgment, among other things. I ask him, however, to rush to inspection in view of the complaints Deputies have received. I have pictures and detailed accounts which I am not going to go into, but he should certainly rush to inspection because that would be appropriate at this point. Miltown Malbay has been very good in its welcoming of asylum seekers and they have a very positive relationship with the town. However, there are 12 residents in a centre that appears not to have been inspected and it appears somebody is in charge who is not competent to be so. There are many questions about the appropriateness of this situation. We are not complying with our obligations under international law. We are not complying with our obligations under an EU directive which obliges us to carry out a vulnerability assessment. I mentioned when I was a member of the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality that not a single vulnerability assessment had been carried out. My colleague, Deputy Pringle, has written to the Minister. I will write to him, as I am sure will many other Deputies.

On community policing, the price of democracy is eternal vigilance. In that context, the report from the Policing Authority is vital because it is the monitoring body. I say well done to the Minister for ensuring that happened, although I am sure it could have done it of its own accord and he might clarify that if he gets a chance. It has provided a very precise and succinct report. It certainly gives praise to gardaí, which is well deserved and reflects my experience of them.

The report does, however, highlight a number of issues that the Minister failed to highlight, such as the failure to give a breakdown of the five powers. I cannot go into them because of the time limits, but they include the power of arrest, the power to give directions and so on. The report states that it would have wished in particular to identify those occasions when a garda directed a person and that direction was complied with, but it cannot report on the exercise of the power as it would have wished because the necessary information was not available and so on. The Policing Authority stated that it found it very difficult to understand why it is not possible to indicate which of the powers was invoked on each occasion. It then went on to talk about the importance of recording ethnicity and gives reasons for that. It also referred to the use of spit hoods and provided data on that. They are the important outstanding issues.

The Minister mentioned that gardaí are not armed, but there are armed gardaí at checkpoints and the Policing Authority commented on this in terms of impact and perception. There are

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reasons for the presence of armed gardaí, such as being involved in an operation, reassigned or so on. They are present and there are issues with that.

It is extraordinary that it has taken the Morris, O'Higgins, Charleton and I do not know how many other tribunals to investigate policing. The Charleton tribunal cost €70 million to come around in a circle and tell us that we need gardaí to be visible, honest, polite, take pride in their work in uniform, serve the people of Ireland and treat their obligation to the public as superior to any false sense that individual policemen and policewomen should stick together. It referred to self analysis. It should not be necessary to have a Morris tribunal or an O'Higgins and so on. What has been missing in the past is the fact that the command structure of An Garda Síochána failed to call itself to account. To be fair to gardaí, those points could apply to any of us as public servants. We would be wise to take them into account. In that context it is vital that the information sought by the Policing Authority be given to it.

It seems to me that the Garda is in an impossible position when it comes to protests. I have the greatest respect for gardaí and feel much safer with them on the streets. They were subjected to an appalling situation in Salthill last week, where young people were out of control. Perhaps if the situation had been anticipated better by management on the previous day it would have been good, but I pay tribute to the behaviour of the gardaí.

As I understand it, the gardaí at the Black Lives Matter protest were very good and worked with the protestors. I have no idea why an investigation is taking place. Protest is fundamental to society and it is fundamental that we would express our outrage at what has happened in America. It is a human response. Clearly, it has to be done in compliance with the guidelines. I ask the Minister to look at that so that protests are allowed with social distancing.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I very much endorse what Deputy Connolly has just said with regard to An Garda Síochána, both the good and the bad. One of the things all of these tribunals have taught us is that nobody is above reproach and accountability. A historical incident in Bunratty, County Clare, involves the Nugent family who deserve justice and to know what happened to their brother. Their father went to his grave looking for justice and did not get it. Until they get justice, there will always be a cloud over An Garda Síochána and the role it played on that night.

Another incident took place in Miltown Malbay. It pains me, to an extent, to hear about what is going on there. I recall when the direct provision centre was set up there. The Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, were looking for venues to host direct provision centres. While it might come as a surprise to the Minister and others in the House, the welcome that was rolled out by people in Miltown Malbay did not come as a surprise to me because that is part of the traditional welcome we afford to a stranger in Ireland.

Snámhaí Sásta in particular was highlighted. It is a great initiative where a community comes together to go swimming come hail, rain or snow - literally. People from outside were brought into that and were part of it. It is very much part of mental health. We need to bear in mind, as Deputy Connolly pointed out earlier, many people who come here and claim asylum are fleeing persecution and have various sufferings. They have been subjected to treatment that Irish people were once treated to in this country. We celebrate our independence, but we must remember the cost of it and what provoked the War of Independence and what we were subjected to as a people when we decide how we will treat other people.

The welcome that the people of Miltown Malbay rolled out is something I have experienced as a person in other countries, particularly in Muslim countries where the treatment of the stranger is part of the honour of a society. We talk a lot about racism and that black lives matter, and of course they do. We need to be ever-vigilant for racism in Ireland. We also need to look at xenophobia and vilifying Islam. We need to be very cautious in that regard.

Going back to the welcome the people of Miltown Malbay rolled out, unfortunately, that is not mirrored in our direct provision centres which are about ensuring that people are not welcome. There is an unwritten rule that single males, in particular, get moved out of Dublin and other cities to places like Oranmore, Miltown Malbay, etc. The last thing the Department of Justice and Equality wants is for these people to integrate, get a job and, heaven forbid, get involved with somebody, form a family and have a child because, of course, it makes it more difficult to deport them if they are part of a family unit. Family inheres in us as human beings. Everybody in this House is part of a family. That is the nature of humanity the world over; from Miltown Malbay to Ulaanbaatar we organise ourselves as families. The reason these single males are being sent out to these areas is so that they cannot and will not do that while the system plods along.

I acknowledge that there have been advances, particularly with regard to determining whether refugee status, subsidiary protection status or humanitarian leave to remain is warranted and the process has speeded up. The quality of decision-making, as evidenced by the number of successful judicial reviews taken against the various tribunals, has improved considerably. However, we have more to do. I do not think that our system of direct provision reflects the Irish spirit. It does not welcome people. It tries to keep them apart and that is not who we are as a people.

I ask the Minister to act quickly in respect of Miltown Malbay. I do not know what the truth is of the allegations that have been made and I do not want to prejudge anything. I ask him to act quickly because the local people have given a great welcome to these people. There have been all sorts of allegations made, including about running water. Nobody in Miltown Malbay has running water today. Every second week the water system breaks down. That is not unique to the hostel in Miltown Malbay.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** It is running down the walls.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** If it is running down the wall, that would be unique.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** The Deputy should wait to see the report. I welcome what he has said actually.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I ask the Minister to look into this issue as a matter of urgency and report back because the people of Miltown Malbay deserve better than to be spoken of in the way that they have been in the Chamber tonight.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** It is not a direct provision centre. It is emergency accommodation and there was an inspection in February of this year.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** That concludes the statement by the Minister for Justice and Equality, questions to the Minister and answers from the Minister on Covid-19 as it relates to community policing.

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*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

The Dáil adjourned at 9 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 10 June 2020.