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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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Déardaoin, 9 Iúil 2020

Thursday, 9 July 2020

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan) i gceannas ar 10 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Estimates for Public Services 2020

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht(Deputy Catherine Martin): I move the following Revised Estimate:

Vote 33 - Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €376,236,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain subsidies and grants and that a sum not exceeding €3,435,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Is mór agam an deis seo a fháil inniu chun Meastacháin na Roinne Cultúir, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta do 2020 a phlé. Tá an-áthas orm an deis seo a bheith agam labhairt faoi leithdháiltí agus tosaíochtaí na Roinne Cultúir, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta do 2020. Is eol do na Teachtaí gur le na meáin, turasóireacht, ealaíona, cultúr, spórt agus an Ghaeltacht a bhaineann mo cheapachán. Tá réimsí cláir an-leathan agus an-éagsúil i gceist leis sin agus táim ag tnúth go mór le dul ina mbun agus iad a chur ar aghaidh le linn mo thréimhse mar Aire.

Today's appearance relates specifically to the 2020 Revised Estimates for the previous Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. I will therefore confine my remarks to those programme areas and ask that Deputies likewise confine any questions or clarifications they require to these areas. It should be noted that, in the newly created Department, my responsibilities will no longer include the heritage division, which will transfer to the new Department responsible for housing, local government and heritage where they will be the responsibility of my colleagues, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan. In addition, in the newly created Department my responsibilities will no longer include the islands, responsibility for which will transfer to the new Department responsible for

social protection, community and rural development and the islands under my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys.

Déanfaidh an tAire Stáit, Teachta Calleary, agus mise araon tráchtanna gairide ar réimsí cláir aonair anois. Táimid sásta tuilleadh sonraí a thabhairt faoi aon ní ba mhaith leis na Comhaltaí a tharraingt anuas.

Over the past few months, we have all been witness to the devastating and unprecedented impact of the Covid-19 pandemic across all sectors of society and the economy. The arts and culture, heritage, language and islands sectors have suffered considerably in view of the audience-facing focus of much of their work. They will continue to experience difficult and challenging times long after many other sectors have returned to work. These sectors are an integral part of the fabric of society, particularly in rural areas where they support tourism, economic activity, and well-being. They represent a very important component of regional development. Myriad community, voluntary and not-for-profit entities typify these sectors and there is a very significant ecosystem of local and small enterprises, economic activity and regional employment dependent on these sectors. It is therefore imperative that we support these sectors through their vulnerability in the face of the Covid pandemic.

There has been extensive consultation with cultural bodies, the Arts Council, arts organisations and individual artists and arts practices since the commencement of the Covid-19 crisis. This engagement has made us all very aware of the challenges that artists have faced and also of the hugely important role that they have played in sustaining all of us in recent months. The recent announcement of a further investment of €25 million in arts and culture during 2020 reflects the significant role arts and culture play in our individual lives and across society as a whole. Many challenges lie ahead as we begin to exit from Covid-19 restrictions but there is a determination to ensure that we have a vibrant arts and culture sector to see us through these challenges and into the future.

Among the measures that will be introduced on foot of the additional funding will be new bursaries and commissions from the Arts Council, including supports for freelance artists and those looking to develop projects on a collaborative basis. The Department will provide supports for cultural centres, including local and regional museums, as well as for new online cultural and creative content to build on the success of programmes such as Ireland Performs, the "Other Voices: Courage" programme and Cruinniú na nÓg. The funding will ensure that the important role culture plays in contributing to our well-being at all times, and particularly in times of crisis, can be safeguarded and enhanced.

When account is taken of this additional funding of €25 million, a gross provision of €379.6 million is available to the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in 2020, representing an increase of 12% on the comparable allocation for 2019. An additional €3.4 million in funding has been carried over from the 2019 capital provision for expenditure on priority projects in accordance with the provisions of public financial procedures.

In broad terms, the 2020 breakdown of allocations to the Vote is as follows. Just under €218 million is allocated for culture. This includes €100 million for the Arts Council, €48.9 million for the national cultural institutions, €21 million for Screen Ireland, €9.5 million for cultural infrastructure and development and €14.8 million for regional museums, galleries, cultural centres and projects. Some €62.6 million is allocated for the conservation and protection of Ireland's built and natural heritage. This includes: €13.7 million for natural heritage; €10 million

for peatlands restoration, conservation and management, including €5 million from the carbon tax fund; just over €6.6 million for the Heritage Council; and just over €6.8 million for built heritage including the very successful built heritage investment scheme and the Irish Heritage Trust. There is €58 million for the Irish language, the Gaeltacht and the islands, including €23.7 million for Údarás na Gaeltachta, just under €9 million for the islands and €3.7 million for the 20-year strategy for the Irish language. There is also just over €41 million for North-South co-operation, including support for two North-South implementation bodies, Waterways Ireland and An Foras Teanga.

The gross allocation for the Department in 2020 is 12% higher than the comparable figure in 2019 and allows for increases in funding across a range of bodies under the Department's remit, as well as increases in funding for a number of culture, heritage and Gaeltacht schemes. This increased funding is targeted at a number of key initiatives. In the case of the culture programme, 2020 funding is 15% higher than the 2019 equivalent. Of its priorities, Arts Council funding is up by 33% to €100 million, including €20 million in response to the Covid pandemic. Among the measures that will be introduced will be new bursaries and commissions, including supports for freelance artists and those looking to develop projects on a collaborative basis. With this funding, the arts sector will be stabilised in 2020, art will continue to be created, artists will be employed and the public will continue to have access to the arts, sometimes in new and imaginative ways.

Funding for our national cultural institutions amounts to €48.9 million in total. Since the lockdown began on 12 March, these institutions have done a wonderful job in responding to the Covid crisis by providing online content of the highest quality on their websites. Clearly, this is no substitute for being able to visit a gallery, library or museum and I am delighted that most of these institutions have now reopened to the public, albeit with a slightly different visitor experience on offer. Those yet to reopen, such as the National Concert Hall, face somewhat different challenges as a consequence of the Covid crisis, but I have no doubt that they will overcome these challenges and welcome patrons across their thresholds again before too much longer.

There is dedicated funding of just under €15 million for regional museums, galleries, cultural centres and projects to provide robust supports that ensure their viability and sustainability and secure new online cultural and creative content. Funding of €12.5 million, including €3 million carried over from 2019, in respect of cultural infrastructure and development will ensure that momentum is maintained in the delivery of a suite of ambitious capital programmes and projects as part of Project Ireland 2040.

Fís Éireann, or Screen Ireland, is to receive additional funding of €1 million. It follows the Government's decision to extend the section 481 film tax credit to 2024 and the regional uplift of 5%, which provides an additional incentive to increase Irish and international production across the regions. These measures are in line with the audiovisual action plan, which sets out the Government's ambition to make Ireland a global hub for the production of film, television drama and animation.

Also under the culture heading, an additional €900,000 is being made available for 2020's decade of centenaries programme. This will enable the delivery of a significant programme of commemorative events, including Bloody Sunday on 21 November and the execution of Kevin Barry on 1 November, in an appropriate and meaningful manner consistent with the advice of the expert advisory group. While the restrictions necessarily imposed as part of the Covid-19 crisis management measures will potentially require a reimagining of the commemo-

rative events originally envisaged, it remains critical that all pivotal moments in the history of our nation continue to be remembered in an appropriate and meaningful way.

Funding for the heritage programme in 2020 is €62.6 million, an increase of 16% on the 2019 allocation. The largest increase in the programme is in respect of peatlands restoration, conservation and management, where an increase of €2 million, or 67%, plus a further €5 million from the carbon tax fund will result in an allocation of €10 million for 2020 compared to the 2019 allocation of €3 million. This increased funding will allow for an accelerated programme of peatlands restoration and conservation works, resulting in 1,800 ha of restored peatland in 2020, the generation of 100 jobs in the midlands and ultimately the storage of 28 million tonnes of carbon. Restoration and rehabilitation of raised bogs will provide multiple additional ecosystem services, such as water and air quality improvements, flood mitigation, biodiversity enhancement and opportunities for tourism development, and contribute to the social and economic well-being of local communities.

An additional €1 million is being provided in 2020 to accelerate key nature conservation and biodiversity programmes under the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Funding for the farm plan programme is being doubled in 2020 to €1 million to support measures to protect biodiversity and assist farmers with lands designated as special areas of conservation in their role as custodians of nature.

Also under the heritage programme, Ireland's national parks and reserves will continue to be supported, including the tourism interpretative master plan, under which the Government is investing to enhance visitor centre experiences and facilities in 2020. These parks and reserves have provided a welcome refuge to many during the past few months when restrictions on movement limited travel and interaction. It was a welcome reunion with the wealth of natural beauty on their doorstep and it is critical that these wonderful natural amenities continue to be available in their optimum iteration for all who wish to enjoy them.

Labhróidh an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Calleary, faoi na gnéithe a bhaineann leis an nGaeilge, an nGaeltacht agus na hoileáin.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): Ceapadh mé mar Phríomh-Aoire agus mar Aire Stáit don Ghaeltacht, don Ghaeilge agus don spóirt agus tá mé thar a bheith sásta a bheith anseo ag labhairt faoi Mheastacháin Athbhreithnithe mo Roinne.

Táim ag súil go mór le tús a chur le mo ról agus a bheith ag obair leis an Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, sa Roinn mar aithním an tábhacht faoi leith atá ag baint leis an nGaeilge mar chéad teanga na tíre, mar theanga beo agus mar chuid riachtanach d'ár n-oidhreacht mar oileán. Beidh mise i mo ról mar Aire Stáit diongbháilte cur le feiceálacht ár dteanga dhúchais agus cur le líon na gcainteoirí laethúla sa bpobal. Mothaím go paiseanta faoi chosaint agus faoi chaomhnú na Gaeltachta chomh maith chun a chinntiú go mairfidh sí mar thobar den teanga bheo.

Táthar ag leanúint le cur i bhfeidhm na Straitéise 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge agus leis na spriocanna ar leas na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta atá leagtha amach sa Plean Gníomhaíochta 2018-22 a foilsíodh i Meitheamh 2018. Gabhaim buíochas leis an iar-Aire, an Seanadóir Seán Kyne, as an obair a dhein sé sa Roinn.

I measc na rudaí faoi leith atá luaite sa phlean atá ag imirt tionchair dearfaigh cheana féin ar an nGaeltacht, tá an próiseas pleanála teanga, tacaíochtaí airgeadais mo Roinne agus Fhoras na

Gaeilge go príomha don earnáil pobail agus tacaíocht Údarás na Gaeltachta don earnáil ghnó. Déanfar cistiú don Ghaeilge, don Ghaeltacht agus do na hoileáin, clár C de Vóta na Roinne, a mhéadú faoi 5% sa bhliain 2020 go beagán os cionn €58 milliún.

I mí Aibreáin i mbliana, ba ghá gach cúrsa coláiste samhraidh a chealú ar mhaithe leis an tsláinte phoiblí a chosaint le linn na paindéime Covid-19. Fógraíodh, dá bharr, ciste cobhsaíochta de €4.7 milliún i mí na Bealtaine i mbliana chun tacú leis an earnáil, ar cuid ríthábhachtach de gheilleagar na Gaeltachta í agus a meastar gur fiú €50 milliún í gach bliain.

Áirítear iad seo a leanas leis na príomhthosaíochtaí eile a dtabharfar aghaidh orthu sa bhliain 2020. Gheobhaidh Údarás na Gaeltachta leithdháileadh caipitil breise €1 milliún, a fhágann go mbeidh a chroí-leithdháileadh caipitil cothrom le €10 milliún san iomlán, méadú de níos mó ná 11% ar an bhfigiúr don bhliain 2019. A bhuí leis sin, beifear in ann infheistíocht bhreise a mhealladh chuig limistéir Ghaeltachta agus tacú le poist a chruthú agus forbairt pobail agus teanga a chothú i réigiúin Ghaeltachta ag an am céanna. Sa chomhthéacs sin, cuireadh €5.6 milliún breise ar fáil don Údarás le roinnt seachtainí anuas idir €5 milliún ón gciste cothaithe fiontair agus €600,000 don scéim dhearbhán trádála ar líne.

Gheobhaidh an tÚdarás cistiú reatha €200,000 sa bhreis do chomharchumainn Ghaeltachta freisin. Fágann sé sin gur tugadh cistiú méadaithe €1 milliún san iomlán don earnáil thábhachtach sin thar na cúig bliana seo a chuaigh thart. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas agus mo chomhghairdeas do na comharchumainn as an obair atá déanta acu i gcomhthéacs Covid-19.

Leithdháilfear €500,000 sa bhreis ar an bpróiseas pleanála teanga sa bhliain 2020. Tá 18 bplean ceadaithe sa Ghaeltacht cheana agus tá beartaithe go mbeidh an ocht gcinn eile ceadaithe taobh istigh de bhliain. Tá plean teanga de thrí líonra Gaeilge ceadaithe do cheantair lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht: i gCluain Dolcáin, in Inis agus i mBaile Locha Riach. Tagann an méid sin sna sála ar na bearta a fógraíodh thar an mbliain seo a chuaigh thart chun tacú leis an bpróiseas pleanála teanga, lenar áiríodh infheistíocht shuntasach bhreise chun tacú leis an earnáil luathbhlianta, le seachadadh teanga sa suíomh teaghlaigh agus leis na healaíona traidisiúnta. Úsáidfear leithdháileadh breise €275,000 don bhliain 2020 chun a chinntiú go leanfar le seirbhísí riachtanacha iompair a sholáthar do na hoileáin. Mar is eol do bhaill an choiste, níor tháinig méadú ar bhuiséid an Fhoras Teanga ó 2016 i leith. Is í an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh Theas a cheadaíonn na buiséid do na forais trasteorann uile, An Foras Teanga san áireamh. Tugann athbhunú na comhairle deis dúinn anois breathnú arís ar na buiséid sin sa bhfómhair nuair a bheidh cáinaisnéis 2021 á hullmhú.

Níl aon dabht faoi ach go raibh an chéad leath den bhliain reatha dúshlánach do lucht na Gaeilge, agus muid ag cur impleachtaí Covid-19 ar an ngeilleagar san áireamh. Tuigim go maith go bhfuil na heagraíochtaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta tar éis teacht tríd roinnt blianta crua ó bhí an ghéarchéim eacnamaíochta deiridh ann, ach is féidir leis an Teach glacadh leis go mbeidh mise agus an tAire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, feadh ár gcumais, ag lorg acmhainní breise do chúrsaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta ón Státchiste le linn ár dtéarma oifige.

Deputy Catherine Martin: In terms of North-South co-operation, a provision of more than €41 million is made available to support the two North-South implementation bodies, An Foras Teanga, comprising Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency, and Waterways Ireland. These allocations are also subject to the approval of the North-South Ministerial Council.

I am satisfied that the 2020 allocation of €379.6 million for the Vote of the Department of

Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht will allow for the continuation and enhancement of its very diverse but critical work programmes. We, as a nation, are beginning to emerge from the public health restrictions necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. I am confident that the Department is equipped to provide the necessary supports and assistance to the relevant sectors and their myriad stakeholders to ensure they all emerge together and stronger.

I am happy to take any questions Deputies may have in respect of the 2020 Vote of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. I again ask that the questions be confined to these programme areas, notwithstanding the broader remit of my ministerial responsibilities.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá ceisteanna agam.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Is this Deputy Ó Snodaigh's slot?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá mé chun mo chuid ama a roinnt leis an Teachta Doherty.

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

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I welcome the Estimates. No one could oppose them in the way they have been fashioned as to do so would starve many organisations and artists which have struggled for many years, and are still struggling, of the funding they have, meagre though it is. The Minister outlined some of the changes that have happened as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. She also stated we are coming out of a recession. The Irish language organisations have never recovered from the cuts imposed by previous Governments since Fianna Fáil collapsed the economy.

I congratulate the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, and the Minister of State, Deputy Calleary, on their promotion to high office, and I hope we will be able to work well and positively together in this area. However, I have some criticisms of the Estimates and questions on what has been presented to us, as elements are often hidden in the detail. Is much of what the Minister outlined a repurposing of the budget that was announced last October? Is she moving some of the Department's funding to address the crisis caused by the pandemic given that the money provided in some of the budget lines will not be spent? If capital funding remains unspent at the end of the year because of the restrictions, or unspent moneys are identified prior to that, will the Minister request that this funding be repurposed and distributed among organisations that help artists, musicians and others involved in the arts who are struggling? Many of them were struggling before the pandemic. It is reckoned that 70% of artists and musicians live on income that is below the average industrial wage or even below the minimum wage.

I do not know which Minister will answer my questions on the Irish language section. Prior to last year's budget announcement, the allocation for Údarás na Gaeltachta was 68% below its funding in 2010, and the position with regard to Foras na Gaeilge was much the same. All of the organisations in that sector are still awaiting the restoration of previous levels of funding, not to speak of an increase, to allow them to carry out their duties.

The Minister mentioned regional museums and the national cultural institutions. I agree that these bodies have done immense work during the pandemic in trying to ensure that at least part of their vast collections are available online. Will the Minister commit to ensuring more money goes to the National Museum? The State moved part of the national collection to the museum in 1993, yet not all of the facilities in the complex have been developed to a stage where the public can visit. The same is true of many of the other institutions, although I accept

the National Gallery is nearing full completion of its restoration programme. A capital spend is required which has not been fully realised.

I mentioned the shortfall in funding for Údarás na Gaeltachta, which for several years, including this year, has spoken of the need for additional funding to ensure it can create jobs, which it has lined up, in the Gaeltacht areas. There is a need to continuously look at its programmes to ensure that families are retained within Gaeltacht areas and they can sustain themselves. Údarás na Gaeltachta does not just have a remit for the fiontar, tá jab eile aige agus is é sin díriú isteach ar phleanáil teanga chomh maith céanna. Muna bhfuil an chumhacht agus an t-airgead aige chun é sin a dhéanamh, tarlóidh i bhfad Éireann níos mó ná mar atá ag tarlú i Ráth Chairn faoi láthair, áit atá an Ghaeltacht féin i mbaol toisc pleanáil tithíochta agus a leithéid agus an creimeadh timpeall teorainneacha na Gaeltachtaí. Tá sé sin ag tarlú i Ráth Chairn anois.

Luadh campaí samhraidh agus coláistí samhraidh. Tógfaidh mé an deis chun iarraidh ar an Aire agus ar an Aire Stáit an iarrfaidh siad ar an Aire Sláinte athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an gcinneadh a glacadh na campaí samhraidh a chur ar ceal, ach go háirithe toisc go bhfuil athrú suntasach tarlaithe maidir leis an treoir sláinte atá tugtha faoin méid daoine ar féidir teacht le chéile. Tá an grúpa Muintearas ag impí ar an Rialtas é sin a dhéanamh chun go mbeadh na campaí samhraidh seo ag na páistí, a lán acu go bhfuil ualaí breise orthu mar pháistí agus go bhfuil a leithéid de champaí samhraidh ag teastáil uathu.

Luadh infheistíocht sa Ghaeltacht chomh maith. Baineann mo cheist dheireanach leis na hoileáin. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil freagracht as na hoileáin ag bogadh go Roinn nua ach tá sé fós faoin Estimate atá curtha faoinár mbráid faoi láthair. Cad é an scéal mar gheall ar sholáthar uisce d'Inis Oírr, áit nach raibh uisce ceart ann le míonna anuas? In ainneoin na paindéime, tá uisce á thabhairt isteach ar an mbád farantóireachta.

Ar deireadh, tá ceist agam faoi na vouchers i gcomhair trádáil ar líne a luadh. Tá sé sin go maith. Chonaic mé cad a tharla leo sa Roinn Cumarsáide, Gníomhaithe ar son na hAeráide agus Comhshaoil. Bhí a lán daoine á lorg. An bhfuil an t-airgead sin don údarás amháin nó an bhfuil sé roinnte leis an scéim Bhéarla? An bhfuil cuntasaíocht faoi dhó ag tarlú sa chás seo?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an Teachta ag cuardach freagraí ach cuirfidh mé mo cheisteanna. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, agus leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Calleary. Go n-éirí an t-ádh leo. Is é an rud is tábhachtaí a bhfuil mé á iarraidh ón Aire Stáit ná níos mó acmhainní uaidh agus ón Aire sinsearach. Níl dabht ar bith nach bhfuil go leor anseo don Ghaeltacht, do na hoileáin agus d'Údarás na Gaeltachta, mar atá léirithe go soiléir ag an Teachta Ó Snodaigh. Scríobh mé ag an bheirt acu agus thug mé cuireadh chuig an Ghaeltacht i nDún na nGall dóibh. Tá súil agam go nglacfaidh siad leis. Tá cinneadh le déanamh ag an Aire Stáit fosta ó thaobh ionad bualadh isteach don óige i nGaoth Dobhair. Thug an t-iar-Aire Stáit gealltanas dom féin agus don iar-Theachta, Pat the Cope Gallagher, go maoineofar é seo. An bhfuil cinneadh déanta air sin?

Tá staidéar faoi bhráid an Aire Stáit i leith ionad bualadh isteach don aos óg i nGaeltacht Ghaoth Dobhair. Rinne Údarás na Gaeltachta an staidéar sin. Cén uair a bheidh cinneadh déanta air sin?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Freagróidh an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Calleary, na ceisteanna faoin nGaeltacht, má tá sé sin ceart go leor. I acknowledge that Deputy Ó Snodaigh and his family are deeply connected to and steeped in culture and the arts. I recognise the invaluable

contribution that his family has made to the arts and culture sector. This Revised Estimate comprises the allocation from last year's October budget plus the additional €25 million announced last month. That €25 million for the arts and culture reflects the significant role that they play in our individual lives and across society as a whole. With regard to the Deputy's question about repurposing money, we are halfway through the year and 48% of our money has been spent. Our intention is to spend all the money but we will repurpose if necessary. We did that already with "Other Voices: Courage" and Ireland Performs.

All funding remains in place for our cultural institutions. We have an ambitious capital development programme for all cultural institutions, including the museum. As Minister in this area, I am aware that the arts and culture sector is on its knees. This is a crisis. I am aware that arts and culture go to the being of who we are as a nation. Our culture, arts and music are a celebration of who we are as a nation. They must be supported. The crisis has emphasised the importance of our arts and creativity in all of our lives. I pledge that I will work with my Department officials and State bodies in consultation with stakeholders to ensure that the talent and creativity of Ireland's performers, writers, music-makers and makers of everything in the arts world are developed to their full potential, sustained and stay alive to be once again enjoyed by widespread audiences nationally and internationally.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Aontaím leis an Aire, an Teachta Martin, faoin obair atá déanta ag an Teachta Ó Snodaigh agus ag a chlann. Maidir le cúrsaí an údaráis, tuigim an brú faoina bhfuil sé ach bhí ardú sa bhuiséad deireanach. Beidh muid ag obair leis an údarás chun go mbeidh sé san áireamh sa phacáiste spreagtha a sheolfar i mí Iúil chun an dochair atá déanta ag Covid a réiteach. Bhí airgead breise ag an údarás sa bhliain seo. Tá sé ag déanamh an-obair leis an airgead sin. Labhair mé faoi na comharchumainn agus Gteic. Beidh siad sin an-tábhachtach. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil obair mhór le déanamh againn. Tá sé ráite sa chlár Rialtais go ndéanfar athbhreithniú ar an údarás. Tá a anniversary 40 bliain ann. Tá sé in am dúinn obair leis. Tá an ceart ag an Teachta. Déanann an t-údarás níos mó ná fiontar a spreagadh. Déanann sé a lán rudaí eile. Tá sé sin tábhachtach.

Maidir le campaí samhraidh, tá a fhios ag na Teachtaí go bhfuil an Rialtas fós ag plé na rialacha nua le haghaidh scoileanna a thabhairt ar ais, so níl muid in ann aon rud a dhéanamh faoi champaí samhraidh sula gcríochnófar an phlé sin. Tugadh airgead do na campaí samhraidh a reachtáiltear taobh amuigh an tseachtain seo caite. Tá a fhios agam nach bhfuil an aimsir maith go leor do sin faoi láthair ach níl guidelines againn chun aon rud a dhéanamh taobh istigh. Tá airgead ann agus beidh seans ann. Sin an scéal agus an chomhairle a fuair muid ó Mhuintearas - go reachtáilfear rudaí taobh amuigh an samhradh seo.

Tiocfaidh mé ar ais ag an Teachta maidir le cúrsaí uisce ar Inis Oírr agus maidir leis an scéim um thrádáil ar líne. Beidh an scéim sin an-tábhachtach.

Maidir le Dún na nGall, gabhaim buíochas le Teachta Doherty as an gcuireadh. Beidh mé ann. Bhí an iar-Theachta, Pat the Cope Gallagher, ar an nguthán sula raibh a fhios agam go raibh an post sin agam. Tá a fhios agam go raibh geallúint tugtha ag an gcruinniú sin. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais ag an Teachta chomh luath agus is féidir maidir leis an ngeallúint sin. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbeidh scéimeanna ann do dhaoine óga. Tiocfaidh mé díreach ar ais ag an Teachta faoi sin.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I congratulate the Minister and the Minister of State on their new roles. I look forward to working with them over the coming months and for however long this

Government lasts.

I get a sense from the Minister that she has a strong understanding of all the difficulties the arts sector faces and I am encouraged by that. The programme for Government states that as part of the July stimulus, there will be funding and initiatives for the arts sector. Is what we heard today part of the stimulus? I am concerned about packaging. Will there be an announcement later this week or next week where what has been said today will be repurposed or repackaged? We had a meeting of the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response a couple of weeks ago. I know that Deputies Ó Snodaigh and Gannon were there. It was one of the more memorable sessions of the committee. Representatives from the arts sector came to tell us just how difficult financially, emotionally and psychologically this pandemic has been for their entire sector. I am sure they are listening to this session as they do every time the arts have been raised in the Dáil since the pandemic hit. When they take down figures and measure it against the programme for Government, they will want to know without uncertainty if this is the July stimulus or if further initiatives will be announced later in the month.

At that meeting of the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response were representatives for workers in the arts industry who are funded through the Arts Council. I welcome the additional funding for the Arts Council in this Revised Estimate. There are also workers in the industry who are not funded through the Arts Council, such as sound engineers. At the committee, the wonderful night of fundraising and the national broadcast that took place a couple of weeks ago were referred to. There was a performance by Hozier from the middle of the pitch in Croke Park. It was visually stunning, it sounded stunning and it was a high point of that evening. All the workers who put that together were not funded by the Arts Council. Is the Minister or her Department working on anything that will target those workers in the arts who are fundamental to literally keeping the show on the road?

The programme for Government mentions how important night-time culture is and how difficult it will be with physical distancing, etc. It stated the intention to establish within the first 30 days of Government a night-time economy task force which I know will have an economic remit beyond what we are discussing today. The wording in the programme for Government is that it will have some remit to protect night-time culture. We are 11 days into this 30-day commitment. What has been done to establish this task force?

Deputy Catherine Martin: This is not the July stimulus package; this is last October's budget with the addition of the €25 million announced last month. Some €20 million of that has gone to the Arts Council and the other €5 million will be allocated. I am still new to the role, but I am working on that to support the other artists the Deputy mentioned and those who work in the industry. I am keenly aware of how they are struggling and the supports they need. This is last October's budget and not this the July stimulus package. Regarding that July stimulus package, I am that voice at Cabinet. I am working on that and the discussions are under way on it. I am advocating for the arts and culture sector at Cabinet.

On the night-time economy task force, I am getting to grips with my brief. It is moving quite fast, but I am completely up for that challenge. I will be meeting representatives of the Arts Council this week. I hope to establish this month an arts task force with voices from the entire sector on how best to support them. As the Deputy said, there is a commitment there with the night-time economy task force as well. I will be looking at how best to protect that night-time culture.

Does the Deputy have further questions?

Deputy Duncan Smith: Would it be fair to say that the Minister is pushing for more funding in the July stimulus package so that there may be some expectation or hope in the industry of further announcements later this month?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Absolutely. I am that voice pushing for more funding and supports for the arts and culture sector.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I wish the Minister well in her new role and welcome her to the heart of Dublin's north inner city. I am not too sure about the auditorium we are in, but the location is spectacular. Given where we are located, I want to raise an issue that is locally relevant and nationally important and relates to the Estimates we are discussing. Like many places in Ireland, the north inner city is defined by its connection to the arts. If the Minister walks around the corner, she will see a statue of one of our greatest, Luke Kelly, which has undergone a bit of a hard time of late. It is spectacular in that location. We also have people who make their careers and live their lives through the arts, not in the performing arts but in the associated industries related to them.

According to the Estimates, the numbers of feature film projects receiving production funding from Screen Ireland are 40 this year, 39 last year and 43 in the previous year, which is very welcome. The film industry in Ireland is performing very well at the moment. Behind that film industry are the workers who make it happen. I am not talking about the actors, producers and directors, who are rightly acclaimed internationally. I am talking about workers such as carpenters, painters and set designers, many of whom live in the north inner city. I think there are 400 members of the Irish Film Workers Association. In recent years, they have asked for their plight, including unsafe and inappropriate conditions, to be raised. My colleague sitting to my right, Deputy Boyd Barrett, has been raising it for a long time. I ask the Minister to meet these professionals from the industry.

Last week, the Covid committee had a presentation from engineers and other people who make their living through the arts. It was really interesting to hear the plight they are facing. All they are asking is to be included. These people will not be able to apply for grants. I know departmental officials are meeting representatives from the Event Production Industry Covid-19 Working Group, EPIC. I ask the Minister to meet people from the Irish Film Workers Association. That is their only request at the moment.

I raise the issue of local authority funding as it pertains to the arts. In my previous role as a councillor on Dublin City Council I had the great honour of being chair of the arts and cultural strategic policy committee, SPC, for a very short time. While in that role I got to see the all-encompassing nature of the role the local authority plays in the arts. It brings the arts down into communities, helps with funding and provides funding for new artists coming through. It is innovative in the manner in which it does this and it is flexible. Local authorities' arts funding is a major way by which new communities can access funding that enables them to see their own reflection in our arts. Will that funding be protected? Is it possible for it to be enhanced?

I want to raise the issue of local authorities' discretionary funding. Discretionary funding, not covered in the Estimates, is usually how communities, often taking their first step into the arts and unable to fill out the forms, are able to access a small grant allowing them to put on a local production with local artists. That was been decimated in recent months, even before the

Covid-19 crisis. I imagine it has become an even greater problem after the pandemic. I ask the Minister to pay particular attention to the local authorities' discretionary funding, which is a very important funding mechanism for artists.

I welcome the additional €25 million for the arts, with €20 million going to the Arts Council and a further €5 million still to be decided. Although it is welcome, we are starting from a very low level. We talk about the arts in Ireland all the time. Dublin Airport displays pictures of our artists. We use the arts to sell Ireland on a global stage. However, we have grotesquely underfunded the sector for decades despite taking advantage of it so much. That €25 million is welcome. However, that can be compared with the stimulus announced for the arts across the water in the UK, which has been extended into the billions of pounds. That meant the North of Ireland got €36.7 million for the arts there, despite having a smaller population and a smaller cohort of artists. While our artists and artistic community welcome the €25 million, although it is not enough, can we guarantee that it will be committed to for next year and possibly extended?

The artistic community feels vulnerable at the moment. What is keeping our artists and others in the artistic community alive and helping them feed themselves is the pandemic unemployment payment and the temporary wage subsidy scheme. These need to be continued for as long as our artistic community cannot access their workplace in the manner in which they previously could. Be it through the July stimulus or any other mechanism, I know the Minister will advocate strongly. I ask her to advocate to allow our artists to continue to be able to avail of the pandemic unemployment payment and the temporary wage subsidy scheme until they can return to their place of work.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The Deputy compared the €25 million with the supports given across the water. Making comparisons across different countries is difficult for many reasons, including population size and the nature of the arts and entertainment sectors. For example, the UK has a very large commercial theatre sector. According to the EU, the arts and culture share of public expenditure in Ireland in recent years has been broadly in line with the EU average. The Arts Council has established an expert advisory group to make recommendations on measures to support the arts. The recent allocation of that additional €25 million to the sector, including the €20 million to the Arts Council, was a direct response to the need identified by that expert advisory group. It is also very much in line with the recommendations of the National Campaign for the Arts.

I am very mindful of the concerns of people working in the sector. I am absolutely willing to meet all stakeholders. That is my intention and it is what I will be doing.

Local authorities have well developed connections with local historical groups and are very effective in supporting a wide range of events, for example, commemorative events. The creative communities initiative is being implemented via the local authorities, largely through a joint investment programme of €8.7 million supported by Creative Ireland and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. We will continue to protect that.

The Deputy also mentioned discretionary funding. I will sit down with officials in my Department and tease out how best to deal with that matter. I am keenly aware of the struggles and crises that are there and if Deputies will bear with me, I am determined to include and listen to all stakeholders as we seek to support them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am provoked by Deputy Gannon's reference to the venue we are in. It is a nice venue but if one was trying to do an artistic evocation of the weirdness, surreality and alien character of the impact of the pandemic on Irish society, one could do worse than start with an image of this place, with Deputies sitting miles away from each other in this weird environment. Having said that, it is better that democracy continues to function, even in a slightly weird environment.

It is democracy, in the broadest sense, that has produced the additional €25 million funding for the arts. That has come about as a result of the agitation of the arts and cultural community who made their voices heard. Those voices were then expressed in a Dáil debate and at the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. The National Campaign for the Arts and many of the arts workers, crew and groups like EPIC and many others have made their voices heard and reminded us about the value and importance of our arts. That has been even clearer than ever during the pandemic because it is unimaginable to try and think what the past six months would have been like without music, literature, films, books and all the results of talent and creativity. At this moment when we need arts, culture and music the most, there is an existential threat to the people who make that art, including the artists and performers but also the crew members who stand behind them and make those productions happen.

As Deputy Gannon and others have already stated, the €25 million is a start but is not nearly enough. That is only one of the 13 requests of the National Campaign for the Arts. It does not really touch the crew members who work in live music and entertainment at all. They need commitments that there is going to be additional support and funding for all of those who produce music, live entertainment, art and culture.

The key demand that unites them all is the appeal that the income supports will continue until there is a full recovery in the industry. There is no foreseeable moment of recovery for music, live entertainment, the arts, theatres or gigs. We have no idea when that will happen and the Government needs to sustain crew members who have the necessary skills, artists and performers. Critical to doing this is continuing, in some form, an income subsidy. It does not have to be an unemployment payment. These artists and crew members want to do what work they can but there will not be enough work available for them to make a sustainable living, and we should remember that most of them were struggling to earn a sustainable living even before Covid-19. Now more than ever, those people need an income support that will give them a baseline of a dignified living income but beyond which they can also do what work they can in the period ahead. I appeal to the Minister to address that matter. It is the key request and must materialise in the July stimulus package.

It is not a good start to dealing with these issues that thousands of arts workers had their payments cut yesterday. That is really kicking people when they are down rather than supporting them when they need it. The incomes of many musicians and artists were hit because the manner in which the pandemic unemployment payment was cut failed to take into account the episodic and precarious nature of the employment of many in the arts, culture and entertainment sector. Therefore, many of those people saw their incomes cut yesterday. There is no alternative for them to simply go out and make work for themselves to increase their incomes. How will they pay their bills, rent and childcare costs when they simply do not have the money? The Government made the situation worse by cutting the payment yesterday. We need those income supports to be restored and maintained, and additional supports to be put in place, until the arts, entertainment and music sectors recover.

Reference was made to the Irish Film Workers Association, many members of which live around the corner from here on Sheriff Street. Representatives of the association came before the Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht two years ago and have been blacklisted by the industry since because they raised issues about health and safety, pay and conditions, and direct employment in the film industry. Many of them have not worked in the film industry since. There is a big difference when one compares the film industry with all the other areas that the Minister is supporting with this Revised Estimate. When we give money to galleries, museums and theatres, people get jobs. Therefore, most of those people, during the past six months, have been on the wage subsidy scheme. The Government policy was to give the wage subsidy scheme in order to maintain the relationship between employer and employee. There are employees in museums and theatres but there are none in the film industry. Producers can access funding of €20 million that the Government gives to Screen Ireland and also receive money through the relief provided under section 481 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, which amounts to approximately €100 million, and yet nobody in the industry has a job. Everybody who was working in Ardmore Studios, Troy Studios and Ashford Studios was sacked on 12 March. Those people were not put on the wage subsidy scheme, they were sacked. There was no consultation with the workers and front-line people whatsoever in the development of the guidelines to reopen the industry. All the money goes to a group of producers and, as a result, we do not actually have a national film infrastructure and nobody has a job. That needs to be examined.

I repeat the appeal that the Minister needs to meet all stakeholders and insist that they come to a forum on the film industry, as was recommended by the all-party Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht two years ago, but which certain stakeholders simply refused to attend. I do not think that such people should continue to get funding if they refuse a request from an all-party Oireachtas committee to come to a stakeholder forum and resolve the difficulties and disputes that exist in the Irish film industry. I appeal to the Minister on that front.

11 o'clock

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The time available has expired. If we get a few minutes later, we might address a couple of the questions that are outstanding. Otherwise, the Minister might correspond with Deputy Boyd Barrett. Deputy Denis Naughten has eight minutes.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I welcome the opportunity to address the Minister. I wish her the best of luck in what is a challenging Department. I think the acronym relating to her new Department will include every letter of the alphabet. I wish her and the Aire Stáit the very best of luck.

I will turn to the Aire Stáit initially to say that the communities across the Gaeltacht are deeply disappointed that the Gaeltacht portfolio has been sellotaped on to what is already a very large Department. As the Minister knows first hand, the Gaeltacht population is declining. It is an ageing demographic and that is even more challenging when we look at na hoileáin where we have similar problems. This needs to be looked at right across Government.

When I held the portfolio of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, I was very focused on bringing high-speed broadband to the islands and rural communities and on ensuring that they should not be left behind. It will transform those islands.

Against the advice at the time, I included the offshore islands as part of the clean energy

for EU islands strategy, and that will directly benefit them, providing sustainable clean energy to them. There is a great opportunity in servicing the offshore renewable industry from the Gaeltacht areas and the islands but Údarás na Gaeltachta needs to be supported now to be proactive rather than reactive in that regard. Again, that is an area that had completely fallen by the wayside until I resurrected the offshore renewable strategy, and in fairness, through persistence at Cabinet level, the leadership was taken on by the office of An Taoiseach. I hope that this Government actually delivers on the objectives that I set out in my time in that Department.

I also ask the Minister of State, Deputy Calleary, if he could provide our new Aire with a copy of the Western Development Commission report, the Creative West report. While it is a decade old at this stage, I think the Minister will find great benefit in reading it in terms of the potential economic stimulus that exists regarding creating jobs, particularly in our rural communities and regions in the creative, arts and culture sector. I hope the Minister takes the opportunity to review that document.

There are two other issues I wish to bring up, one of which is close to the heart of the Minister's Secretary General, namely, the ban on hedge cutting. I am not going to go into that heated debate. As the Minister knows, the ban on hedge cutting applies from 1 March to 31 August. At long last, by 1 March of next year, we are going to have high-speed broadband outside people's homes. They will be offered up to 500 Mbps as a standard offering from about 1 March next year. The last thing we need when that broadband arrives outside people's homes is for them to be told that because of the Minister's Department, they cannot connect as they have to remove a tree or cut down a hedge between the telegraph pole on the road and their house. I ask the Minister to make contact with National Broadband Ireland, find out the exact specification needed for householders and circulate it to householders so that from 31 August of this year they can start preparing for that broadband. If they have to trim back trees and hedges, they could then do it between August and March of next year rather than waiting until the broadband arrives at their door and then have a delay of up to six months on that. It is about bringing logic into this issue rather than creating a problem next spring.

On the final issue I want to raise, the Minister might respond to me if she has the figures available to her. I am going to give her a bit of history. Back in 1996, the then Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins, provided for the designation of bogs which led to the ban on turf cutting on a number of designated bogs across the west. Some 24 years later, about one in ten of those families that looked for it has been relocated. A massive 70% of those turf cutters who sought relocation are still without any plan to provide them with an alternative turf bank. The first test of the just transition is the relocation of those turf cutters who had their rights removed from them 24 years ago. At the formation of the previous Government in May 2016, 68 turf cutters had been accommodated on alternative sites. At the end of last year, that had risen to 72 families relocated. That is four families in four years or one relocation per year, which is grossly inadequate. Because this has been so frustrating and delayed for so long, in the meantime the Minister's Department has paid €1,500 per annum to those families until they are relocated. About 8% of those families have thrown in the towel and said they will allow the Department to buy out their rights. However, in a sneaky move by the Department, it is deducting the payments that have already been made for the Department's failure to relocate them from the compensation payment that is being paid. Can we issue these people with their rightful compensation payment and not deduct the payments that were made to them in the interim in lieu of relocation?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We do not have time for a reply but we

will try to accommodate-----

Deputy Denis Naughten: There is one minute left for the Minister to reply. I know she is anxious to reply.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Perhaps we can accommodate it at the end if we have time.

Deputy Denis Naughten: With all due respect, I did leave one minute for the Minister. It was a simple question and one minute would have been sufficient to answer that question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): If the Minister wants to answer, but otherwise it is not really fair to expect a reply.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Minister has indicated twice that she wishes to answer.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I am quite happy to answer. I welcome the Deputy's engagement which is always highly constructive and helpful on these areas and working with the communities involved. I am aware that options exist in respect of turf cutters which include relocation to non-designated bogs, annual compensation payments and in some instances lump sum payments. My colleague, Deputy Noonan, will have responsibility for this and I will bring the matter to his attention. I will also bring the issue to his attention in respect of the roll-out of broadband and hedge cutting.

Deputy Michael Collins: I congratulate the new Ministers who are before us today and wish them luck in their positions. I was across the corridors from the Minister, Deputy Martin, for the past four years and thankfully we had a lot of conversations and I hope we can work together going forward. The Deputy has the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and in my own constituency of Cork South-West the Gaeltacht and culture are very important. I am disappointed somewhat that the Gaeltacht and the islands have been split. It is a very big mistake. I come from a constituency where there are eight islands and great people have worked very closely in islands like Cape Clear, where the Gaeltacht is very strong. It was imperative that those areas of responsibility stayed together, and unfortunately they have been split. It will lead to the weakening of the islands.

Our heritage and culture have been eroded more and more. An Irish neighbour of mine who visited Chicago over a year ago for a holiday told me that there were so many Irish men, women and children openly Irish dancing on the streets of Chicago and showing how proud they were of our Irish heritage. My neighbour told me it was a joy to see and that Irish-Americans are truly more Irish than we are in Ireland today. We need to look at our culture and heritage and build on what is there in our communities. We can do that. We need to invest in Irish culture. There are fabulous Irish musicians both North and South of the Border who are going through a terrible time with the loss of income during this Covid crisis. We need to support these musicians, singers and dancers who sell Ireland all over the world, including Nathan Carter with his song, "May the Road Rise to Meet You". Tourism Ireland use this to sell Ireland and musicians are selling Ireland all over the world to people who love our culture and heritage. We should be proud of what we have achieved and where we came from to be where we are today. I would appreciate if the many singers and artists who are selling Ireland all over the world were seriously considered in any stimulus package. This is what people around the world love about Ireland and these artists should be enabled to continue to do so.

I will touch on verge and hedge cutting on roadsides, as opposed to farms, in rural Ireland as the matter is also in the Minister's brief. I know the Minister has visited west Cork because I have met her there, and she is familiar with the beauty of the area. Hedges grow on to roadsides and this has led to deaths and serious accidents. We are always looking at the bigger picture of road deaths caused by factors that come under other Departments, but in the peninsula and constituency I represent, from Innishannon all the way west to Skibbereen, Clonakilty and Bantry, people are asking that hedges on roadside verges be cut for safety reasons. It can look like people are trying to interfere with our natural beauty but that is not the case. They are asking that verges be maintained so that people are safe.

In the event of a second wave of Covid, what contingency plans are in place for the centenary commemorations in famous historical places such as Crossbarry and Kilmichael? The Michael John McLean memorial in Lowertown is right outside my door. What contingency plans are in place if things go wrong?

Deputy Carol Nolan: Guím gach rath ar an Aire ina ról nua. Tá mé ag tnúth le bheith ag obair leis. Níl ach am gearr agam agus ba mhaith liom béim a chur ar gheallúintí i gclár an Rialtais maidir le dul chun cinn na Gaeilge. Mar Ghaeilgeoir agus mar iar-mhúinteoir, tá sé seo fíorthábhachtach dom. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go mbeidh dul chun cinn maidir leis an nGaeilge mar phríomhchuspóir ag an Rialtas nua. Tá sé soiléir go bhfuil Conradh na Gaeilge agus TG4 ag déanamh sár-obair chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn ar an oileán seo. Tá geallúintí i gclár an Rialtais an scéim teanga a fhorbairt agus a chur chun cinn agus scéimeanna eile cosúil leis a bhunú. Cuirim fáilte roimh seo ach tá i bhfad níos mó ag teastáil ón Rialtas. Tá maoiniú ag teastáil in ionad focail dhearfacha dheasa ón Rialtas. An fhadhb is mó atá ann ná an t-easpa maoinithe sna Gaeltachtaí. Phléigh mé an fhadhb seo le Conradh na Gaeilge cúpla uair nuair a bhuail mé leo. Tá réiteach ar an bhfadhb ag teastáil chomh luath agus is féidir. Tá súil agam go mbeidh níos mó airgid ag dul ón Rialtas seo chuig Údarás na Gaeltachta chun poist a chruthú i ngach cúinne den Ghaeltacht. Tá an méid seo ag teastáil ó phobal na Gaeltachta. Mothaíonn siad go bhfuil siad tréigthe agus nach bhfuil siad mar phríomhchuspóir ag an Rialtas agus nach raibh siad mar phríomhchuspóir ag an Rialtas deireanach. Caithimid é sin a athrú.

Last year's revised Estimate for the Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht amounted to €351 million. I am very concerned that we now have oversight and development of the Gaeltacht mixed in with several other vast and wide-ranging portfolios. Does the Minister accept that this will not give people hope with respect to being able to deliver on commitments for the development of the Irish language strategy, for instance? This issue has been raised in the House time and again. We must get to the root of it and show we are serious about it. There is a real concern that the Irish language will get lost in the maze of the new Department and that it will not be prioritised in the manner in which it should. I dearly hope that we will see a different approach under this Government. What assurances can the Minister give that this will not happen?

Tá sé fíor-thábhachtach go mbeidh gach uile iarracht ar bun ag an Rialtas nua seo an Ghaeilge a chosaint agus a fhorbairt agus gan í a chur ar leataobh sa Roinn nua. Bheadh sé i bhfad níos fearr Roinn amháin don Ghaeltacht a bhunú. Is é sin mo thuairim agus tuairim go leor Gaeilgeoirí agus muintir na Gaeltachta.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tuigim gach rud atá ráite ag an Teachta. Tá mé féin agus an Teachta Catherine Martin ag bord an Rialtais. Is é seo an chéad uair le blianta anuas a bhfuil beirt Airí as an Roinn a bhfuil freagrach as an nGaeltacht ag bord an Rialtais. Beimid ag obair

go dlúth le Conradh an Gaeilge agus le gach coiste Gaeilge. Aontaím go mór leis an Teachta agus a buairt faoin nGaeilge agus faoi na Gaeltachtaí. Tá mé ag súil le bheith ag obair leis an Teachta. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuig an Teachta Collins ar a ceist.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We now move to the Independent Group. I call Deputy Connolly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an mbeirt Airí nua. Guím gach rath ar an mbeirt. Tá trua agam don Aire sinsearach mar ní dóigh liom gur féidir níos mó cúraimí a chur faoin a stiúir. Baineann a ról le turasóireacht, ealaíon, cultúr, spóirt agus na Gaeltachtaí. Tá dúshlán ollmhór os a comhair.

Maidir leis an Meastachán Athbhreithnithe, is scéal dearfach atá ann. Ní féidir cur in aghaidh an Mheastacháin seo. Tá airgead breise do na healaíona, do Údarás na Gaeltachta agus do na hearnáil eile. An rud atá in easnamh ná comhthéacs agus cúlra. Níl aon chomhthéacs anseo mar shampla an géarchéim atá sna Gaeltachtaí ar fud na tíre. Níl aon aitheantas tugtha don ghéarchéim atá ann ó thaobh na teanga de. Cuireann sé sin olc orm i ndáiríre. Ní maith liom tús a chur le mo chuid oibre leis na hAirí i mbealach atá diúltach, ach tá gá le haitheantas a thabhairt agus iad ag caint faoi chúrsaí airgid agus caiteachais. Is rud dearfach é na figiúirí a bheith againn, ach gan chúlra agus gan aitheantas don ghéarchéim atá ann, tá sé thar a bheith deacair muinín a bheith agam as an gcaiteachas seo.

Níor luaigh na hAirí Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla. Ní raibh trácht air in aon áit. Ní mór dom a rá freisin b'fhéidir as seo amach go mbeadh ceannaireacht ón dtús i gceist agus go mbeadh na hóráid i nGaeilge freisin. Le ceithre bliana anuas tá mé féin agus mo chomhghleacaithe ag troid chun dáta a fháil maidir leis an mBille. Stopfaidh mé ag an bpointe seo chun nóiméad a thabhairt don Aire a rá cén uair a bheidh Bille an dTeangacha Oifigiúla foilsithe.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Mar Phríomh-Aoire, tá mé ag tabhairt geallúint don Teachta go mbeidh sé ann roimh an Nollaig.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Briathra millte arís. Cén rud a mbeidh ann roimh an Nollaig? An mbeidh sé foilsithe nó achtaithe?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá mé ag iarraidh go mbeidh sé achtaithe.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go raibh míle maith agat. Sin gealltanais amháin.

Ó thaobh na n-oileán de, tá díomá orm go bhfuil na hoileáin anois faoi Roinn eile. Ceapaim gur droch-chinneadh é sin ach feicfimid. Tá mé sásta obair leis na hAirí agus leis an Roinn eile.

Maidir le polasaí do na hoileáin, cá bhfuil sé? Níl sé luaite in aon áit. Chuireamar rún os comhair na Dála cúpla bliain ó shin agus ghlac formhór na Dála leis an rún sin maidir le polasaí do na hoileáin. Cé atá i gceannas anois? Tá na hoileáin faoi Roinn eile. Cathain a mbeidh an polasaí sin foilsithe?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá straitéis ar bun agus tá consultation ar siúl ach tá moill ann mar gheall ar an pandemic. Ní raibh seans déileáil leis go tapaigh, ach beidh sé ar an mbóthar agus bhí sé ar siúl faoin iar-Aire, an Seanadóir Kyne.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Ní thuigim sin. Cé hé an duine atá taobh thiar den pholasaí anois? Tá fhios agam go bhfuil córas cumarsáide i gceist agus tá sé sin thar a bheith táb-

hachtach. Ach tá sé níos tábhachtaí dáta a bheith againn maidir le cathain a mbeidh an polasaí foilsithe.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Bhí an Roinn ag iarraidh comhairliúchán poiblí a dhéanamh le haghaidh mhuintir na n-oileán agus bhí sé sin ar siúl roimh Covid-19. Cé go bhfuil an fhreagracht seo ag dul go dtí Roinn dhifriúil beimid ag coimeád súil ghéar ar cad atá ag tarlú ann mar gheall ar cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé do chúrsaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuig an Teachta faoin moill agus faoi dháta ina mbeimid in ann é a fhoilsiú.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Gabhaim buíochas mór leis an Aire Stáit. Tugann sé sin beagáinín dóchais dom go mbeidh sibh ag coinneáil súil ghéar ar an bpróiseas. Cuirfidh mé an rud seo i gcomhthéacs. Tá méadú suntasach tagtha ar an daonra ar oileáin na hAlban de bharr go bhfuil reachtaíocht agus polasaí acu. Níl siad ag obair i bhfolús sa chaoi go bhfuil na hoileáin anseo agus tá an-tábhacht ag baint leis seo. Tá a fhios agam gur chuir Covid-19 isteach ar an bpróiseas ach bhí cruinnithe i gceist agus tá súil agam go bhfuil rud foghlamtha agaibhse go dtí seo agus go bhfuil treoracha ann faoin gcaoi nó faoin mbealach a bheidh an córas cumarsáide ag dul ar aghaidh as seo amach agus go mbeidh dáta againn.

Maidir le cúrsaí ealaíne, tá a fhios agam go bhfuil airgead breise curtha ar fáil agus fáiltím roimhe sin. Maidir le Gaillimh 2020 agus cúrsaí ealaíne, de réir mar a thuigim tá droch-chaoi ar chúrsaí caiteachais agus airgid ann agus níl siad in ann airgead a íoc don earnáil ealaíne. An bhfuil an tAire Stáit in ann soiléiriú a thabhairt dom faoin uair a bheidh airgead breise ar fáil don chóras áitiúil?

Chomh maith leis sin maidir le Gaillimh 2020 féin, an bhféadfadh an tAire Stáit in ann soiléiriú a thabhairt dom maidir leis? Fuair an tionscadal seo réidh le foireann agus chuir sé díomá orm go raibh an t-oifigeach Gaeilge ina measc siúd. Cheap mise gurbh í an duine ba thábhachtaí, go háirithe agus muid ag caint faoi chathair dhátheangach atá ar thairseach na Gaeltachta is mó sa tír. An féidir leis an tAire Stáit soiléiriú a thabhairt dom ar an dá phointe sin, lena thoil?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Ar an gcéad dul síos caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil, mar is eol don Teachta, an-suim agus an-ghrá agam don Ghaeilge. Úsáidim í chomh minic agus is féidir liom. Beidh mé féin agus an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Calleary, ag tabhairt cuairte ar an nGaeltacht an mhí seo. Is i nGaeilge a rinne mé mo chéad agallamh.

If the Deputy can bear with me as regards Galway 2020, táim chun an cheist sin a fhreagairt i mBéarla agus beidh sé níos soiléire, I hope, ansin. I have received a request from Galway 2020 to continue funding for a repurposed programme. The current Covid-19 pandemic will continue to have a significant impact on the delivery of Galway 2020. The Department has indicated approval for Galway 2020 to re-engage with cultural partners from the original bid book to examine options for the delivery of a revised cultural programme in light of Covid-19 impacts. On this basis, Galway 2020 is proposing a revised cultural programme comprising 27 projects from the original winning bid book, many of which will include multiple events to be held over the period from July to March 2021. The proposed format for delivery is on the basis that social distancing requirements will remain in place, with delivery methods to include limited access physical performance, exhibition installations and a significant element of digital delivery. One cultural partner has indicated that it will not be possible to deliver its proposed events by the end of March 2021. A request for the prolongation of the cultural programme to April 2021 has been sent to the European Commission to allow time for delivery in changed

circumstances and a response is awaited.

The unspent elements of committed local authority funding is no longer guaranteed and there is no expectation of further private sponsorship, leaving the Government as the sole funder. As I said, I have received a request from Galway 2020 to continue funding for a repurposed programme and I hope to make a decision on this shortly. I ask the Deputy to bear with me as I am only a few days in this brief. The matter has been brought to my attention and I am dealing with it. Gabhaim buíochas léi.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I congratulate the Minister, Deputy Martin, on her appointment. Tá sé an-deas an Ghaeilge a chloisteáil sa Dáil freisin, gabhaim buíochas leo.

I will speak briefly about Shannon Heritage and its portfolio of sites. The group has nine sites and also operates the iconic GPO visitor centre on O'Connell Street. Shannon Heritage's origins lie in the mid west. It was once run by Shannon Development. Some years ago, as many Deputies will remember, the Dublin Airport Authority was broken up. The Shannon Group is now a separate entity from the DAA and operates Shannon Heritage as a subsidiary. Shannon Heritage employs 300 staff, some of whom do not work all year around, although a core staff group of 145 works on a 12 month basis. Some staff have been with the organisation for upwards of 30 years.

The most iconic site owned by Shannon Heritage is Bunratty Castle, which is also the setting for the world famous Bunratty Folk Park, one of two major attractions in County Clare. We are blessed to have a beautiful county but most people who come on day visits to Clare, whether they are on Paddywagon tour buses or fly into Shannon Airport, will visit the iconic sites of the Cliffs of Moher and Bunratty Castle.

The region has been devastated in recent weeks to hear from Mary Considine, the chief executive of the Shannon Group that, and her management team that, on 31 August, Bunratty Folk Park and all the other sites managed by the group, including King John's Castle and Knappogue, will remain closed for the autumn and winter months. Initially, the Covid-19 public health guidance was cited but now it has become an issue of solvency. As the Shannon Group portfolio is spread between aviation, commercial property and heritage sites, the group is in an acute financial crisis. We heard in the Dáil earlier this week debates on staff lay-offs and pay cuts in Shannon Airport. The same is now happening in Shannon Heritage. This company has a staffing problem but it certainly does not face the same crisis that the aviation sector faces in that there is not the same volatility. If Dublin Zoo, the GPO site and key sites in the centre of Dublin are open to tourists at the moment, I cannot see why the mid west should lose out.

This is essentially a solvency issue. It makes no sense to have key, iconic, strategic sites in the mid west closed for business at a time when we are trying to attract those who are in our country and want to have a quality staycation. The international tourism market has imploded this year but the domestic tourism market is buoyant. Every possible attraction should be open to satisfy domestic tourists' needs.

The aviation task force, which we discussed last night, will report back this month. It is widely expected that funding will be announced for the airports, including Shannon Airport. I ask the Minister to insist at Cabinet that any more money awarded to the Shannon Group be conditional on it keeping its Shannon Heritage sites open throughout the autumn and winter months. I made the same point to the Taoiseach.

This has a domino effect. By closing down Bunratty Castle, a site that has been open since the late 1600s, due to Covid-19 during the autumn and winter months, we are denying ourselves huge opportunities in the mid west. People nowadays are very fickle in how they book holidays. With a few clicks of a mouse, they can decide to holiday in Kerry instead of Clare, which is very damaging to the region. The domino effect impacts on the many bars and restaurants in the immediate footprint of Bunratty Castle and those further afield in the county which leverage the castle to sell packages to incoming tourists. Will the Minister intervene to ensure that any State funding to the Shannon Group is made conditional on it reopening its sites? I would also like her Department to communicate the strategic importance of keeping Bunratty Castle, King John's Castle and the other Shannon Heritage sites in the mid west open throughout the autumn and winter.

I wish the Minister the best in her portfolio and thank the Acting Chairman.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I will be as brief as possible and try to leave time for the Minister and Minister of State to respond. I wish both of them the best of luck in their new briefs. In regard to the Minister, I am encouraged by her approach and commentary thus far in respect of the arts, culture and tourism, which is now part of her brief. I genuinely wish her the best of luck and I look forward to working with her and to welcoming her to west Cork to show her the incredible tourism offering there. I know the Minister of State a bit better than I know the Minister, and I am aware of his passion for the Gaeltacht and the islands. I have no doubt he will do a fantastic job.

I welcome the announcement of the additional funding in the Revised Estimate, which seems targeted. All of the additional funding for the different events mentioned by the Minister will be for nothing if we do not protect our events sector and workers. As the Minister rightly stated, the sector has never faced a crisis like this so we need to support it by means of the funding to which I refer and the July stimulus. We have all referenced the impact on tourism, hospitality and aviation but it could be argued that the events and arts sector is potentially most affected because of its reliance on mass gatherings. We do not know when mass gatherings will be permitted again. I have spoken to events workers and sound engineers who do not expect to have an income until April 2021. Judging by some of the commentary in the Chamber in recent days, Covid may be with us for a couple of years and so it may be some time before mass gatherings will be permitted again. We need to protect and support the sector in question and its workers.

The events sector is a thriving industry. I know from a conversation I had 25 years ago with an events worker who had oversight of the festival that was then known as Oxegen, and previously known as Witnness, that British event companies rigged and set up events here. These days, that work is being done by Irish companies and, as I said, we now have a thriving events industry and skilled crew. We need to protect the sector and ensure that it will exist when we emerge from Covid. Funding for all of the cultural events mentioned by the Minister will be nothing unless we protect the industry. We cannot allow this talent and skilled labour force to be leaked or lost to other industries. We cannot let that happen. We can protect the sector by listening to some of its demands.

All of us in this Chamber have enjoyed various events, gigs, theatre performances and concerts. I come from west Cork, which I consider to be the rock capital of the world. For the final 20 years of his life, Noel Redding, the bassist with the Jimi Hendrix Experience, lived in west Cork. Eric Bell of Thin Lizzy also lived there. It is home to incredible venues that have hosted world famous names. Venues such as DeBarras in Clonakilty, Connolly's of Leap and

Levis' Bar in the small village of Ballydehob are gems. We need to protect them and to ensure that this industry still exists when we emerge from Covid. It is important that we protect not only the venues but the events and the festivals, including the International Guitar Festival in Clonakilty and the Cork Jazz Festival. We all enjoy these events and the music. We need to start appreciating what happens prior to an event, including the sound checks, the rigging and so on. We are sometimes oblivious to what these incredible events workers do. Many of the small events and festivals that take place in west Cork and other parts of rural Ireland depend heavily on sound engineers to set up public address systems and the stages, and they sometimes do this work free of charge or at a reduced rate.

I would like now to mention some of the requests from EPIC, of which I am sure the Minister is aware because EPIC will have communicated them to her. The main request is that the Covid pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and wage subsidy scheme will continue for event workers until such time as mass gatherings are permitted again. That is very important and it should be addressed in the July stimulus package. I acknowledge that this debate is not about the July stimulus. We need business grant support of, potentially, 20%, if possible, above the turnover for 2018. This is essential.

Another issue affecting this sector is insurance coverage, which I would like the Minister to highlight to the Cabinet. The risk factor has been reduced dramatically because events are not happening, rigs are not being set up and so on but the insurance companies are not being flexible. This matter needs to be tackled.

There is also a mental health aspect involved, which I know EPIC has also communicated to the Minister. The arts sector, from musicians to event workers, have been supportive of each other to get them through this pandemic. We have all seen the Facebook live performances. DeBarras in Clonakilty has held a Facebook live event for the past four months. It has been a brilliant way to bring these events into our living rooms. The sector needs targeted funding in order to put in place proper and effective mental health programmes.

I welcome the Minister's reference to the possible establishment of an industry task force. I echo the calls for a meeting with stakeholders. There is another issue with the PUP which I would like the Minister to bring to the Cabinet. For some reason, random events workers are receiving the lower payment of €203 per week but their 2018 accounts would have reflected a position much healthier than that. This needs to be rectified. The situation of the many seasonal workers who were not employed in January and February and, therefore, do not receive the PUP also needs to be rectified to get these essential workers through the crisis. This sector needs to be provided for in the July stimulus.

I will move on now to the islands, following which I hope there will be time remaining for the Minister and Minister of State to respond. I come from west Cork. As Deputy Michael Collins indicated, we have many vibrant offshore islands. I would like confirmation that island services will not be impacted by the move of responsibility for the islands from its existing Department to the new Department with responsibility for social protection, community and rural development and the islands. We need a guarantee that services will be protected. In the context of the overall approach to the islands, there is an issue with housing. There are many couples who would like to move there and work remotely but they cannot do so because there is no available housing on the islands. Provision needs to be made for housing on our offshore islands. Tied closely to this is the provision of rural broadband so that people can choose to live and work on the islands and thus the islands would be repopulated and lead to a very healthy

island economy. One of the local islands off the coast of Cork, Cape Clear Island, recently re-started a market which had not been held for 15 years, which is helping to keep expenditure in the local economy. I would welcome a brief response from the Minister and Minister of State on the issues I have raised.

Deputy Catherine Martin: On Deputy Cathal Crowe's question regarding Shannon Heritage, we are critically aware of the issues facing the heritage sector, as well as the arts and cultural sector. As a Government, we are working with all stakeholders to ensure facilities can reopen safely and to stabilise them financially. As requested by the Deputy, I will raise this matter with my colleagues in government, including the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, who will have responsibility for heritage. In terms of my new remit, I am also very conscious of it from a tourism perspective.

On the issues raised by Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, as I have previously stated, the Covid-19 crisis has emphasised the importance of our arts and creativity in all of our lives. Along with my Department officials and State bodies I am working with all stakeholders to ensure that the talent and creativity of our performers, writers and music makers is developed to their potential and sustained and enjoyed once again by audiences in our local communities, at national level and globally. The impact of Covid has been deep across the sector. Live performances to audiences will be impacted long-term. This is one of the sectors that was first hit and it will be the last to return. I am very aware of that. On live performances, my Department is engaging with EPIC and the entertainment industry in order to ways to sustain them. I fully agree we have built a skilled labour force in that sector and we want to protect and continue to work with the sector. As I said, it was the first to go and will be the last to return. I am fully aware that the arts and culture sector is heavily dependent on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and the temporary wage subsidy scheme and that an extension of the former has been sought by the National Campaign for the Arts.

As the Deputy may be aware, the programme for Government states that, as part of the July stimulus package, the Government will set out a pathway for the future implementation of the temporary wage subsidy scheme and the future distribution of the PUP based on the principles of fairness and equity. As he rightly noted, these are industries where seasonal workers must be considered. That is on my radar and I seek to address it. The work is under way.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): As there is no Fine Gael Deputy who wishes to speak, I call Deputy Ó Cathasaigh from the Green Party.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Ar dtús báire, déanaim comhghairdeas ó chroí leis an Aire nua as a bheith ceaptha ina ról nua. Tá sé suntasach domsa mar bhall den Chomhaontas Glas mo chomhghleacaí a fheiceáil sa ról sin, ach freisin mar Ghael tá sé suntasach go bhfuil beirt Airí sa Roinn a bhfuil tacaíocht don teanga léirithe acu ag gach uile dheis go dtí seo. Guím gach rath ar a gcuid oibre amach anseo.

I will ask my questions in two parts to allow the relevant Minister or Minister of State an opportunity to answer. My first questions pertain to the equality budgeting outlined in the Estimates. Under the previous programme for Government, a pilot programme on equality budgeting was rolled out in a number of Departments in budget 2018. The equality budgeting objectives and performance indicators outlined in the Revised Estimates raise a few questions, not just on the attention paid to increased female participation in film and screen content supported by Fís Éireann but also on the future of equality budgeting, its success and whether we

can improve on efforts made thus far.

In considering these issues, what is the status of the pilot programme that sets out to improve equality in all Departments and what is the proposed timeframe for its completion? Will the Department report on lessons learned from the pilot programme on equality budgeting to inform and improve equality budgeting in all Departments in the coming years? Has the Department considered following up on or implementing the recommendations in the OECD review of Ireland's equality budgeting?

The Revised Estimates set out the aims of increasing the number of applications received with female talent and increasing the number of successful applications received with female talent, both by 5%. Will the Minister indicate the starting point or baseline for those targets and whether they had a financial underpinning?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the Deputy and all Deputies who have expressed their good wishes to me and the Minister of State, Deputy Calleary. I look forward to working with them all.

While the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is responsible for the equality budgeting programme, my Department was one of six that participated in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's equality budgeting pilot in 2018. Dedicated equality indicators were included in the 2018 Revised Estimates with the objective to work to achieve enhanced levels of representation of women and girls in films and screen content supported by the Irish Film Board. Equality budgeting uses impact indicators to provide information on how the allocation of resources impacts various groups in society, such as women, children and disadvantaged groups.

While the pilot scheme focused mainly on gender in 2018, with five gender objectives and one socioeconomic objective, the scope was broadened in 2019 to include other equality measures such as poverty, the promotion of inclusiveness and disability. My Department has engaged, and will continue to do so, with this process annually. While an equality budgeting advisory group has been established by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to support this process, my Department is not a member of the group. I am very supportive of equality budgeting as a means of advancing equality, reducing poverty and strengthening economic and social rights.

With regard to the pilot programme, a key lesson for my Department was the value in setting metrics as a means of driving policy change. In 2018, for example, the Irish Film Board, or Screen Ireland as it is now known, launched a scheme, POV, that was aimed at delivering on Screen Ireland's commitment to achieving a 50:50 gender parity in the Irish screen industries, both in front of and behind the camera. Screen Ireland offered enhanced production funding for female-initiated or female-driven feature films. Screen Ireland surpassed its 2018 equality budgeting targets of 5%, achieving an increase of 12% in the number of applications with female talent attached and an increase of 7% in the number of successful applications with female talent attached. Equality budgeting provides an objective way to track and measure success in this area.

A key lesson learned from participation in the pilot was that linking funding decisions to greater gender equality has paid dividends in encouraging greater equality in the film industry and provides a positive model to replicate in other policy areas. Screen Ireland is confident

that 2020 will build on the success of 2018 and 2019 in terms of the participation of women in screen productions. It is my strong belief that extending equality budgeting to other policy areas in my Department will incentivise and reward positive change towards greater equality, and I will seek to expand this success into areas in the Department.

To respond to the Deputy's third question, my Department is very cognisant of the recommendations contained in the OECD report on equality budgeting. While the report recognises that equality budgeting in Ireland is in its infancy, I am pleased my Department has participated in Ireland's initiative since its inception. In recent years my Department and its bodies have engaged in a number of initiatives to promote inclusion and equality in the context of gender participation in the arts and culture sector. This work has involved staff in the culture and corporate divisions and external staff in agencies under the Department's remit working together to achieve gender balance on State boards in the arts and culture sector, which I am pleased to say stands at 49%. The project focused on support for women at a senior level in arts organisations, support for promotion to the public of the work of women artists, leadership in dealing with accusations of abuse of power and sexual harassment in sections of the arts sector, and diversity and equality training for boards and senior management of State agencies in the sector. This work was the subject of a Civil Service excellence and innovation award in 2019.

My Department will continue to focus on equality when developing policy and will be proactive in ensuring that our strategic objectives underpin equality of opportunity, access and outcomes in the arts for everyone living Ireland.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Admhaím nach mbeidh seans nó am ag an Aire Stáit freagra a thabhairt ach b'fhéidir go mbeidh sé in ann freagra scríofa a thabhairt dom ar an gceist seo. Maidir leis an uimhir mhoil dhigiteach atá leagtha amach laistigh de na Meastacháin seo, le 31 luaite mar sprioc don bhliain seo, an bhfuilimid ar an treo ceart chun an sprioc sin a bhaint amach an bhliain seo? I bhfianaise an mhéadú ollmhór cinn oibre atá tar éis tarlú de bharr na géarchéime sláinte Covid-19 agus na gealltanais atá sa chlár Rialtais ó thaobh cinn oibre, an smaoineoidh an Roinn ar na spriocanna níos ilmhaoiní de na moil dhigiteacha a chur i láthair amach anseo agus muid ag pleanáil cén áit go díreach a bheidh na moil dhigiteacha seo lonnaithe? An bhfuilimid ag cinntiú go bhfuil treoirlínte ann ionas go mbeidh aidhmeanna ó thaobh spriocanna aistíochtaí agus pleanáil straitéise agus fadtéarmach dár gceantair Ghaeltachta bainte amach freisin? Mar shampla, an mbeidh siad cóngarach do sheirbhísí áitiúla cosúil le scoileanna nó siopaí, chomh maith le naisc chórais iompar poiblí laistigh den Ghaeltacht, agus ar aghaidh go seirbhísí Gaeilge go háirithe?

An Ceann Comhairle: Cé atá ag déileáil leis an gceist seo?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuig an Teachta.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tiocfaidh an tAire Stáit ar ais chuige. Glaoim ar an Teachta Ó Cuív.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Ar an gcéad dul síos, creidim go bhfuil sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go dtabharfaí tacaíocht do na healaíona agus go leanfar leis seo. Phléigh muid cheana, sa Dáil agus sa choiste um Covid, cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé go dtabharfaí tacaíocht dóibh siúd a chuireann imeachtaí móra poiblí ar fáil. Beidh siad ag teastáil arís nuair a shocraíonn rudaí síos agus ba thragóid é dá ligfí leis na healaíona i lár na géarchéime seo.

Tá ceisteanna sonracha gur mhaith liom a chur faoin nGaeilge, faoin nGaeltacht agus faoi na hoileáin. Bhí iontas orm nuair a roinneadh cúram na n-oileán agus cúram na Gaeltachta sa

mhéid is go bhfuil formhór dhaonra na n-oileán ina gcónaí ar oileáin Ghaeltachta. Táim ag caint faoi Chléire ó dheas, na hOileáin Árann, Árainn Mhór, Inis Bigil agus Toraigh le gan ach cuid acu a lua. Tá siad ar fad sa Ghaeltacht agus daonra mór orthu. An bhféadfadh an tAire a shoiléiriú cén cúraimí a bhaineann leis na hoileáin Ghaeltachta a bhfanfaidh lena Roinn agus cén cúraimí a aistreofar go dtí an Roinn nua ar a mbeidh freagracht as coimirce shóisialta, forbairt tuaithe agus oileáin? An bhféadfaí deimhniú a thabhairt go mbeidh na seirbhísí a aistreofar ar fáil trí Ghaeilge sa Roinn nua? Ó 1997 go dtí lá inniu, bhí an rud ar fad lonnaithe sna Forbacha agus bhí gach seirbhís ar fáil i dteanga an phobail, is é sin i mBéarla i gcás oileán taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht agus i nGaeilge i gcás oileán taobh istigh den Ghaeltacht.

Chomh maith leis sin, ba mhaith liom dhá cheist shonrach a chur ar an Aire Stáit. An bhfuil sé tiomanta brú ar aghaidh láithreach le forbairt na céibhe in Inis Oírr? Maródar duine éigin lá éigin, tá sé chomh contúirteach sin. Briseann na maidhmeanna ar chúl na céibhe thar an gcéibh agus scuabfar duine éigin isteach sa bhfarraige mura mbeidh muid cúramach. Bhí cead pleanála don chéibh sin sa mbliain 2008. Bhí sé le tosú nuair a bheidh an chéibh ar Inis Mór tógtha. Seo 12 bliain ó shin agus níl sé bogtha ar aghaidh cé go raibh an cead pleanála ann i gcónaí. Tá sé in am an chéibh sin a dhéanamh. Tá gá le forbairt bhreise a dhéanamh ar chéibh Inis Meáin freisin. Cé a bheidh freagrach as na céibheanna seo? An bhfuil sé i gceist dul ar aghaidh leis seo le dlús agus le teannas? Tá mórchuid airgid chaipitil ag teastáil sa nGaeltacht agus ar na hoileáin.

Maidir leis an straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge, foilsíodh é i mí na Nollag, 2010. Sin beagnach deich mbliana ó shin. Ní féidir a rá go ndearnadh mórán leis an bpolasaí sin a chur chun cinn seachas polasaí oideachais Ghaeltachta a fhoilsiú. Go deimhin féin, bunaithe ar an daonáireamh, is siar a bhí rudaí ag dul faoin dá Rialtas deiridh, tar éis go raibh rudaí ag dul ar aghaidh go breá go dtí 2011. De réir an daonáirimh, bhí méadú ar líon na nGaeilgeoirí laethúla, líon na ndaoine a raibh Gaeilge acu, agus ar líon na gcainteoirí Gaeilge laethúla taobh istigh den Ghaeltacht. An bhfuil sé i gceist ag an Rialtas seo an maoiniú a chur ar fáil leis an straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge, a réitigh an Rialtas seachas aon dream taobh amuigh agus a d'aontaigh an Rialtas i 2010, a chur i bhfeidhm go hiomlán agus go huile? Ní fiú leathdhéanamh a dhéanamh air seo má táimid leis an nGaeilge a láidriú agus a threisiú mar theanga labhartha sa bhaile i dtithe ar fud na tíre taobh istigh agus taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht.

An bhfuil muid chun treisiú an maoiniú d'Fhoras na Gaeilge? Arís tá gach rud stoptha le deich mbliana anuas agus níl aon dul chun cinn déanta.

Beidh sin mo cheist dheireanach chun go mbeidh am chun freagra a thabhairt dom ar chuid de na ceisteanna. An bhfuil sé i gceist bord tofa daonlathach a chur ar Údarás na Gaeltachta? Níl an socrú atá ann ceart ar chor ar bith mar is iad na comhairleoirí a roghnaíonn na baill. Níl ceangal dá laghad ag formhór na gcomhairleoirí atá ag déanamh an roghnaithe sin leis an nGaeltacht agus níl siad ag déanamh aon ionadaíocht uirthi. Tá a fhios ag an Aire Stáit é sin i Maigh Eo agus tá a fhios agam é sin i nGaillimh. D'oibrigh an socrú a bhí ann roimhe seo go maith. Bhí na hionadaithe tofa ag an bpobal féin. Mhol mé Bille ag pointe amháin agus foilsíodh Bille mar é. Mhol sé nach dtiocfaidh ar ais bord chomh mór leis an gceann a bhí ann cheana, cé gur oibrigh an bord sin i bhfad níos fearr ná na boird ó shin, ach a thabharfadh guth do chuile Ghaeltacht sa tír ar bord an údaráis fós féin agus a chinnteodh gurb iad muintir na Gaeltachta a bheadh i mbun a bhforbartha féin. Sin an bunéileamh a bhí ann nuair a bunaíodh an t-údarás.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Beidh orm teacht ar ais chuige

lena lán de na freagraí. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil daoine buartha faoi sheirbhísí ar na hoileáin ach táimid soiléir go mbeidh muid ag obair leis an Roinn nua agus go mbeidh seirbhísí ar fáil trí Ghaeilge. Tá sé sin an-tábhachtach dúinn, go háirithe, mar a dúirt an Teachta féin, toisc go bhfuil formhór na n-oileán ina n-oileáin Ghaeltachta. Beidh muid ag obair air sin. Bhí comhrá agam le hoifigigh mo Roinne féin faoi sin inné.

Bhí comhrá againn leis an Teachta faoi chúrsaí ar Inis Oírr. Bhí comhrá agam le hoifigigh na Roinne inné. Tá rudaí ar siúl maidir leis an gcé. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuig an Teachta leis an scéal ar fad. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais maidir le hInis Meáin. Níl eolas agam faoi sin.

Tuigim go raibh dul chun cinn faoin straitéis mall ar dtús agus tá an obair ag teacht le chéile anois. Tá pleananna teanga foilsithe agus tá daoine ag baint úsáide astu. Tá obair le déanamh agam ach tá rudaí ag teacht le chéile. Tuigim go gcaithfimid an straitéis a úsáid chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn níos fearr.

Tá sé sa chlár Rialtais go mbeidh athbhreithniú ar chúrsaí an údaráis. Beidh an cheist faoi thoghcháin dhíreacha go dtí bord an údaráis páirt den athbhreithniú sin. Ceapaim féin go bhfuil sé tábhachtach.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat. An bhfuil éinne eile ag ofráil? Ní dóigh liom go bhfuil. Tá sé beagnach in am dúinn dul ar aghaidh go dtí Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí ach níl chuile dhuine anseo go fóill. Ar mhaith leis an Aire bomaite amháin ag an deireadh chun rud éigin a rá? Gabh mo leithscéal. Ba mhaith leis an Teachta Tóibín labhairt.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: An féidir liom ceist ar bith a chur ar an Aire?

An Ceann Comhairle: Is féidir leis an Teachta é a chur ach ní dóigh liom go mbeidh an t-am aici freagra a thabhairt.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is ceist an-sciobtha í. Tá fadhb ann i gContae na Mí mar gheall ar thithíocht nua atá á tógáil i Ráth Chairn. Tá An Bord Pleanála tar éis iarratas pleanála a fhaomhadh a scriosfaidh Gaeltacht Ráth Chairn ina iomláine. Tá an fhadhb sin ag teacht chun cinn arís agus arís i ngach Gaeltachta eile. Caithfidh an Rialtas a bheith sásta srian a chur ar chead pleanála sa Ghaeltacht maidir leis an líon teaghlach atá sásta an Ghaeilge a labhairt atá ag dul isteach sna háiteanna sin. Tá Gaeltachtaí leithéidí Ráth Chairn, Baile Bhuirne agus an Rinn in aice le bailte móra thart timpeall na tíre.

12 o'clock

Ba cheart go mbeadh an Roinn ag eagrú córas éigin do dhaoine atá ag tógáil a chlainn le Gaeilge sna cathracha agus sna bailte móra chun go mbeidh siad in ann bogadh go dtí an Ghaeltacht agus a chlainn a thógáil le Gaeilge ansin, ach a gcuirfeadh an Ghaeilge san áit tosaigh, seachas an plean atá ann i Ráth Chairn ag an mbomaite a chuireann tógáil tithe san áit tosaigh.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta. Tiocfaidh an tAire ar ais chugat

Vote put and agreed to.

Minute's Silence to Mark 25th Anniversary of Srebrenica Genocide

An Ceann Comhairle: Before proceeding to Leaders' Questions, we will now, as agreed, pause to mark the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. It is almost inconceivable that

a short quarter of a century ago in Europe, approximately 8,000 men and boys were forcefully removed from their homes and loving families and executed, slaughtered in cold blood for who they were and for the faith they wished to express peacefully. We must never allow this dark episode in our Continent's history to fade and I commend the ongoing voluntary work of the Bosnia-Herzogovina Association of Ireland in this regard. We are fortunate to have many Bosnians living here in Ireland and actively involved with their communities, many of them personally touched or impacted by the events of 1995. Therefore, it is important we stand for a minute's silence to indicate that we remember them. Ar dheis Dé go raibh siad.

Members rose.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá bainc na tíre seo ag iarraidh na mílte euro de bhreis úis as a gcuid custaiméirí atá ag baint tairbhe as sos íocaíochta mar gheall ar Covid-19. Caithfí deireadh a chur leis seo agus caithfidh an Rialtas seasamh suas i gcoinne na mbanc agus cinntiú a dhéanamh de nach dtarlóidh seo níos mó. On 11 May, the current Tánaiste, the Minister for Finance and the then Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation held a meeting with the chief executives of the five main retail banks here, along with Mr. Brian Hayes, chief executive officer of the Banking & Payments Federation Ireland. At the meeting the matter was raised of additional interest being charged arising from mortgage payment breaks.

As the Tánaiste is well aware, on 18 March, the banking sector, along with the Minister for Finance, announced measures in response to Covid-19. Among them was a payment break option that could benefit customers who suffered income loss because of Covid-19. Under this measure, financially vulnerable customers could avail of a break, with no repayments due on either principal or interest for up to six months, with the repayments in question spread over the remainder of the term or the term extended by the length of the payment break.

This will come at a significant cost to the consumer. It is a Covid penalty. It is something I raised in the Dáil on 26 March, more than three months ago, and many times since. All 80,000 customers who have taken this payment break on their mortgages because of Covid-19 will face higher repayments and debts as a result. During the break, interest will continue to accrue and it will be recapitalised thereafter. This will hit some families harder than others.

We can take Permanent TSB as an example, a State-owned bank in which we have a 75% shareholding. Someone with a €250,000 mortgage with 30 years remaining on the term and who takes a six-month break will face an additional cost of more than €6,200. This means the customer will repay all the capital, as per the contract, all the interest and then be hit by a Covid penalty of €6,200. That is an example of a State-owned bank increasing the debt of an already financially vulnerable household.

This matter was raised at the meeting of 11 May, which I know because I have seen the minutes. At the meeting, the chief executive officer of Bank of Ireland claimed the charging of interest during these payment breaks was required by the regulator. The chief executive officer of AIB, in which the State is a majority shareholder, claimed that if interest was not charged, loans would go into default. Neither of these claims is true. No regulator required the banks to charge additional interest on mortgage breaks taken because of Covid-19.

The European Banking Authority, EBA, guidelines published in April indicate it is acceptable for payment breaks to be given without interest being charged. This is what allowed the Spanish Government to adopt legislation in March that would let those impacted by Covid-19 avail of a mortgage payment break on a primary residence without interest accruing. It is what allowed the Belgian Government and banks to adopt measures to ensure no interest would accrue for low-income borrowers availing of a mortgage break. KBC Bank has implemented such a process in Belgium for those customers.

How does the Tánaiste respond to the fact that he and other senior Ministers were misinformed by the retail banks and the Banking & Payments Federation Ireland on 11 May? Most important, what is the Government now going to do? Is it going to act and stop the overcharging of interest on these vulnerable 80,000 customers?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter and his ongoing interest and work on behalf of consumers and bank customers. As the Deputy and the rest of the House are aware, banks are offering mortgage holders and businesses loan breaks of between three and six months. This is very welcome as it gives people breathing space if they are struggling to pay their mortgage or business loan as a consequence of the pandemic. So far, 140,000 customers have availed of the payment break. Crucially, the loan is not reclassified as a non-performing loan, which is important for banks as it does not hit their capital and it is important for the customer because it does not affect their credit rating and the mortgage cannot be sold.

It is correct that interest accrues during the break period. The Deputy mentioned the meeting I had, as Taoiseach at the time, with the banking representatives. It was also attended by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, and the banking chief executives. It was on 11 May. I have not seen the minutes but I was at the meeting, whereas the Deputy was not. I know what happened. The banks never claimed they could not waive interest for the period and the representatives said it would be possible for them to waive interest for the period. Their issue was that somebody had to cover the cost of the payment break.

The Deputy knows how this works. Banks might borrow money on the market for ten years and turn that into a ten-year loan or mortgage. If the mortgage is not paid back for 10.5 years or 11 years, there would be an increased cost of borrowing for the banks and the question is who will cover it. Does it come from the bank profits? Ideally, it should do but banks will have no profits this year and may not have profits for a number of years because of what is happening to our economy. Should taxpayers cover the cost? I do not believe so as it would not be fair on taxpayers, many of whom do not even have a mortgage on a home or business. Should this fall to mortgage holders who are up to date with payments? I do not believe so. It must fall somewhere and currently that additional cost is falling on the customers availing of that payment break.

I was very blunt but clear with the bank representatives and I sought assurance from them that as a consequence of them extending these mortgages or loans, they should only be covering their costs. I said to them that it cannot be acceptable for them to get some sort of premium from this or make some sort of additional profit. I am not sure if it is in the meeting minutes but I remember saying to them that if it turns out that banks somehow make additional profit or premium from this, or if they simply make more money than they would have if the loan had been repaid as originally set out, I would see this action being as serious as the tracker mortgage scandal. I told them if that happened we would come down on them like a tonne of bricks.

What I must find out over the next couple of weeks as Tánaiste and Minister with responsibility for business is whether the banks will make any extra money from this in comparison to a position where loans had not been extended. That is a fundamental point.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The minutes are crystal clear. It is not just Bank of Ireland and AIB. This involves Permanent TSB. Unless the minute taker at the meeting has reflected what happened inaccurately - unless it is the polar opposite - there is a serious issue. It is written in black and white in those minutes that Bank of Ireland said this had to be done because the regulator had demanded it. AIB indicated the same and Permanent TSB argued it was the best option because the loans would go into default otherwise and a credit issue would arise for the customer. Unless the minute taker was at a different meeting, there is a serious issue.

More important is the naivety that the Tánaiste has just expressed. If the Tánaiste goes to Permanent TSB's website he will see it gives an example. If one has a loan of €250,000 for 30 years one will pay back all of the capital, all of the interest that would accrue normally in one's contract but also an additional €6,200. That is the Covid-19 penalty. Is the Tánaiste trying to suggest to me that the delay of payment by six months is costing Permanent TSB €6,200? There is no country in Europe that is faced with higher penalties as a result of this payment break than Ireland because of the high level of interest rates. The Tánaiste should do what the Spanish Government did on this matter. On 30 March it brought in legislation, which I have given to the Minister for Finance, that would prevent the banks profiteering on the back of a pandemic where the economy was shut down and people, unfortunately, are unable to pay their mortgages this time.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. We have had a look at what has been done in other countries around Europe and the way the Deputy has presented it in interviews and so on does not tell the full story. Different countries are doing different things but those are broadly in line with what is happening in Ireland. There are some hardship cases, for example, in Belgium which is treating it differently but it is not as the Deputy has presented it in the media. He has been quite misleading in his comments in that regard.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Spain, Germany and Cyprus.

The Tánaiste: The fundamental point for me, and for customers and people who have availed of a payment break, is whether the banks will make any extra money out of this. If somehow they make extra money out of it by making some sort of Covid premium or Covid bonus for the banks, that is not acceptable and we will deal with that but that is what has to be worked out because that is what matters. It appears to me, and this is what was explained in the meeting, is that if a loan is issued for ten years and it is extended to ten and a half years, 11 years or whatever, there is an additional cost to finance. Somebody has to bear that additional cost to finance and I do not believe it should be the general community, whether it is customers or taxpayers. If it is a case that the banks are making an extra profit out of this or are benefiting from it in some way, that would be a scandal in my view. If that is the way it turns out, we will deal with it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We live in a republic and in a republic we cherish our most vulnerable except, it seems, people with intellectual disabilities in a post-Covid scenario where the health services are coming back. Inclusion Ireland has produced a report and analysis of a survey of all families and users and the statistics are quite startling. Effectively, families are burned out and service users are totally regressing. There is no date for a return to services in the vast ma-

jority of scenarios and there is little or no respite.

Last night, I met Philip. He is 29. I spoke with him at length. He told me about all of his troubles. I spoke with his sister, Lauren. They spent their days painting, driving into the Retro cinema in Leopardstown, where he has been to so often he has got VIP status. They were cooking also. However, he has regressed terribly.

I spoke with Claire Hendrick, chair of Carmona, St. John of God's, in Glenageary, which represents 500 families. Her daughter, Leah, is 20. Leah wants a life again. Every day she is regressing because of the lack of day services. Life has no purpose for her. She is getting up every day to do nothing. It is devastating to watch. Most importantly, Zoom will never work for Leah.

I spoke to Breda. Her son, Darragh, is 28 and attends St. Michael's House. She said, "I'm on my last legs".

John Clarke, whose son Stephen is 20, says his health is deteriorating and that he is developing habits that are regressing his health. He believes he and thousands of others are part of a forgotten community.

I spoke to Nóirín Walsh about Pádraig, her son, who believes he is going inward and regressing totally.

I spoke to Kathleen Clifford about her son Alan. She asks why the funding for day services has been taken away and transferred to other services. She feels that is discriminatory.

I do not make these comments in a political way. These people are our people. They deserve, under the Republic, to be treated with dignity and respect. They deserve to have their services brought back. They are the most vulnerable and they are regressing. We are opening all pubs on 20 July. I look forward to going for a pint, as I am sure the Tánaiste does also, but by the next phase of reopening these service providers deserve to know when their services will be restored.

To get back to Philip, the Tánaiste has met Philip. He knows one of his parents quite well. He is watching now. He asked me to say the following:

> Please ask when can I get back to work. Please ask Leo, the boss, when I can see my friends again. I really want to know.

I ask the Tánaiste to please answer Philip.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. All of us in this House will have had many similar stories related to us by our constituents and many queries coming through our constituency offices which are very similar. As I believe everyone in the House will appreciate, many normal health, education and disability services had to be suspended, discontinued or curtailed during the pandemic period. The Government is working very hard to restore those service to what they should be and what they used to be, albeit within the health guidelines. That includes getting the schools open in full at the end of August. It includes getting colleges back. It includes restoring normal health services including health screening and includes getting services for people with disabilities back up and running. It is difficult. It is not always straightforward. It has to be done safely and in co-operation with staff and with the best medical advice but I can absolutely assure the Deputy that this is a very high priority for

Government and for the line Ministers in question. We will not waste any time or tolerate any delay in getting those services back up and running as soon as is possible.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will not turn this into a political issue. It is too sensitive. It was actually quite upsetting last night. I spent hours talking to people. I could have spent weeks talking to them. They are being let down. The families are run off their feet. Every one of the service users has regressed. The progress they have made has stopped. In many cases they now have new issues. I looked at the Minister's statement last night. In fairness, Ailbhe Conneely, on RTÉ's "Morning Ireland", told a very good story on it. The Minister of State's statement was too bland. She is delighted that services will begin in August. There is no plan in most cases to begin any services in August. I will tell the Tánaiste why that is the case. In order to do that they will need more staff. The staff that have gone to residential care will have to come back to day services. We will need many more staff. We will also need a capital budget to change the buildings, purchase new buildings or take over new buildings in order to adhere to social distancing requirements. I am asking the Tánaiste if we will get dates by 20 July for the thousands of families that are affected. Is there a capital budget in place to change all the buildings to make them fit for purpose to provide these services? Where will the Tánaiste get all the staff to ensure these services can commence again? Will those who are working in residential services be brought back in to provide the day care services?

The Tánaiste: I am reluctant to give the Deputy a date because if I give him one it is a date I want to stand over. The worst thing one can do in a circumstance like this, other than failing to provide the service, is to give a date that one cannot then deliver. That would raise people's hopes and they would be let down even more and I do not want to do that today. I can assure the House that this is a priority for the new Ministers involved in education, health and disability. Works will have to be carried out to some buildings and a capital budget will be provided for that but even then the work has to be done and that will take time. Also, staff will need to be redeployed back to services and, in some cases, new staff hired, and all of that will take some time. Not all services will be restored at the same time and on the same day. In some places they may come back sooner than in others. I totally understand, appreciate and agree with the sentiments expressed by the Deputy that families are at their wits' end and that people who had been making good progress are now regressing. That is of enormous concern to all of us. We are very keen to get those services back as soon as is possible.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the co-leader of the Social Democrats, Deputy Shortall.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: My question relates to the availability of the flu vaccine and the adequacy of the supplies we have now secured for this coming season. It is extraordinary to think that last year more than 4,300 people were hospitalised with seasonal flu. That is more than the total number of people who have been hospitalised with Covid to date.

While Ireland works to prevent a second wave of Covid, it is so important that we also put huge effort into ensuring that we reduce the impact of the flu in order to protect capacity in our health service. As the Tánaiste knows, capacity within our hospitals in terms of beds and staff is completely inadequate for normal times. In addition to this, we are faced with a situation whereby, as a result of the requirements relating to infection control and social distancing, it is estimated that between 25% and 50% of capacity within the public health service will be reduced. Furthermore, it is recommended that 20% of capacity be reserved for a second wave of Covid, which is quite likely at this point. That amounts to 60% of what is inadequate capacity being taken out of the system and leaving a mere 40% available. For that reason, it is absolutely

essential that huge emphasis is put on reducing the number of flu cases in the coming season. We need to take a lot of steps to encourage wider uptake. I recognise that the Department of Health has announced an expansion of the free scheme for people at risk who are below the age of 69 and for children between two and 12 years of age. As was the case last year, those over 70 are also entitled to the flu vaccine. We must also take steps to improve the level of uptake, particularly among at-risk groups but also among healthcare workers.

For all of these reasons it is essential that we have sufficient supplies of the flu vaccine. Can the Tánaiste confirm the quantity of vaccine that is available for this season and the number of doses this equates to? What is the estimated increase in demand expected to arise from various factors, such as a heightened awareness of the need for vaccination and a greater sense of the importance of protecting one's own health and the need to avoid unnecessary hospitalisation? Last year, 1.1 million flu vaccines were delivered in Ireland. Can the Tánaiste provide an assurance that there are sufficient quantities of the vaccine available to cope with demand this year?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue. She does so at a good time because this is going to be really important as we head into the winter. We are very closely watching what is happening in the southern hemisphere, where countries are now entering the winter flu season. We need to watch what happens there in order to inform what we do here. Everyone knows that the flu comes every winter. What many people probably do not know is that every year somewhere between 500 and 1,500 lives are lost or shortened as a consequence of the flu. It tends to hit particularly badly in nursing homes and residential settings. It affects the elderly and the ill particularly badly and has an impact on our hospitals. Part of the reason for overcrowding, which is a year-round phenomenon, getting much worse in the winter is the flu and other seasonal illnesses.

What we are planning for the winter of 2020-21 is a quantum leap in our response to flu. We can do better in terms of suppressing the flu virus than we have done in previous years, even if there was no Covid. The fact that we have Covid creates the possibility of a second wave happening at the same time as a bad flu season, which would be very serious indeed. We need to act now to reduce the risk of that. This involves making sure that as many people over 70 and healthcare workers as possible have the vaccine this year. For the first time in a long time, perhaps for the first time ever in Ireland, we will be extending the vaccine to children below the age of 12, as well as more at-risk groups.

To answer the Deputy's question, the extension will permit all of those in at-risk groups who are aged six months or older and all healthcare workers to avail of the vaccine free of charge. The extension will also provide access to the vaccine for children aged from two to 12 years, inclusive. That will involve the nasal drop version of the vaccine rather than an injection. The HSE has placed orders for 1.35 million doses of the quadrivalent influenza vaccine for the forthcoming winter. This will be sufficient for a 90% uptake among at-risk groups, including healthcare workers. That is a much higher uptake than we would have had in the past. In addition to those 1.35 million doses, 600,000 doses of the nasal drop vaccine for children have been ordered. That would provide for a 75% uptake among children.

To give the Deputy an indication of what the position was like in previous years, the uptake among people over 65 was 68.5%. We need to do much better than that. There must be a big campaign around this. For healthcare workers in hospitals, the rate of uptake was just over 50%. In the community, it was less than 50%. That is a really big problem. We are planning for an uptake of 75% among children. Typically, in countries that provide the flu vaccine for

kids, the rate of uptake is in the region of 50%. The rate in the UK is around that mark and in Finland it is 20%. We will have enough on our plate in order to do better than any other country. We should aim to do better than any other country because this will be a real risk in the next few months.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I thank the Tánaiste. I welcome the fact that there will be a promotional campaign to improve uptake. That is especially important among healthcare workers, as the Tánaiste stated. He referred to a quantum leap, which would be very welcome. Can he clarify the figures? Leaving aside the nasal drop doses for children, there will be 1.35 million doses of the quadrivalent vaccine. I understand that last year the figure was between 1.1 million and 1.2 million. This does not seem to cater for a significant increase from last year's numbers. Again, what is the Government's estimate of the demand for doses of the vaccine in the coming flu season? The Tánaiste said that the HSE has placed orders. That is not quite the same as securing additional supplies. Can he assure us that sufficient supplies will be secured before the start of the flu season?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. The figures I have been given refer to 1.35 million doses of the quadrivalent vaccine. That will be sufficient for a 90% uptake among at-risk groups, including healthcare workers. There are 600,000 doses for children between two and 12 years of age, which equates to a rate of 75%. I will double-check those figures.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What is the estimate of the demand?

The Tánaiste: I do not know if there is an estimate for demand, but there is enough to provide for a 90% uptake.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Have the additional doses been secured?

The Tánaiste: No.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Is the Tánaiste confident that they will be secured and will be available before the onset of the flu season?

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy will know, the flu vaccine for the northern hemisphere is formulated based on what the flu looks like in the southern hemisphere, because it starts there and spreads to the northern hemisphere. It may be the case - I might be wrong - but I suspect that the vaccine has not yet been formulated, let alone produced. It would not, therefore, be possible for us to have secured a vaccine that has not yet been produced. However, we are aware that there will be increased demand this year and that other countries will be looking to get the vaccine. I am confident that we will be able to secure those doses. The Deputy is right to raise the question, however, because we need to make sure that we do.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The measure of a country is how it values its vulnerable. This can be ascertained by how we treat the people who look after the most vulnerable. Older people in nursing homes have been treated abysmally during the lockdown. They have been treated as an afterthought. When decisions were made, they had disastrous consequences for them. As a result, Ireland has one of the highest rates of nursing home deaths in the world. Despite this, there has absolutely no commitment to a full public investigation from this new Government. Pubs and restaurants are open for business but community facilities for people with disabilities are not open. As a result of the lack of direction on social distancing, many people with disabilities who have been at home since March are unlikely to be able to use services until the end

of August at the earliest.

The childcare sector, which is charged with the development and care of the next generation of Irish people, is in chaos. This sector has been under phenomenal pressure in recent years, with tens of thousands of people having to take to the streets. Shockingly, I have received information from the sector which indicates that 180 providers have closed their doors since the start of the pandemic. As many as 10% of childcare providers have shut down due to the lack of support. These closures are accelerating. In the past week alone it has been reported that 55 childcare providers have closed. My office spoke to two providers on the telephone yesterday and in the time between those two calls, another three providers had closed. I was told this morning that seven childcare providers in Dublin have closed in the past 24 hours.

The childcare sector is dying on its feet, yet the Government is sitting on its hands. I have spoken to representatives of the Federation of Early Childhood Providers and they are not just charging the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with wilful neglect of the sector; they are accusing it of gross mistreatment of childcare providers. The federation informed me that it has set up a mental health team with two doctors to deal with the level of trauma and upset that has been caused to its members by the Department and the Minister. I am asking the Tánaiste to intervene urgently to ensure childcare services have the necessary supports, that we do not see further closures of these services in the coming weeks, and to make sure there is a service for parents in the second half of the year.

The Tánaiste: In regard to the Deputy's earlier remarks, we all need to be very careful and responsible in how we use international comparative data relating to Covid. We all need to take the information we see on websites like Worldometer for what it is, which is not a like-for-like comparison between countries. Every country is at a different stage in this pandemic. Things look very different in Israel and Portugal today from how they looked a few months ago, and the same applies in other parts of the world. Countries that thought they had eliminated the virus, such as New Zealand, are now seeing new cases every single day. Different countries also count the numbers differently. One thing we always did in Ireland, from day one, was to count cases in care homes. Other countries did not do that. We counted suspected cases where there was not a laboratory test confirming the patient had Covid. Other countries did not do that. We did not discount people who had underlying conditions, as other countries did. If somebody with stage 4 cancer in a nursing home was suspected of having Covid but did not test positive for it, we included him or her in the total. Other countries did not include such cases. We need to be responsible in the way we use language and these types of data. It is not responsible to misuse data.

On the issue of childcare, we are all aware that childcare facilities often close in the summer period of July and August and things are different from how they are in September and October. We want to make sure the sector is fully up and running for September and October in order to meet demand. Data are being collected on reopenings and that information will be available for the period from Tuesday, 7 July, with a weekly update until early September. In a normal year, approximately 40% of childcare providers close over the summer. A total of 60% of the existing services have indicated that they will be reopening by September, and this portion may rise. The Government has provided a reopening package of €75 million, which is being made available through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and other Government supports for the sector are running through June, July and August. Since reopening, 1,000 services have registered 11,876 children on the Department-funded programmes, and registrations remain open until the end of the programme year. There have been 717 applications for a reopening support

payment, with an approximate value of €3 million. In addition, there have been applications for capital grants totalling €7 million.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The number of Covid deaths in nursing homes in this country is absolutely shocking and it is wrong. I am always amazed that when a Government is confronted with these figures, the answer is that it counts those deaths better than any other country is counting them. How the deaths are counted is not something to be proud of. Preventing them is the important issue.

Regarding childcare services, the closures in the sector are complete, full-time closures. The grants that have been provided add up to about €2,500 for reopening, but childcare providers are dealing with overheads like electricity, insurance, rents and wages. They have fewer children coming in for fewer hours. Most of the sole traders operating in the sector are working 70 hours per week under an avalanche of administration and are getting no income at all. Their debts are building up at a rate never seen before and no level of future trading will get them out of that debt. This is a crisis unlike what we have seen any other summer and it needs a different response. The previous Minister for Children and Youth Affairs stated that €750 million would be given to the sector but that money has not materialised. Key stakeholders have been locked out of decision making by the Departments. There needs to be a proper injection of support and a lifeline given to the childcare sector in order to protect it.

The Tánaiste: I was involved in the country's response to Covid from day 1. I was at all the meetings where the big decisions were made and I can assure everyone in this House that our overriding concern always was to reduce the number of people who got infected and to minimise the number of deaths in all settings, whether in the community, in care homes or in hospitals. We know now from the data on excess deaths provided by the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, that we overestimated significantly the number of excess deaths in Ireland. The reason we counted the way we did was that we thought it the right thing to do in terms of saving lives to overcount, because we could then contact-trace suspected cases, not just confirmed cases, which other countries did not do. The excess death figures produced by HIQA tell us a lot, including that we may be one of the few countries significantly revising down the number of deaths during the pandemic period. For some people, they saw the crisis as some sort of competition as to where they were in a league table. There was really hateful and nasty stuff from people who thought it was a sort of competition between countries. When they saw Ireland high up on a league table, they almost took a perverse pleasure in it because it was an opportunity to have a go at the Government, Dr. Holohan or whomever. I deplore that kind of attitude and those kinds of people, I must say, because they did nothing at all to help us when it came to fighting Covid.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

An Ceann Comhairle: Thirty Deputies have indicated, which gives one minute per question. If Members stick to that, we will get through as many speakers as possible.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste said to me earlier that representatives of the banks told him at the meeting on 11 May, despite what the official minutes claim, that they could waive interest on mortgages during the payment break. Can he explain why his former colleague, Brian Hayes, who is now the chief lobbyist for the banks, has defended the banks' comments in the minutes where they state that they had to charge interest because the regulator

asked them to do so? Mr. Hayes's defence was that the rules only changed on Tuesday. Was Brian Hayes in a different meeting with the minute taker and why are there are so many different versions of the Government's meeting with the banks? Will the Tánaiste clarify his earlier comments in this regard, because they simply do not stack up?

The Tánaiste: As I said to the Deputy earlier, I have not seen the minutes and I am not a spokesperson for Brian Hayes. I related to the Deputy my recollection of the meeting and I related to him what I think is the most important thing here, namely, that the banks should not think that they can in any way make an extra profit or get some type of bonus or premium out of the fact that some people are getting a payment break or loan break on their mortgage. That is the key point in all of this. The banks are claiming that by extending loans by six months or a year, there is an additional cost to them and that cost has to be covered by those who benefit from that payment break, rather than its being passed on to other people or taken out of profits that do not exist any more. However, if it is the case that they misled us and that somehow the banks or other financial institutions are going to make a bonus out of this or an additional profit over and above what they would have made anyway, then that, in my view, is a very serious matter.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Under the programme for Government, there is a commitment to establish a sectoral task force on the new national economic plan. It is a very sad reflection of the programme for Government that there is literally nothing in it on workers' rights. An issue of deep concern, as the Tánaiste is well aware because it is now his area of responsibility, is the High Court judgment in regard to sectoral employment orders. We in the Labour Party have produced a Bill to reinstate those orders for the electrical, construction and mechanical engineering sectors. The Tánaiste is the Minister with responsibility in this area. There are thousands of workers dependent on sectoral orders, which were introduced by our colleague, the then Minister of State, Deputy Nash, when the Tánaiste was a Minister alongside me in government. The general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Patricia King, has written to the Tánaiste on this issue. What is he proposing to do about it? Will he introduce new legislation or appeal the judgment? The Tánaiste should remember that this situation is creating a dangerous precedent. Thousands of workers are depending on him to ensure that they are protected.

The Tánaiste: This is a very important issue for those whose pay and terms and conditions are governed by sectoral employment orders, including electrical contractors, construction workers, some engineers and contract cleaners. I have considered the matter with the Minister of State, Deputy English, and sought the advice of the Attorney General. I can confirm to the House that it is our intention to appeal the judgment to the Supreme Court. We have until 14 July to make that appeal and will be making it. I wish to send a clear message from this House to all affected workers and their employers that until the case is heard by the Supreme Court and a judgment is made, there must be no unilateral diminution of the workers' terms and conditions by any employer. It is important that that is known.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I echo some of the sentiments expressed by Deputies regarding disability services. The Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016, which lapsed with the dissolution of the previous Dáil, aimed to give further effect to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in areas such as assisted decision making and voting and with regard to the National Disability Authority. The programme for Government commits to strengthening rights through the convention as well as improving support and diagnostic services. In light of the importance of a rights-based approach being taken to address immediately the ongoing

disservice done towards people with disabilities, when will the legislation be advanced? Will the Tánaiste assure the House that the Government will do everything in its power to implement the convention as soon as possible?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I know she will acknowledge that this is a new Government and we are all still finding our feet. The Government, working with the Business Committee and the relevant legislative committee, should be able to clarify in the coming weeks which Bills will be brought forward. The Bill to which she referred will form part of that consideration.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am glad to hear that the Government will appeal the sectoral employment order. It seems to me that there are very strong grounds for that appeal which, as was stated, will affect thousands of construction workers and, potentially, hundreds of thousands of other workers in sectors where sectoral employment orders, SEOs, or sectoral agreements maintain some kind of minimum standard of pay and conditions. The Tánaiste stated that people should not try to breach those orders or agreements prior to the appeal. It is important that that sentiment be enforced because I have already heard reports from construction workers that some contractors are taking advantage of the striking down of the order and are essentially trying to undercut the minimum rates. It is important that the orders are enforced. Construction workers will be protesting outside the headquarters of the Construction Industry Federation at 12.30 tomorrow to highlight their significant concern on this matter. Much as I welcome the Tánaiste's comments, how will the orders be enforced? Will the Government, on a parallel track, consider plan B legislation that will deal with possible loopholes to ensure that, in the event of the appeal failing, we will immediately have something in place to ensure that pay and conditions and minimum rates can be set through orders and by actions of the Dáil?

The Tánaiste: As I understand it, the pay and conditions of existing workers in these sectors cannot be diminished unilaterally by their employers. As such, the orders stand until such time as the Supreme Court hears the appeal and adjudicates on them. Obviously, labour rights are enforced in the normal way and should be enforced fully. As is often the case when the Government is appealing a decision of the High Court, work will be taking place in the background on a plan B, as the Deputy described it. However, that can never be done perfectly because we cannot predict the outcome of the Supreme Court case or know what loopholes may be identified. To answer the Deputy's question in short, of course work will be done on contingencies that might arise from a judgment of the Supreme Court, but none of us know for sure what that judgment will be.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Age Action is a wonderful organisation. In response to the Covid crisis, it developed a hardship fund for older people throughout the country who are finding it impossible to make ends meet. Some 21,000 older people applied to the fund, but there was only enough money for 1,000 grants. It is interesting that Fine Gael Deputies and councillors throughout the country tweeted about the fund or posted about it on Facebook. Some took out adverts in their local paper and put the fund next to their photograph. However, it is not a State-backed fund, which is why it ran out of money so quickly. The number of applications to the fund underlines that there is no flexibility in the pockets of those on the State pension. Many of them have been driven into hardship by the Covid crisis. There is a mismatch between the resources that have been allocated and the need that exists among older people. I ask the Tánaiste to step in and ensure the Government contributes to the fund to make certain that the 21,000 older people who applied to it will receive money to help them through the current situation.

The Tánaiste: I had the privilege of visiting Age Action a few months ago, in the early phase of the pandemic, to see the work it does and to thank its staff personally for their work. I think State funding was provided to the fund, but I will have to double-check that. If my recollection is correct, State funding was provided. The Government can certainly give consideration to whether additional funding could be provided. I would have to discuss the matter with the Minister responsible.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Schoolchildren have been severely affected by the Covid crisis. They are now on holidays and looking forward to going back to school at the end of August. Teachers and boards of management are doing their best to get that organised. However, there are difficulties with regard to the school bus transport system. Contractors who are with Bus Éireann are getting a 50% payment, which may help or enable that cohort to provide a service in rural Ireland. However, independent providers, those operating outside the auspices of Bus Éireann and whose services are often organised by parents or parents' councils, are vital to ensuring that children in their areas are brought to school. They will not be there to bring children to school in September because they have not received a penny from any fund. They have been refused assistance and they have been neglected. They provide a tremendous service. They are obliged to have their buses impeccable and organised and they meet that obligation. However, they will not be able to sustain the losses they have incurred. They have not received any income since schools closed. Will they be able to bring children to school in September? Will families be left without a means of getting children to school? This is a significant issue that affects all parts of the country, not just Tipperary.

The Tánaiste: The Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Foley, and her team are working on this issue. We wish to ensure that all children return to school in August and that they have a means of getting there, which of course involves the provision of school transport. There will be real difficulties because capacity on school transport may be considerably reduced compared with previous years. The Minister and her team have a few weeks to get this right. They are working on it.

Deputy Michael Collins: Hotels, cafés, restaurants and pubs are the main contributors to the tourism industry and they are massively struggling. The decision by the previous Government, supported by Fianna Fáil, to increase the VAT rate from 9% to 13.5% was a significant mistake that damaged many businesses in rural Ireland. Several restaurants, pubs and other facilities in west Cork and elsewhere in rural Ireland closed prior to Covid as a result of the VAT increase. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil had no concept of the damage they were doing to the tourist industry in rural Ireland. They refused to listen. The damage will take a long time to reverse. Will the 13.5% VAT rate on tourism be reduced to zero? If that is not possible, will it at least be reduced to 5%? Similarly, the 23% VAT rate on alcohol should be reduced to 5% to provide a lifeline for struggling pubs and the tourism industry. That must be done immediately.

The Tánaiste: I think the Deputy indulged in some selective history-making there. The VAT rate on tourism and hospitality was 13.5% for a very long time and was reduced to 9% by a Fine Gael-led Government on a temporary basis to get the tourism and hospitality sector going again. In the year in which tourism reached a record high, it reverted to the previous rate of 13.5%. Those are the facts.

We are working on the July stimulus package and considering all matters. We know that the tourism and hospitality sector, including hotels and restaurants around the country, have been badly hit by this crisis. In many ways, it was the sector that was hit first and worst and

will be affected for the longest, along with arts, entertainment and leisure. No decisions have been made yet but we are considering actions that will assist that sector to reopen, stay open and return to profit.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Page 84 of the programme for Government refers to broadband. Never has it been more evident than during Covid how important it is to roll out the national broadband plan. The programme for Government refers to facilitating remote working and innovation opportunities. In large areas of north-west Meath in my Meath West constituency, including Oldcastle, Athboy, Ballivor, Kildalkey, Delvin, Collinstown and Castlepollard, broadband is very poor, with little or no access. This makes it nearly impossible for local businesses to trade or conduct their day-to-day business. It is impossible for people to work from home. Leaving certificate students found it nearly impossible to do their school work during Covid. The national broadband plan was signed in April 2017 with a guide of seven years. We are nearly halfway through this plan and we have no definitive timeline for when it will be implemented in all rural areas of the country. Will the roll-out plan begin any time soon in Meath West? Businesses are moving out of rural Ireland because of this.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the question. The contract for the national broadband plan was signed last year. I was in a rural part of west Wicklow to sign it. I remember my Secretary General saying to me at the time that I had got a lot of abuse about it and there had been a lot of controversy, but I would never regret signing the contract. This national broadband plan will bring high-speed broadband to more than 1 million people in 500,000 premises across rural Ireland, including every home, farm and business. It will cover about 100,000 premises each year, starting next year. It will take seven years to do it but we will try to do it quicker if at all possible. The Deputy's party was wrong to oppose it. Sinn Féin opposed it, so do not pretend that it was in favour of bringing broadband to rural areas. It was against it and came up with no other alternative.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It was announced in the budget that the income limits for medical card eligibility for people over 70 would be increased to €550 from €500 for single people and to €1,050 from €900 for couples. Will the Tánaiste tell me when legislative effect will be given to this decision? It was meant to be introduced in July and we are already in July.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. Primary legislation is required to change those income limits upwards for people over 70 and also to provide for the expansion of free general practitioner care to children up to the age of 12. That legislation has been approved by Cabinet. It is intended to take it through the Dáil and Seanad before the recess, to get it done this month. That will allow the Minister for Health to bring those changes related to people over 70 into effect later in the year. It is more complicated for children and will take a bit longer, requiring discussion with general practitioners.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The programme for Government contains a promise to tackle the scourge of scramblers and quad bikes. This issue is not only anti-social but there is also a significant criminal element involved. These vehicles wreck our community, open spaces and parks. The Tánaiste will know some of the ones I will mention, which have been scourged over the last month, including Hartstown Park, Royal Canal Park in Ashtown, Ladyswell Park, Hazelbury Park, Littlepace, and Corduff park and grove. Those are just some of the areas about which people have been in contact with me about quad bikes and scramblers. Unfortunately, when these bikes come out, parents take their children in and they cannot go out to play. I also raise the deep frustration of gardaí who tell me they feel hamstrung not only by the legislation

but also by Garda instructions not to challenge these people when they are out and about. The British police forces have a completely different attitude to this. I have seen actions that they have taken about this in the last months, because it has become such a significant problem. Will the Tánaiste indicate a timeline for the promised legislation to tackle this scourge in our communities?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I agree that this is a problem in our shared constituency and indeed in other parts of the country. We are working on the legislative schedule. It will not be possible to bring in legislation on that matter in July but we are working towards the possibility of having that legislation for the autumn session.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The front page of the *Irish Farmers' Journal* today features an article stating that the Irish Farmers Association is seeking evidence of uncompetitive practices in the meat processing sector. Almost anybody who looks at this objectively will know that cartel-like practices are being engaged in. It should not be left up to a farmers' organisation to investigate these matters. The people who should be doing this are in the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, which has said that it will not investigate because it does not have evidence. That is crazy because clearly one needs an investigation to gather evidence. Will the Government ascertain whether there is a need for additional legislative powers for the CCPC to conduct such an investigation or if it would be better for another body to be tasked with that role? Does the Tánaiste agree that the concerns raised with regard to the meat processing sector are so grave and numerous that it is now time for an independent beef regulator to be legislated for?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We have barely ten minutes left. I ask Members to be as brief as possible because it is not possible to get through the numbers on the list.

The Tánaiste: The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, formerly the Competition Authority, falls under my Department. I am still finding my way around the brief in the Department so the Deputy will forgive me if I am incorrect in saying that I think there was a competition investigation carried out. Perhaps it was years ago and it did not have adverse findings. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission acts on complaints, which have to be backed up by evidence, as is the case for most things. I will check into it further and get back to the Deputy with a better reply than that.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I raise the issue of University Hospital Limerick where, as the Tánaiste is aware, 14,000 people lingered on trolleys last year. The position did not get any better in 2020. We saw increases of 25% in January and 32% in February. The figure increased each day in March until Covid arrived and people stopped attending the emergency department in huge numbers for a variety of reasons for the rest of March, April and May. Unfortunately, in July, the numbers are increasing again. There are already 266 people on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick. There was a plan to build three separate units, with a 24-bed unit, a 60-bed unit and a 96-bed unit. Will the Tánaiste advise us when these units will be operational? Has the HSE spoken to staff in the units to ensure they are not just built but staffed and operational?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I will ask the Minister for Health to provide him with an accurate update about the progress of the projects to expand capacity in University Hospital Limerick in correspondence.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: The programme for Government contains a commitment to consider the report on the future of the western rail corridor and to take appropriate action. That report was commissioned by Irish Rail and carried out by EY-DKM. It was assessed again by Irish Rail after the report was produced and assessed by officials in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. It has been resting on the desk of the former Minister, Shane Ross, since last October. This infrastructure is critical to the development of the western region in the future. It has been lying idle for 40 years.

1 o'clock

We urgently need to see the report so we can act on its findings and bring this infrastructure back into use again.

The Tánaiste: I guess that report is now lying on the desk of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I am sure he will want to bring it to Government and make it public as soon as is feasible. I will get my office to check in with his after this.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: It is simply unacceptable that banks are halting lending to those in receipt of the wage subsidy scheme and the pandemic unemployment payment. Reports also that extra scrutiny will be applied to so-called high-risk workers certainly do not help matters. At a time when all sectors of society are pulling together to aid our recovery from the pandemic, the banks' actions are simply unacceptable. We need to encourage and incentivise investment post Covid to stimulate our now fragile economy. The banks owe this to the public. We bailed them out in the recent past and they must now step up to treat customers fairly. How does the Government intend to deal with this decision? What legislation, if any, will be introduced to aid it?

The Tánaiste: The role of the banking sector, credit unions and other non-bank lenders in our economy and society is to provide credit in the form of mortgages to people who want to buy a home, credit to businesses, and loans to people who need them. However, they also need to be prudent. Banks and lenders need to know the money will be repaid or at least in almost all cases the money is repaid. Banks and other lenders need to be prudent in that regard because if they make loans that are not repaid, there are serious consequences for everyone else in society. We need to bear that in mind. No legislation is proposed.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The programme for Government makes a commitment to ensure no homes are flooded and that flood relief measures are put in place throughout the country. During the recent heavy rain, we had incidents of very serious flooding in north Leitrim, north Sligo and other areas. Last Monday I visited a house outside Dromahair which was under 2 ft of water the day before. The furniture and other belongings were thrown out outside. A lady who was driving when that flooding happened had to get out of her car and wade waist deep through water. She was fortunate because if she had gone off the road there could have been a tragedy. That is what is awaiting some of these areas if flood relief measures are not put in place immediately.

The River Bonet, which goes from Manorhamilton right through Dromahair, is in serious need of drainage works. Drainage works are also needed in other areas across north Sligo and north Leitrim. The Office of Public Works, which has responsibility for this, has come out and looked at all of this. It has published reports, but very little work has been done. The local authorities, which in some instances have responsibility, get very little funding for that. The Government needs to make a commitment not to have more engineers' reports but to have actual work done because that is what will save people's lives and prevent their homes from flooding.

The Tánaiste: I am aware of the mudslide that occurred in Leitrim and the flooding that occurred in Wexford a few weeks ago. My sympathies go out to the communities and the people who were affected. I want them to know that Government is here to help them through the various schemes we offer, particularly through the Red Cross. Flood works are now a matter for the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan. I will ask him to correspond with the Deputy on those flood works. I will let the Minister of State know that the Deputy raised it in the Dáil today.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Saturday will mark the fourth anniversary of the publication of the Cassells report. The commitments in that report have not yet been implemented and are now beyond urgent. Many families are being pushed into poverty because they are excluded from the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grants. With the Covid crisis, will the Government assess SUSI to allow for the changes in families' financial circumstances so that they are not based on last year's figures. This especially affects the self-employed. A widow bringing up three children has just had her business closed down. She is only on half a grant. Her Covid payment has now been reduced to €203 a week. Will that woman and people like her get full access to SUSI?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy has raised a very relevant question. Many people's financial circumstances are dramatically different now from what they were last year. People who previously would not have qualified for medical cards now will. People who do not qualify for SUSI grants now probably should. Obviously budgets are limited, notwithstanding the extent of borrowing that is happening. However, it is a matter for the Minister for Education and Skills, and I will let her know that the Deputy raised it here today. We will see if there is anything we can do about it. It may be now be a matter for the Minister with responsibility for higher education. I will have to double-check that.

Deputy Pat Buckley: Is the Tánaiste aware of the British independent medicines and medical devices safety review which was published earlier this month? The review sets out nine major recommendations to address the serious medical deficiencies and anguish caused to patients who received pelvic mesh implants. Will the Government do the same or something similar to address the serious issue in this country?

Deputy David Cullinane: I know the Tánaiste is aware of this issue because it was raised with him several times when he was Taoiseach. A number of different drugs were examined here: Primodos, sodium valproate and pelvic mesh. When in opposition, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, called for an independent inquiry into these three medical interventions. We now have a report from Britain. The Government needs to establish an expert panel to look at that report so that we do not need to reinvent the wheel. These women want action. A number of interventions that can be made should be made by the Government very quickly. Will the Government establish an expert panel to look at the UK report and make recommendations so that these women can get justice?

The Tánaiste: I am aware of the issue. I am not aware of the specific report although I did see the news from the UK yesterday. It is my view that Irish women who had an operation involving this mesh and experienced very severe pain and life-changing difficulties as a result should certainly be treated no less favourably in Ireland than they are being treated across the water in Britain. I am sure the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, will give urgent attention to the matter.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Unfortunately, the clock has caught up

with us and there are still 14 Members on the list. I will recommend them to the Ceann Comhairle for favourable consideration on the next occasion, but there is no guarantee.

Sitting suspended at 1.08 p.m. and resumed at 1.50 p.m.

Estimates for Public Services 2020 (Resumed)

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade(Deputy Simon Coveney): I move the following Revised Estimates:

Vote 27 — International Co-operation (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €549,702,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020,for certain Official Development Assistance,including certain grants, and for contributions to certain International Organisations involved in Development Assistance and for salaries and expenses in connection therewith.

Vote 28 — Foreign Affairs and Trade (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €225,860,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020,for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade,and for certain services administered by that Office, including grants and contributions to International Organisations.

The first thing I would like to do, before addressing the Revised Estimates, is to thank the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Helen McEntee, and former Minister of State, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, for the work that they did in their briefs within my Department for the past number of years. Deputy McEntee made an extraordinary contribution to European affairs, positioning Ireland in a safe space in the context of the Brexit challenges that we faced and working to build solidarity across the European Union. Deputy Cannon did extraordinary work with our diaspora and contributed to an ambitious development of our development assistance programmes. Both Deputies will be missed in the Department.

I welcome the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, Deputy Thomas Byrne, to his new portfolio. He will do an excellent job. I also welcome the Minister of State with responsibility for overseas development aid and diaspora, Deputy Colm Brophy. There is a considerable amount of work to do in that area and I will refer to some of that in my contribution. I am delighted to have both those Ministers of State working with me in the Department.

I am seeking the House's approval for the Revised Estimates for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Vote 28, and international co-operation, Vote 27. The Department's spending in 2020 is allocated across six expenditure programmes which correspond to the high-level goals set out in the Department's statement of strategy 2017-20. Five of these programmes are managed through Vote 28, the expenditure framework for foreign affairs and trade, and the remaining programme is managed through Vote 27, the framework for international co-operation.

For 2020, the overall gross Estimates of the foreign affairs and trade group of votes, Vote 27 and Vote 28, is €821 million, compared with €802 million in 2019, an overall increase of €18.9

million or 2.4%. I will focus first on Vote 27, international co-operation.

Our forefathers said that we live in each other's shadows. That truth has been brought home in recent months as we have learned to live and cope with the shadow cast by Covid-19. The virus has reminded us of our interconnectedness with others, both at home and abroad. In communities across Ireland, we have seen acts of neighbourly generosity that have helped to keep us all safe. In our global community, our actions help protect and mind each other through the health crisis and the associated economic and social strains that have followed. We know that unless we do this, there will be a recurrence of Covid-19. Unless and until the disease has been suppressed, or even better eradicated, not just at home or abroad, the risk will be sustained.

Ireland's well-regarded official international development programme is the vehicle for much of our international response to Covid-19. This is a whole-of-Government effort. Almost €838 million has been allocated, an increase of €21 million to the 2019 allocation. It is the sixth consecutive year of an increase in the allocation for international development. Approximately 70% of this allocation for international development is managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade under Vote 27. Nearly €550 million has been allocated to Vote 27 this year.

The sustainable development goals provide the overarching framework for Irish Aid's work. Those goals require us to leave no one behind and, importantly, to focus on reaching the furthest behind first. The furthest behind are at the heart of what we do. The OECD peer review of Irish Aid, published in May, highlighted the priority which Ireland attaches to targeting the least developed countries, stating that we walked the talk. Importantly, the OECD recognised that this clear focus enables Ireland, as a relatively small donor, to exercise leadership and make a visible difference.

We saw the intangible outworking of that commitment to making a difference last month when Ireland was elected to the UN Security Council for two years, beginning next January. The United Nations system is a key partner for Irish Aid. It is at the heart of the global response to Covid-19. To date, Ireland has provided over €118 million in fresh, repurposed and fast-tracked funding to this global effort. We also carry the torch of multilateralism through our core membership of the European Union, through which a large volume of Irish international development assistance is channelled. Working with others allows us to leverage economies of scale. The €51 million which my Department provides contributes to Team Europe's approach. This has seen EU institutions and member states work closely together in their Covid-19 responses to mobilise over €36 billion since the pandemic was declared. This is to provide quick, effective and coherent support to regions and countries most affected by the virus. Our support to date includes engaging with the World Health Organization, which is, in particular, assisting countries with weaker health systems but we also draw on its expertise in Ireland. Irish funding to the WHO has quadruped this year to over €16 million. Given the strain on the humanitarian system and the need for the system to prepare for the onslaught of the virus, I fast tracked Irish Aid funding. This included €7 million for Palestine through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration to help meet the needs of 5.6 million Palestinian refugees whose vulnerabilities are multiplied in the current pandemic. This is in addition to the crises in Yemen, Sudan and South Sudan, where Ireland continues to make generous contributions.

There is, as people know, an ongoing crisis in Syria. Last week, I pledged a further €25 million to the continuing humanitarian response there. Across the Sahel belt in Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere, the need was considerable before Covid hit and is even greater now.

Ireland's approach to humanitarian action is an expression of our values, supported by financial investment which, in 2020, will be just over €90 million. Of course, our investment in effective humanitarian action goes well beyond money. This is why the OECD this year described Ireland as an excellent humanitarian donor.

We know the importance of working in partnership with others. Civil society organisations are essential partners in driving the change that we all want to see, whether that is through Irish NGOs working on the ground in challenging contexts or local NGOs making a difference in their home places. That is why I have budgeted €90 million in Irish Aid support for civil society and development education during 2020. Predictable funding is always important to NGOs, as changes are not achieved without effort over time, and is even more essential than ever now as civil society funding models are strained by the economic consequences of Covid-19. My officials have been working closely with civil society partners at this time to ensure that we understand their needs, and to support them in retooling in response to this crisis and others.

Ireland also plays a constructive role with partner countries, assisting them in their response to Covid-19 and many other things. In Mozambique, for example, the Irish Embassy team built on the strong relationship they, and the HSE, have developed over time with the local health authorities to help them craft an effective national response to the virus.

Work across the mission network on education has helped partners manage through the challenges of educating children at home. This includes education through radio in Sierra Leone, a story which featured on the RTÉ "Home School Hub" last month. This complements Ireland's investment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, education, including with Young Scientists in Africa and Africa Code Week, which reach millions of young people every year. Irish Aid fellowships see over 100 postgraduate students come to Ireland every year. Working with third level institutions here, my officials are ensuring that the programme continues this year notwithstanding the challenges posed by Covid-19.

I am also determined that Covid will not put our investment in climate action in international development off track.

We are working closely with other Departments to ensure that this is a whole-of-government effort. In addition to investing in a range of climate funds, the relationship which Ireland has built up over recent years with small island developing states has a very strong climate focus.

2 o'clock

Last year I launched a strategy for engaging with these states. This includes a €12 million Irish trust fund at the Asian Development Bank, which is a first, and a range of other initiatives including at the United Nations. Ireland is also a member of the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility, which allows immediate payment to Caribbean countries in the event of a hurricane or climate disaster. There is scope, too, for innovation in the climate space. For example, Ireland is investing in a solar-powered project in Palestine, in Gaza, in partnership with France which will ensure that a groundwater treatment facility is powered in a sustainable way. We are committing about €10 million to that project which is just inside Gaza. The Irish people can take great pride in the work of Irish Aid. As the OECD said in its recent review, it has many areas of excellence. It has found us to be the best in the world at targeting extreme poverty. This Government is committed to building on this good work and to doing more.

I will now turn to Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade. The 2020 allocation for Vote 28 sees an overall increase of €13.1 million or 5.1%. The programme structure for Vote 28 corresponds

with the Department's strategy statement. It also mirrors the priorities as set out in our foreign policy document, The Global Island: Ireland's Foreign Policy for a Changing World. It sets out the Department's work in five priority areas, namely, supporting our people, engaging actively in the European Union, promoting our values, advancing our prosperity, and strengthening our influence. These correspond directly with expenditure programmes A to E in the revised 2020 Estimates volume.

The Vote 28 priorities for 2020 include Brexit, the passport reform programme, Northern Ireland, Ireland's place on the UN Security Council, the expansion of the overseas mission network under the Global Ireland 2025 initiative, provision for urgent capital building and security works in our missions abroad, and continuing investment in the Department's global ICT network. To that list I must also add the Department's response to Covid-19, including our consular and diaspora outreach response and our role in supporting the country's economic recovery.

My Department and our mission network around the world play a critical role in promoting and advancing Ireland's interests through our international engagement. We are committed to implementing the Global Ireland 2025 initiative to double the scope and impact of our global footprint, as set out in the programme for Government, having due regard to available resources. Since 2018 we have opened ten new diplomatic missions to advance our own interests and to support our people. While some delays have been encountered due to the international impact of Covid, we are actively planning openings in Kyiv, Manila and Rabat in the next 12 months. The Government's overarching ambition under this initiative is to ensure that Ireland is well positioned to secure our national interests, particularly economic interests, globally. Our expanded network will enhance Ireland's visibility globally, extend our influence, and position us for trade and investment in new and exciting markets.

Programme A covers many key policy areas, including Northern Ireland, consular services and assistance, the emigrant support programme and passport support. Together with passport services, the provision of consular services and assistance lies at the heart of the Department's engagement with our citizens. This was evidenced during the Covid-19 pandemic when our consular directorate, working closely with our missions, provided advice and assistance to more than 8,000 Irish citizens across all five continents, helping them to return safely home. Covid-19 added a new relevance and urgency to my Department's travel advice, which we provide for more than 200 countries and make available on our website and the TravelWise app. We reviewed this advice regularly during the crisis, making 1,965 updates during the first half of 2020 alone. In fact, that was done only in the first two months of 2020 because the travel advice since then has been not to travel abroad.

Until the emergence of Covid-19, Irish people were travelling more often and more widely than ever, with a commensurate increase in the demand for consular assistance. In 2019, my Department provided assistance to Irish citizens in more than 1,857 serious consular cases, including 254 arrests, 287 hospitalisations and 293 deaths abroad.

The Passport Service issued 934,000 passports in 2019, the highest number ever issued in a single year. This represented an increase of over 8.6% on the previous year. At the beginning of this year, we expected to issue in excess of a million passports for the first time. However, the impact of Covid-19 on international travel has altered this expectation significantly. I now anticipate that the number of passports issued this year will be less than last year. During the crisis, Passport Office staff were redeployed to assist the processing of the Covid-19 pandemic

payment, to assist with HSE contact tracing, and to staff the Department's call centre set up to handle the consular crisis overseas. They returned to processing passport online applications on 8 June and processed more than 46,000 applications in the first three weeks of getting back to that normality. The 2020 allocation includes a capital allocation of €1 million in respect of the passport reform programme, and this year the programme will focus on the replacement of the software which operates the passport system.

Through the emigrant support programme budget of €12.6 million, the Government provides funding for non-profit organisations and projects to support our most vulnerable emigrants abroad, strengthen global Irish communities, and facilitate the development of closer and more strategic links between Ireland and the global Irish. As the scale of the impact of the pandemic on our diaspora communities became clear, the Government established a dedicated Covid-19 response fund for Irish communities abroad. It targets projects supporting our elderly and more vulnerable members of our communities, and it has new and innovative ways to provide services online. The projects are managed by our mission network and are delivered through existing community welfare organisations and charities.

This programme also deals with matters relating to Northern Ireland, North-South cooperation and British-Irish relations. In the context of the current public health emergency and the potential impact of Brexit, this area of work remains a particular focus of my Department. The New Decade, New Approach agreement in January represented a significant shared achievement of the political parties in Northern Ireland with the Irish and British Governments. It is important that we continue to work closely on a North-South and east-west basis in support of the power-sharing institutions which are so vital for politics in Northern Ireland. The Government is committed to working with the Executive through the North-South Ministerial Council to build connectivity North-South, invest in the north-west region, and explore other opportunities to work together to address shared challenges across the island of Ireland. In that regard, we are looking forward to an early meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council in plenary format, bringing the Irish Government and Northern Ireland Executive together for the first time in over three years. We hope to do that before the end of this month.

Programme B provides the framework for the Department's role in securing Ireland's influence in EU outcomes through maintaining and growing strong relationships with the EU institutions and other member states. Deputies can get a copy of my speech on our priorities in working with the new German Presidency. In particular, we welcome Germany's focus on the EU's future relationship with the UK as a priority of the coming six months. My Department at HQ, through our permanent representation in Brussels, and through our embassy network continues to play a vital role in protecting and advancing Ireland's core priorities in the Brexit negotiations. We also welcome the priority Germany plans to give to the rule of law in its Presidency. The rule of law is and should remain a fundamental principle that all EU member states respect, promote and implement.

Negotiations on the European Commission's proposals for the next multi-annual financial framework package or EU budget, which includes a new recovery instrument, are intensifying. We are committed to engaging positively and in a sense of solidarity to reach agreement, while of course also seeking to achieve the best possible result for Ireland.

Programme C covers the Department's contribution towards a more just world through the promotion and protection of human rights internationally and a more secure world based on a stable and secure rules-based international environment. The majority of current expenditure

under this programme is made up of contributions to international organisations.

Programme D is entitled "Our Prosperity". The Department's work under this programme will focus on leveraging our resources to drive job creation, exports, including cultural exports, inward investment and the tourism and education market. There will be particular focus in 2020 on assisting Irish business in the context of the UK's exit from the EU and in the post-Covid world. The programme for Government has moved trade promotion back to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. I look forward to working with the Tánaiste and his Department in utilising the mission network to support trade promotion globally.

Programme E covers the Department's work in marshalling its human and other resources at home and abroad to maximise Ireland's influence internationally. It includes the management and development of staff, the management and mitigation of risk, and compliance with statutory and legal obligations.

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

Deputy Simon Coveney: The programme also covers communication by the Department of its policies, objectives and activities to citizens at home and abroad. I look forward to people's comments and questions. I congratulate the new spokespeople in this policy area and look forward to working closely with them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): Is there a copy of the Minister's speech for everybody?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am not sure if we are allowed to hand out copies because of Covid, with us touching the same sheets of paper.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): I have no difficulty touching it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It will certainly be available online and I will ensure that everyone gets a copy.

Deputy John Brady: I take the opportunity to congratulate the Minister on his reappointment as head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and his new role with responsibility for defence. As Sinn Féin's spokesperson for foreign affairs and defence I look forward to rigorous and robust exchanges of views.

I begin with Brexit. Its impact will be felt not only in this State but across the island of Ireland. There is a great onus on the Government to protect the Irish protocol. The protection of the Good Friday Agreement must take priority over all issues relating to Brexit. We must ensure that the EU negotiators continue to protect Ireland's interests. The Minister has a key role in ensuring this. I assure him I will shadow his progress and performance every step of the way.

When we discuss overseas aid and its importance and relevance, it is important we note that Irish citizens have given to a level that we would not have previously thought possible. As the death toll from Covid-19 creeps agonisingly towards 2,000 people, we must be cognisant that our first defence against a future and perhaps more devastating pandemic is overseas aid.

As a nation which has positioned itself at the centre of the international community through our success at the UN, we must act strategically. Now is the time to build the levees, not when the flood comes. That means we must keep our commitments to achieve a target of 0.7% of

GDP. The strategic use of overseas funding to help developing nations help themselves also helps us. Covid-19 has exposed vulnerabilities as well as interdependencies across international boundaries. Perhaps this is a good time to pay tribute to the international brigade of Cuban doctors and medical staff who selflessly went to Europe and further afield to assist the First and Third Worlds in the fight against this pandemic. This interconnectedness has also illuminated the vulnerabilities of the poorest members of our global community.

The World Food Programme recently published a report that states we face the threat of multiple famines as a consequence of Covid-19. A new report from Oxfam warns that more people could die every day from hunger related to the coronavirus rather than the virus itself. It also warns that by the end of the year, up to 12,000 people daily could die of hunger as a result of Covid-19. It noted that 121 million people might be pushed to the brink of starvation as a result of the social and economic fallout from the pandemic through mass unemployment, disruption to food production and supplies, and declining aid.

I am proud of the egalitarian instincts of the Irish people polled as part of an EU survey, with 92% of respondents agreeing that Ireland had a responsibility to help those in disadvantaged countries. The Minister must become a voice on the international stage that urges for cancellation or restructuring of debt for developing countries. Sixty countries spend more on servicing debts than on healthcare.

The Department has developed a series of metrics to promote gender references under specific categories of statements, an admirable target on which it should be commended. However, how many references to gender will be apologies? It could be said that *mea culpa* is the battle cry of this Government, based on its performance to date. From the Minister's remarks, we are being asked to support an 80% reduction in the number of organisations funded to promote the participation of women in post-conflict reconciliation. Further funding cuts of 43% under the rubric of human rights, gender equality and protection are also proposed. Where there is conflict, women must be part of the solution. Despite the effects of conflict on women, their participation in the peace building agenda has been resisted by both local male elites and, more importantly, international actors. That cannot be allowed stand.

I must ask the Minister about the response of his Government colleagues in the Green Party on learning of his proposed cut of 11% to climate change and environment under the category of resilience and economic inclusion. Perhaps, the Green Party's focus on tormenting rural Ireland is enough to occupy its members at the moment. In that category, there are proposed cuts of 26% under the heading "nutrition". I remind the Minister that malnutrition is the leading cause of death across the globe and has been described as the leading driver of disabilities. Its effects can be felt across generations, particularly in the areas of physical and cognitive development. One in nine people around the world is hungry or undernourished. A quarter of all children in the world under the age of five years suffer from stunted growth as a consequence of the effects of malnutrition. The failure to tackle malnutrition acts as a brake on the development of individuals, communities and economies around the world. Where there is evidence of malnutrition, the probability of outbreaks of armed violence increases considerably. A sustained emphasis on tackling nutrition has a multiplier effect across both the health and economy of a region. Nutrition is the missing link for sustainable growth. It is integral to the development of sustainable development goals.

I want to address Ireland's welcome success in securing a seat on the UN Security Council and how the Government will approach this role. It is not enough for the Minister to present

his approach to the Security Council as one akin to a strategy premised on pester power. He should look at how much he annoyed the electorate and yet he and his party are here again. In my experience pester-power works much better for eight year olds than for governments. We must take advantage of our position on the UN Security Council as a non-aligned nation that has a celebrated history of neutrality. We must become the voice of truth to power, a voice for the dispossessed, the disadvantaged, the homeless and above all for those who have no voice of their own.

What people could one describe as being more voiceless, more disadvantaged, more dispossessed, and if the Israeli Government is allowed to give full vent to its colonial impulses, more utterly and completely homeless than the Palestinian people? The Minister may possess aspirations to be the stone in the shoe of the powerful but he has certainly proven to be a boulder in the pathway of attempts by this House to introduce the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill, at least according to his own Government colleague, Deputy Neasa Hourigan.

Given that the Israeli Government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has threatened the annexation of 30% of the West Bank, there is even more impetus on this Government to introduce the occupied territories Bill and to stand with the growing number of European states which are working to halt Israeli aggression towards Palestinians.

An important matter has arisen which requires clarification from the Minister. There is speculation circulating in the media that the Minister may have deliberately misled this House over the consequences of the implementation of the occupied territories Bill. It is being alleged that his claim that the occupied territories Bill was at odds with EU law and could potentially expose Ireland to fines of tens of millions of euro-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): I ask the Deputy now to stay-----

Deputy John Brady: I am going back to that now in a second. It is important at this point for the Minister-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): It may well be but the debate now is on the Estimates, so will the Deputy confine himself to these, please?

Deputy John Brady: I will finish off on this point, with the Acting Chair's permission. The Minister said, and this is from the advice of-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): The Deputy cannot make allegations in the midst of a contribution on the Revised Estimates. I would appreciate if the Deputy would co-operate with me I would appreciate it.

Deputy John Brady: An opportunity needs to be given to the Minister to clarify remarks he made-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): There may well be-----

Deputy John Brady: -----regarding the occupied territories Bill. That is a question that is appropriate and this is my first exchange with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade on the Government's handling or mishandling of the occupied territories Bill and comments he made in defence of the rationale for not proceeding with the Bill. He cites references to information received from the former Attorney General as to the reason why he could not proceed with this Bill. There is evidence to show that he misinterpreted or misquoted the Attorney General,

which is the point I want to make. An opportunity to clarify this should be given to the Minister.

Time precludes me from covering all that I wanted to here today I will conclude by appealing to the Minister to place human rights at the very centre of Irish foreign policy. When will this Government address the conflict in Yemen, a veritable smorgasbord of international intrigue and interference which has led to untold suffering for the Yemeni people? Will the Minister speak to the plight of the Uyghur people of China who are facing cultural and religious persecution on a daily basis?

I also wish to touch on the whole issue of passports. My colleague, Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile in the Seanad, has led a campaign that the Minister will be well aware of to have a passport office opened in the North - the Six Counties - and there is evidence there to show the number of citizens in the North who have accessed passports over the last number of years. That demand is going to increase the closer we come to Brexit. The evidence shows that opening a passport office in the North would be cost neutral. The time is right now to do that and all the evidence shows that the demand is there for it. We have grade A office space in Belfast that could be utilised for something like this. I urge the Minister again to look at this issue. There is a growing demand that needs to be met for citizens who live in the north eastern part of this island.

There are many more instances across the globe where nations and peoples are now looking to the Minister to be the catalyst that allows Ireland to be the voice that they need. If and when the Minister does so, he will have our full backing or, if and when he fails to do so, he will rightfully earn our ire. I urge the Minister not to let this moment pass. Gabhaim buíochas libh.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): A Aire, tá nóiméad aige, más féidir nó más mian leat freagra a thabhairt. The Minister has a minute or less to respond if he wishes to. If he does not I will move on to the next speaker.

Deputy Simon Coveney: My apologies, Chairman, I am not clear on the procedures. Do I have a minute to respond?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): There is some time left if the Minister wishes to use it but it is nearly gone now.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will respond to the accusation that was made about me misleading the Dáil, which I do not think I have done. Let me be very clear and quote from the advice of the Attorney General on the occupied territories Bill which states that: "there is significant legal doubt that it would be permissible for the State to take the unilateral step of prohibiting the import of produce originating from illegal settlements on the grounds of public policy without being subject to EU infringement proceedings." This is pretty clear. It is not always sensible to take one's lines from social media.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire.

Glaoim ar an Teachta Howlin anois ó Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. I am up here in the gods.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): Feicim thú.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I can barely see my colleagues. I want to begin by congratulat-

ing the Minister, Deputy Coveney, on his reappointment at a critical time for Ireland in international affairs. He has done a very good job to date and I look forward to working with him from the Labour Party's perspective. I also wish to congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, on his appointment. I said to him that he had been sent out to bat so often in tricky circumstances for the previous Government that he certainly deserved promotion and I look forward to working with him on international affairs.

I propose to deal with six issues, pose six questions and then to give the Minister some time at the end to respond to them, if that is acceptable to the Chair and to the Minister. This is a very broad Estimate covering many areas and we will tease them out in detail when we have a chance to read the Minister's script.

First, I will deal with the Minister's commitment to deal with our citizens impacted by Covid-19 abroad. In the early part of the crisis we dealt largely with repatriations. That was a very worthwhile and elaborate scheme that brought many thousands of people back to Ireland and I commend the Minister for that. We now need to have real concrete supports for individual citizens all over the world in desperate hardship. I heard in the Minister's contribution about the support of organisations but there are individuals who have no income, are out of work and cannot pay their rent. Is there an overall picture that the Minister can present to us on that and how he intends to address it?

My second question is on Northern Ireland. I was interested in the comments of the new Taoiseach on the specific Northern Ireland facility that he is establishing in expanding his own Department to have a Northern Ireland office there. I ask how specifically that will interact with the Minister's Department and where responsibility for Northern Ireland policy will lie. Heretofore the Minister has been the lead in this policy. I congratulate the Department and everybody involved in securing a seat on the United Nations Security Council for next year. It is no mean feat to defeat Canada. I pay special tribute to Ambassador Geraldine Byrne-Nason for her sterling work in that regard. The Minister said that our policy in regard to that seat would be anchored in human rights. In that context, while we do not have an extradition treaty with the People's Republic of China, since last year we have had an extradition agreement with Hong Kong, in respect of which the Minister signed SI 395/2019. My third question for the Minister is as follows. In the light of the national security law now being imposed on Hong Kong by Beijing and the decision yesterday of Australia to suspend its extradition arrangement with Hong Kong, does the Government intend to suspend the agreement of last year as a clear signal of Ireland's opposition to the imposition of that security law?

My fourth question relates to the issues in Yemen. It is an area of urgent monumental concern. My own judgment is that it is the most shocking crisis currently facing the globe. Can Ireland, the Minister and we as a parliament lead on this issue? What role will we take to highlight the ongoing shocking suffering that is being endured by the people of Yemen right now?

My fifth question is in regard to Palestine. When we raise the issue of Palestine we are constantly reminded of the two-state solution that is the anchor of all our policy. A two-state solution can only work when there is a willingness for the creation of two acceptable and sustainable entities, two acceptable and sustainable states, supported by Israel and by Palestine. It is clear that the ongoing illegal annexation of more and more Palestinian territory by Israel is making that two-state solution increasingly distant and unviable. In those circumstances, what is our other plan? We cannot simply state that this is our plan if it is being actively undermined. What action will Ireland undertake to defend that core mission?

My final question relates to Brexit, which, although I have left until last is very high on our priority list. We have enjoyed strong cross-party support in regard to our approach to Brexit to date. There are real challenges coming on stream now. What specific plans does the Minister have to ensure there is continued close co-operation across all political parties as we reach the crucial climax of the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union?

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are only two minutes and 35 seconds remaining but I will try to deal with all of the Deputy's questions. On Brexit, I intend to maintain close co-operation with Opposition parties to continue the stakeholders structure that we have had and that has worked very successfully. We hope to have another stakeholders' meeting before the end of this month. I will keep the Deputy and all other Deputies who are interested in progress informed as best I can during the Brexit process. It is not party political in terms of how we handle the challenges of Brexit between now and the end of the year, which is hugely important.

On the Middle East peace process, I am a strong supporter of a two-state solution being the only viable solution for a successfully negotiated peace outcome for Palestinians and Israelis. We are actively working to protect a two-state solution. At UN level and within the EU, I have been very vocal on this issue and will continue to be. In the programme for Government we have made it clear that we want to recognise the state of Palestine in the context of a negotiated peace solution recognising two states, but we have also stated that we would move to recognise the state of Palestine if we felt it assisted in the process of protecting a two-state solution or, indeed, protecting Palestinian land. That speaks for itself. There are a number of policy tools that are available to us here. There is a new Israeli Government and I want to engage with it. I also want to engage with our partners across the EU to provide a deterrent for a new Israeli Government to move ahead with annexation which has been suggested and spoken of by the Israeli Prime Minister on multiple occasions.

On Yemen, I agree with the Deputy that there is an extraordinary humanitarian crisis there. We have committed approximately €28 million to Yemen thus far in terms of humanitarian supports, including €5 million this year thus far. It is the politics of Yemen and the interventions that countries like Ireland and others make in international fora that will hopefully bring about a lasting peace in that country that is being torn apart.

On the Security Council, we will be soon able to access the papers linked to the Security Council and we will then become an associate member. On 1 January 2021, we will take up our seat in the council. I will come back to the Deputy on the questions I have not had time to answer today.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I echo the comments of other Deputies in congratulating the Minister on his reappointment. I also welcome the new junior Ministers to their roles.

I would like first to focus on the comments on the occupied territories Bill and significant legal doubt. In my view, that is not sufficient grounds for the Bill not to be passed by this House. We could pass it and refer it to the Supreme Court or it could be referred to the European Court of Justice to avoid any doubt in relation to it. We need effective action on that. I have three questions for the Minister. Given that the Government does not propose to proceed with the occupied territories Bill, what effective action does it propose to take to ensure that the annexation does not go ahead? It is a very worrying situation.

On the global pandemic and Covid-19, there is no doubt about the importance of interdepen-

dency in this world. We live on an island but it is abundantly clear that what happens halfway across the world can intimately affect every aspect of life here. It is clear that underinvestment in public health systems across the world has knock-on effects for all of us. Earlier, Deputy Brady referenced cuts to the gender programmes. That is very worrying. From my experience of meeting human rights defenders, trade unionists and women's groups in Colombia, I am aware of how central a role women's organisations play in holding their communities together and standing up for peace and against violence. The proposed cuts are regrettable.

My second question is on overseas development aid. The Minister will be aware that for more than 40 years, successive Governments have committed to the 0.7% target, yet we still have a distance to go to achieve that. Given the increasing level of hunger around the world, with 820 million people going hungry every day, which is exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, does the Minister agree that the commitment in the programme for Government to reach 0.7% by 2030 is far too late and that we need to reach it much quicker?

My final question is specifically around the global response to Covid-19 on the health front. As we know, with increased urbanisation and intensification of farming, we are at ever increasing risk globally of virus transmission from animals to humans. We know that there are thousands of viruses with that potential. What we need on a global scale is more research, early warning systems, prevention, hygiene, and global co-operation with regard to vaccines and drugs.

We need to improve public health capacity in less developed countries and global health messaging. Guano farmers, for example, earn less than $1 per bucket of bat droppings that they collect. Entering dark caves is difficult work. If the farmers were given support for more sustainable, safer work, it would be good for them and everyone else because it would reduce risk and exposure to viruses that bats carry.

There is a strong imperative for us to invest much more in the global response both to the current pandemic and to the prevention of further pandemics. Does the Minister agree we need to put many more resources into a global response to Covid-19 and to prevent future pandemics?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not know how many times I have to say it but people do not seem to want to hear . The reason I have opposed as Minister the introduction of the occupied territories Bill is I have clear legal advice from the previous Attorney General, which I believe to be very credible, that we cannot enforce or implement it. People just do not want to accept that, as if to say the legal advice from the Office of the Attorney General is not valid because there is some other legal advice from somebody else somewhere that says otherwise. As a Minister, I have to respect and act on the legal advice the Government has available to it. It is the State's legal advice. This is not some kind of strategic opposition from me to legislation.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: That was not the question.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is a legal position. I can understand the frustrations over the occupied territories Bill but I have on many occasions explained why we cannot do it. People do not want to accept that for political reasons.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: That was not the question I put.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am making the point. The Deputy had his say and I am having

mine.

On the other issues the Deputy raised in respect of annexation and the Middle East peace process, I have been very vocal at UN level, at EU level and domestically about Ireland's absolute support for a two-state solution. Ireland's leadership within the EU seeks to ensure that the EU provides the necessary deterrent to a new Israeli Government to proposals to annex lands that are not Israeli lands but Palestinian lands. We will continue to advocate for that. The language in the programme for Government is clear on that and my actions and my statements, both publicly and privately, are absolutely consistent with what is stated in the programme for Government.

On the comments that two party spokespersons made about cuts to gender action, they are not a reflection of the truth. There are no cuts *per se*. We have increased funding in terms of the overall spend on development of assistance. Budgets are either increasing or static. There is a commitment to growth in the programme for Government. All three issues have been mainstreamed throughout the Irish aid programme, which means we build gender action, climate action and work on food systems and nutrition into everything we do in development aid. A total of 77% of Irish aid targets gender inequality. I ask Deputies, therefore, to read the aid programme for what we are doing on all budget lines rather than trying to pick one or two to give an inaccurate impression.

Climate funding has increased significantly over the past three years, while the increase in the green climate fund through the finance Vote, also in 2020, needs to be taken into account. As for debt forgiveness, Ireland, through the Department of Finance and my Department, has worked with the World Bank and the Paris club to encourage countries to facilitate either debt flexibility in respect of repayments or debt forgiveness.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): As there is no Deputy from Solidarity-People Before Profit who wishes to contribute, I call Deputy Verona Murphy from the Regional Group.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I congratulate the Minister on retaining his portfolio and gaining another. We have worked well together in the past and I wish him the best of luck in the future. Dealing with Brexit will be an arduous task. I also congratulate Deputy Brophy on his appointment as Minister of State and wish him all the best. I have a very large family spread throughout the world and I hope he will not have to engage with any of them.

I appreciate the increase in the Revised Estimates, not least where it pertains to Covid-19. I thank the Minister and his Department for their assistance, especially to constituents of Wexford who needed representation during Covid. I ask him to pass on our thanks to the departmental staff, who were very helpful. All matters were relatively easily sorted out and people got home.

I was glad to hear the Minister say that, for the latter part of 2020, he will deal with Brexit, which will be upon us soon, in five months' time. That brings me to the question of how the Department will deal with probably impartial trade following Brexit in respect of fishermen and the issues that will arise once UK waters are no longer accessible to EU fisherman and, in particular, Irish fishermen, who probably access UK waters more than any of the other EU member states. Currently, 60% of the mackerel we fish, as well as 40% of the prawns caught by Irish trawlers, are fished in UK waters. These goods are the mainstay of the sector but the waters are soon to be outside the EU and off limits to Irish trawlers. Put simply, 30% of what is trawled

by Irish fishermen will be wiped out post Brexit. Significant changes to existing arrangements would be devastating from the Irish fishing industry.

Some mixed signals have come from all sides of the Brexit argument about how it will be managed. The EU has a legally binding commitment under Article 148 of the withdrawal agreement to discuss fishing access and trade together. The UK has set out its negotiating position to insist that fisheries will not be part of any trade deal, whereas the EU wants to tie any post-Brexit trade agreement to a deal on fisheries. Under the heading "Marine", the programme for Government states: "We will [e]nsure protection of the interests of the Irish Fishing industry by insisting that a Fisheries Agreement with the UK is concluded as an integral part of an overall EU Free Trade Agreement with the UK." If the Minister can do so, he might clarify which of the two positions reflects the current circumstances.

Another matter that is of major concern for fishermen nationally, and one I have at first hand heard discussed in my constituency when dealing with fishermen in Wexford town, Kilmore, Duncannon and other areas, is the likely increase in activity in the fishing grounds and waters surrounding Ireland post Brexit. Fishermen expect a significant increase in the number of UK vehicles re-registering for EU ownership. I am glad this is recognised in the programme for Government, which states: "We will [r]ecognise that the critical issue in these negotiations for the Irish industry is continued access to UK waters and quota share and the danger of displacement of the EU fleet into Irish territorial waters." While it is important the Government recognises the critical factors, it is also very important to understand and have knowledge of what action it will take. Will the Minister tell us what steps are being prepared to prevent displacement or an increase in the number of vessels that re-register to the EU post Brexit?

The Covid crisis hit the fishing industry very hard. While supports were welcome, they were very poor in comparison with what other EU countries offered to their fishing industries. With Brexit only months away, the fishing sector will be one of the worst affected. Currently, 14% of Irish fish exports go to the UK. These will be in great jeopardy after Brexit and the cost of doing business in the sector will increase exponentially. It is imperative that supports be granted now as they are needed now. Cash flow, or what might have been very tight cash flow, has been eroded because of Covid. In the programme for Government, on pages 70 and 105, it is stated that the Government will seek EU contingency supports and market disturbance funding for the fisheries sector to mitigate against the impacts of Covid-19 and Brexit. The Minister might be able to enlighten us on what the supports will entail and when they will be made available to the sector. This is a complex issue because it will involve the Departments responsible for agriculture, trade and foreign affairs. Will the Minister do his best to address some of those issues?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy for her compliments on the work of the Department's consular division during the Covid crisis. We are not finished yet because the virus is still accelerating in many parts of the world, including where Irish citizens live. This is the case in Latin America, South America, the United States itself and across Africa. I expect our consular division will continue to be very busy supporting Irish citizens who want to come home.

On fishing, the Deputy has raised a series of issues. No one should assume the outcome yet. It cannot be said yet that we will be locked out of UK waters or that 30% of the stock we access will be wiped out. We do not know whether any of that is true yet. We are in a negotiation. The important point in this negotiation is that fisheries are part of the broader trade negotiation to

ensure the EU uses the leverage it has to get the best possible outcome for its fishing interests, including Irish fishing interests. My job, therefore, is to ensure the task force led by Mr. Michel Barnier will continue to focus on a good outcome from a fisheries perspective to try to protect the two key areas, namely, access to UK waters to catch fish and quota share. With regard to mackerel, for example, many of the stocks caught off Scotland spawn off Ireland. The reality is that we should be catching fish where it makes sense to catch them from sustainability and conservation perspectives, in addition to a profitability perspective. What we do not want are distortions of fishing that force fishermen to catch fish too early or in the wrong place in response to the restrictions in a post-Covid environment. This is a complex negotiation but an important one for counties such as Donegal, Galway and Kerry, in addition to west Cork, Wexford, Howth and all the other constituencies and counties that rely greatly on the fishing industry. It is central to our prioritisation in terms of the Brexit outcome.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): Bogfaimid ar aghaidh go dtí the Rural Independent Group.

Deputy Michael Collins: Humanitarian aid is a must for countries that genuinely need it. Our churches have for decades given generously to countries that struggle, and most of all to children who are suffering beyond belief. I remind everyone of the humanitarian crisis evident in Yemen, a country with 24 million people. Some 80% of the population is in dire need of humanitarian assistance. More than 12 million are children living in what has been described as hell. Countries such as Ireland, which has the means to support countries such as Yemen, should be doing everything they can to prevent Yemen from becoming extinct, which looks very likely to happen. In the next few months, Yemen will run out of wheat, rice and fresh water. It has no healthcare system so people are dying constantly from starvation and illness, in addition to fighting an epidemic of cholera and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The UN declared this as the worst humanitarian crisis in the past 100 years. Ireland should at least try to support charities that are sending food to Yemen. Children there are eating cooked leaves as their meals. They need food and water filters to have a chance of living. What are we doing as a country to prevent this humanitarian crisis, the worst in the past 100 years?

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the Minister and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade were outstanding in assisting my office to help some of my constituents from Cork South-West to return home to Ireland, but now a number of these people would like to return to their lives in their adopted countries, where they have applied for residency or citizenship. Owing to their having returned to Ireland, however, they might have lost their chance to acquire residency status or citizenship. One young man in my constituency - one of many - is stuck in this predicament. He was living in Canada and came home to Ireland because of the Government's advice, but he may now lose his chance of residency. What can the Minister's office do to support such young people?

What about those who have retired here in Ireland who may not be Irish but who have settled into our communities and contributed so much? They have sufficient means to live, they have homes here and they have full medical insurance, and they now call Ireland home. These people are on a stamp 0 visa, which means they cannot apply for citizenship. Surely Ireland would welcome these people and be proud to honour them with citizenship of our beautiful country. Does the Minister believe the process can be modified and does he believe that what I propose will materialise in the foreseeable future?

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am happy to speak briefly on this important issue. Ireland's reputation as a leader in international co-operation is historic and globally recognised. Indeed, if international assistance is counted as a vital part of international co-operation, our reputation as a leader predates even this Republic given the medical and educational work carried out by the vast network of members in the Irish missionary tradition. That work continues to this very day. It is a testament to our generosity that Ireland, through its international development agency, Irish Aid, has allocated almost €838 million for official development assistance, representing an increase of just under €21 million on the 2019 budget allocation. As I understand it, this is the sixth consecutive year allocations for overseas development aid have increased. As a compassionate and generous people, we will continue to offer whatever assistance we can to the most deprived as part of our commitment to international development and effective co-operation. It is rightly said to be the one area in which we unequivocally punch above our weight.

I acknowledge the enormous amount of assistance offered by the Minister's Department and office to those stranded abroad during the Covid-19 crisis. We see that some states are now reverting to a closed border arrangement. That will require ongoing international co-operation.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a ghabháil leis an Aire. I wish him and his Minister of State well. I thank him and his office for their help on various issues, many of which arose during the Covid crisis. There are still issues arising and his office is working on them at present. There is a sad tragedy requiring a lady to go to a family funeral abroad.

On Votes 27 and 28, I see there has been an increase in funding for overseas development aid for the sixth consecutive year. I have concerns over the increase in funding for the World Health Organization, WHO. We gave it a huge increase. I have many concerns about the WHO. I acknowledge the works of our visionaries and missionaries abroad over the centuries and I support them. We now have a place on the UN Security Council. Is it costing us? Are we buying the support of these people? Are we recognised as the truly independent and neutral country that we should be?

I also have major concerns about the Middle East because of the slaughter and persecution of Christians and some members of Muslim sects, or minority Muslim groups. We are not saying one tittle about it or intervening, and there is no debate in our Parliament about it either. We have rumpuses about every single thing, and rightly so. All lives matter to me. We had all the demonstrations associated with Black Lives Matter. All lives matter to me, unborn and born, from the womb to the tomb, but the slaughter in the Middle East is going on and we are not doing anything about it.

3 o'clock

The Minister has retained his position in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. We need to debate such matters.

Deputy Michael Collins mentioned what was happening in Yemen and this is happening in other places as well. When it suits us, the WHO or the United Nations to turn a blind eye, we do so but that is not acceptable.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Am I sharing my time?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Connolly): The Deputy will tell me that.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Perhaps not. I will speak for a while and give the Minister a

chance to answer.

I congratulate the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade on retaining his portfolio. I also congratulate our new Minister of State, Deputy Brophy. Seeing as more congratulations are in order, I will get them out of the way at the beginning. I congratulate those involved in Ireland's success in securing a seat at the United Nations Security Council for the next two years. I am pleased to see that the Revised Estimates increase our resources for civil society and human rights defenders at the United Nations. We will certainly raise issues of concern around human rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex issues; gender equality; and women's political participation in post-conflict reconciliation and disarmament. At the end of Ireland's term, we all want to be able to point to our role in ensuring positive outcomes, especially in the area of human rights.

One section in the Revised Estimates refers to advancing Ireland's interests in negotiations of European Union legislation and other decisions. I was watching to the Minister's contribution on the big screen downstairs and he specifically mentioned the German Presidency and its priorities. He also mentioned working with the European Commission on negotiating the multi-annual financial framework. This makes my point, as the Minister did not mention the European Parliament. Like me, he is a former member of the European Parliament. I acknowledge and applaud the work of the previous Government in engaging with MEPs and briefing them very often on big-ticket items. However, we need a change in our mindset, or we certainly need a tweak. Very often the European Parliament is seen to be of lesser importance. The Minister served as an MEP and he knows that the legislative framework is like a three-legged stool comprising the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament. He knows that any strong rapporteur leading for the European Parliament - I see myself as having been one of them - can have a real influence on the detail and minutiae of European legislation. It is not the headline stuff or the big-ticket items like the figures for the Common Agricultural Policy or the European Social Fund but rather the detail on how the budget is spend, whether it is the Common Agricultural Policy, the European Social Fund or the microfinance fund we discussed this week. This is often what makes a significant difference for citizens. I request greater co-operation where it is possible, although MEPs must be open to it. There should be greater co-operation between Irish institutions and Irish MEPs in the real work of the European Parliament, including amending and improving legislation.

In the context of North-South co-operation, I refer to a programme that was put in place under the peace and reconciliation heading. I have no interest in this because I was not a member but an important initiative was set up where members of local authorities, North and South, could meet informally in a series of structured events to discuss common objectives. In 2013, our current Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, stated at the Merriman School that in the North and South there are two societies that are growing apart but there is nothing inevitable about this. He said there are many areas where a community of interests is clear and where the opportunities for action are at hand. In that context, I want the Minister to reconsider the discontinued initiative I mentioned. It had a focus on building personal relationships in matters of common interest bit by bit and step by step. The Minister and I know that those kinds of relationships are often far more secure and long lasting.

I have a question that was already posed by Deputy Howlin but the Minister did not have time to answer it. Perhaps he can do so now. I refer to our extradition treaty with Hong Kong. As Deputy Howlin mentioned, Australia has revoked its treaty with Hong Kong. I know this is a delicate matter, and I am not asking for anything definitive, but I would like to hear the

Minister's views, as every one of us in the House knows the situation in Hong Kong is slowly deteriorating.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy and I will try to deal with some of the questions. I thank her for the comments about our efforts with the United Nations Security Council. I assure everybody in the House that we did not aspire to be on the United Nations Security Council again just to sit there and win the competition. We want to make a difference and use all the influence we have, including the capacity to bring people together and build bridges on a council which is quite divided and which has been unable to make key interventions and decisions at very important times. The veto has been used and abused in a way that it should not be. There are many challenges and we are putting together a very proactive agenda for our tenure, which will run over two years. We will be very active in areas like gender, disarmament, peace support, post-conflict recovery and similar topics in the context of which Ireland has credibility.

As a former member of the European Parliament, I understand the Deputy's comments and, I suspect, the frustration behind them. I will follow up on those points.

The best example of engagement between local authorities in the North and the South has been on the Derry and Donegal border. The local authorities there have worked incredibly well together and are still working to really positive effect to drive investment in the north west on both sides of the Border. It is a really good example of how cross-Border co-operation at a local government level can work in a very effective way, particularly in Border counties. I will have a look at the co-operation referred to by the Deputy to see if it is possible to design something similar to that for the future.

Unlike many foreign ministers across the European Union, I have been quite vocal and public on the position in Hong Kong. I have released a statement on it and we have expressed serious concern for all the reasons that the Deputy understands. We have not made a decision to revoke the extradition arrangements and treaty that we have as it relates to Hong Kong and that will be a matter for the Government to decide. It is not the space we are in right now. Instead, we have had more than one interaction with the Chinese Embassy on the matter and we are working at a European Union level to try to ensure we act in a way that protects the one-country-two-systems approach that should apply to people living in Hong Kong.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am sharing time with Deputy O'Dowd. I thank the Minister for his many interventions this afternoon and congratulate him on his deserved reappointment. I also congratulate the Ministers of State, Deputies Thomas Byrne and Brophy. I particularly congratulate the Minister on his reappointment, albeit with a gap, to the defence portfolio. It is appropriate that, following the major success of securing a seat on the United Nations Security Council, these two Departments will come under the control of one Minister, particularly in view of the importance of our history of peacekeeping in that victory. It was a major achievement by the Minister, the former Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, and the entire team at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It is something of which all of us should be extremely proud.

Every cent of the €821 million in these Estimates is money well spent. We can be extremely proud of our diplomatic network across the globe and how hard they have had to work in recent months and years on a variety of issues. A point I was glad to hear the Minister reference so many times because it is crucial is the development of the Global Ireland strategy. That is the reason it is key that the 2025 aim of doubling our diplomatic footprint remains. I was heartened

to hear the talk of new missions opening soon in places such as Manila and Kiev, following on from the success of the new consulate in Los Angeles and new mission in Mumbai. However, there needs to be an increased focus on our diplomatic footprint a little closer to home, particularly in Europe. What has stood to us so well over the past couple of difficult Brexit years with the Minister at the helm is our amazing diplomatic network within the European Union. We need to be ambitious for that. The EU is our largest export market. It will continue to be so and it will continue to be a destination to which many Irish people will look to move. Ninety per cent of Irish people, according to the European Commission survey today, are in favour of maintaining the freedom of movement as part of the EU's four freedoms. That is the reason we need to be aware of our network throughout the EU. We need to boost our network. We need to look at our new offices in places like Lyon and Frankfurt and see where other examples could be had across the European Union. We must make sure that our embassies, which were kept open through the difficult years of the financial crisis across the European Union, are grown and optimised.

The Minister mentioned the structural works that will have to take place in many of the diplomatic missions across the world. We need to ensure that our embassies within the European Union, but particularly our Permanent Representation to the European Union in Brussels, maintains the same levels of staffing if not consistently increasing the level of both diplomatic staff from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as well as seconded staff from Departments that make their way not just to the Permanent Representation in Brussels but, increasingly, to our embassies in Berlin, Paris and other European states. We talk about new alliances. It is very easy to focus on the big European Union member states such as France and Germany, and they are vitally important, but we have to remember the other European Union member states.

A recent academic study showed that only two European Union member states had Ireland in their list of top three important partners. They are Denmark and Portugal. We may need to look at our diplomatic missions in Copenhagen and Lisbon but, equally, those in every other European Union member state. In the previous Oireachtas term we did a lot of great work in the Joint Committee on European Affairs on examining those new alliances. I hope that with the Minister's passion for the European project, in partnership with the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, he will push that as we move beyond Brexit to the new challenges that face our European Union, both in dealing with the Multiannual Financial Framework and the modern challenges, including dealing with the mop-up practice from the Covid-19 global pandemic.

An area that Deputy Brendan Howlin spoke about at length previously and on which we need to increase our work and our exposure, and it feeds into the overall European Union work, is our footprint within Africa. It is heartening to hear that we will be opening up new diplomatic missions in countries such as Ghana but there is major potential for Ireland to play a positive role in the development of Africa, particularly with the Minister's expertise in human rights from his time in the European Parliament with Deputy Harkin. That is an issue on which we can stake ourselves out as a small independent country that has an extremely proud record, as other Deputies mentioned, of peacekeeping and missionary work within Africa. It is important that we can continue that work but it will require a genuine investment. I very much hope these Estimates will be put to that and that we will continue to see that Estimate going forward. The €821 million to which the Minister referred is an investment. Every euro of that goes into a huge network that provides an economic return for this small State in terms of opening up new trading partners and investment policies. It also provides a humanistic return when we think about our effort in overseas development aid and our outreach to our diaspora. Some are recent

members of our diaspora. They are people who left the country in the last economic crisis to go to places such as British Columbia and Canada or Perth, in Australia, or the ancient Irish diaspora in New York, Boston, across the UK and in more bizarre places like Argentina.

I conclude by wishing the Minister and his Ministers of State well in the coming years in dealing with the immediate challenges he faces in the Department and asking him to make sure that every time we look to see what Ireland's role is in the world we do not simply say that we are a small country that has to feed in but that we are ambitious.

I commend the Minister for his outspoken statements on the extremely worrying situation in Hong Kong. I ask him to go further and continue to work with the British authorities and also the commission set up by the former governor, Lord Chris Patton.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire agus roimh na hAirí Stáit nua atá in éineacht leis, na Teachtaí Byrne agus Brophy. Tá súil agam go dtiocfaidh feabhas mór ar an saol atá againn go léir de bharr an obair a bheidh á déanamh acu.

I pay tribute in particular to our foreign service. When I use the word "service" I mean it in the best possible way. We can imagine a port city on the edge of the Amazon with a population of more than 400,000 people where a small group of Europeans are trapped during the Covid emergency. It is a city that cannot be reached by road but only by air or water. The citizens are stressed and kept in a very small area, which they could only leave to go to a shop once every so often. They are concerned. They contacted me and I contacted the ambassador with responsibility for Peru, Ambassador Gleeson, who happened to be in Chile. He moved Heaven and earth to get those people home. His work, commitment and dedication in the way he rang those people, assured them and reassured them, and his work with the network the Minister and other European Ministers got involved in to make sure that all of our citizens got home safely, epitomises everything that is good about the service we provide. I commend all of our ambassadors and their staff and the Minister's staff and office also.

In terms of Ireland's record in the United Nations, 129 of the 191 nations in the United Nations supported our application to be a member of the United Nations Security Council. They did that because we are champions on issues like fighting poverty, inequality, the effects of climate change and standing up for human rights. As a country that was dominated by a foreign country for so long, we have a very important investment in foreign aid. Because of our history and affinity with oppressed people Ireland stands No. 1 in my view and deserves the full support of this Parliament in its success and the work they have done. I would like to compliment a Drogheda lady, Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason, who has done fantastic work in achieving that wonderful success.

There was commentary in a newspaper recently about IDA Ireland expecting a 40% drop in foreign direct investment in the years to come. In all the embassies I have been in throughout the world I have been impressed with the cohesion, commitment and professionalism, not just of our diplomats but also people from IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland and their associates who are active 24-7 in pushing the name of Ireland and the investment opportunities that can be made by investing in our country. I would not underestimate the importance of that connection, the work they do or their influence. Notwithstanding the Brexit crisis and all our concerns, the Minister has a huge task, as do his Ministers of State, but we are well up to that challenge of solving the problem of Brexit.

Ultimately, the work, commitment and passion that the Minister and his Department have shown, and all the parties in Northern Ireland, in bringing peace to our country and in trying to ensure that the Northern Executive functions well, and the North-South Ministerial Council meetings that will take place shortly, are a direct result of the input, commitment and professionalism of his Department. I commend the Estimate.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am glad to be able to respond to several of those questions and comment on some of the broader issues that have been raised. Deputy Richmond is correct. The plans for Ireland to increase its footprint and influence across the world are not confined to activity outside of the European Union. The EU will certainly be very different in a post-Brexit world to how it was when the UK was very much a part of it and was an ally of Ireland in so many different policy areas. For some time now we have been investing in increasing our footprint and deepening relationships across the European Union. We have already opened a new consulate in Frankfurt. We have undertaken an Irish-German strategic review that looks at strengthening all aspects of that relationship, including cultural, commercial and political. We have done exactly the same thing with France and Scotland. We are looking strategically at other relationships, such as those with the Nordic and Baltic countries, which share a lot of Ireland's policy perspectives on EU debates. I wish to reassure the House that we are investing time, energy, resources and people to ensure the relationships across the European Union that we will need in a post-Brexit environment. This is appropriate and we will continue to pursue it.

I absolutely agree with Deputy Richmond's comments on Africa. Ireland has a long history in Africa. It is a credible history and not a colonial history. We have shared a lot of our wealth and a lot of our people to assist with education, nutrition, agriculture, climate resilience and knowledge. We hope to do an awful lot more in the future. We are planning to open two new embassies in west Africa. We have not yet finalised the locations. In north Africa, as I said earlier, we will open a new embassy in Morocco and we may also do so in Algeria. This will reinforce relationships there and will open up new political and commercial opportunities. I know Deputy Richmond will be very supportive of this. I take the Deputy's comments on Hong Kong on board. This is an evolving story, on which I suspect I will be answering questions for quite some time.

In response to Deputy O'Dowd, I also want to pay tribute to Ambassador Paul Gleeson. Working from Chile, he did a phenomenal job to ensure Irish people who were trapped in Peru could get home. He was not the only one. He led a team of people who did a really good piece of work over several weeks in a very complex environment. He is one of many examples of people in my Department who do an incredible job across the world. Ms Geraldine Byrne Nason is another example. I was wondering where she got her toughness. Clearly Drogheda is the link. She is quite frankly a force of nature in her work in the UN. She played a major part in our success in taking a seat on the Security Council and she will continue to have a huge influence on how Ireland uses the opportunity of Security Council membership in the ways to which many people in this House have already referred.

I refer to the North-South Ministerial Council. We have a lot of work to do to rebuild better relationships between the North and South of this island, with the Executive and particularly with unionist parties. We must also strengthen the relationship with other parties. Brexit has had a corrosive influence on relationships for the last several years. This Government will work hard to try to address some of that damage.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I wish to join others in congratulating the Minister on his reappointment to the Department. It is a very important appointment that ensures continuity, maintains experience and allows Deputy Coveney to continue the good work he has heretofore been doing with Deputy McEntee, especially regarding Brexit and relationships in Europe. Much of what I wish to ask about has already been raised so I will not repeat it all. We will need to return to the issue of Hong Kong at some point.

I refer to Vote 27, which includes official development assistance, ODA. I note from the Estimates that since 2019 there has been a small increase in funding from the Department. This step in the right direction is to be welcomed. The increase in annual contribution to the green climate fund, which helps developing countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, is also very positive and was noted as such by Social Justice Ireland. However, even with that additional funding and funding from other Departments such as the Department of Finance and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, we are still a long way short of the target of 0.7% of gross national income, GNI.

During these times of global economic uncertainty it is hugely important for developing nations to have reliable assistance funding. We must take our place in the world and seek to protect vulnerable communities globally as well as at home. This applies especially to those most at risk from climate change. Our assistance to the nations that need our help is life-saving. It can eradicate poverty and hunger through agricultural programmes. It can assist democracy and protect the marginalised and vulnerable through education and gender equality programmes. Investment in infrastructure helps to provide for basic needs like clean water, sewage systems and reliable power supplies. Resources are also invested in healthcare and medicine, leading to improvements in life expectancy and quality of life. This is absolutely life-changing for millions of people throughout the world.

Our programme for Government reinforces our commitment to fulfilling our ODA ambitions. The OECD Development Assistance Committee and Social Justice Ireland have both recommended outlining a strategy for increasing our ODA budget to meet our international target. Can the Minister commit to setting out such a strategy? As part of that strategy, will he commit to the establishment of clear communication processes to inform Members of the Oireachtas and the public on the value and the benefit to Ireland of meeting its United Nations target of 0.7% of GNI? I am not just referring to what this assistance can provide on the ground, but also to its contribution to our global standing and its help in furthering our influence on global policies on equality, climate change and the implementation of the sustainable development goals. I also call on the Minister to ensure, as I know he will, that all Irish aid is spent in a manner that upholds the United Nations sustainable development goals. I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy. I will need some time to answer his question. Deputy Brady asked the same question earlier and I did not get a chance to get back to him. Deputy Harkin and others also mentioned the commitment to 0.7% of GNI and how we can get there.

As the Deputy knows, the programme for Government includes a commitment to getting to 0.7% by 2030. We have also committed to ensuring that we do not allow the actual spend to fall below 2019 levels of expenditure at any point between now and 2030. We will use a three-year averaging system to make sure that does not happen on a sustained basis. In other words, if something was to happen to the Irish economy as a result of Covid-19, Brexit, both of these concerns together or something else that we have not anticipated, we will still be very strongly

committed to maintaining actual levels of expenditure as well as attempting to reach 0.7% of GNI. If our economy shrinks we will look like we are making significant progress in percentage terms by just maintaining actual spend. We want to maintain the actual amount we spend, which is now €838 million in total, and also go well beyond that.

If the Irish economy can grow at the rate at which we anticipated before the Covid crisis, we would be talking about spending some €2.5 billion a year on overseas development aid by 2030, which is a significant increase from where we are today. The seriousness of intent in regard to that target was evidenced two budgets ago when we increased the ODA spend by €114 million in one year. The reason we could not increase it by a similar amount last year was that we had a Brexit budget which was incredibly risk averse. The budget was planning for a no-deal Brexit and, therefore, it limited spending across all expenditure areas, including this one. Even in that environment, we still increased the ODA budget by more than €20 million. I believe we will do more if we can get back to some kind of normality. There is a commitment on the part of this new Government, as there was on the part of the last Government, to increase significantly, year on year, our expenditure on ODA. In my view, that expenditure is an investment in decency and morality and in our relationships with people in other parts of the word who desperately need our support and partnership, as opposed to our charity. That is what the new ODA strategy is all about.

We will work with parties in government and in opposition, perhaps though the committee process, to see how we can map out a realistic plan that will take us, over the next decade, from spending approximately €840 million to some €2.5 billion per year. We will work to see how we can move incrementally towards that ambitious target. We are committed to it and I look forward, over the next few years, to delivering on it.

Votes put and agreed to.

Minister for Justice and Equality(Deputy Helen McEntee): I move the following Revised Estimates:

Vote 20 - An Garda Síochána (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €1,782,581,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Garda Síochána, including pensions, etc.; for the payment of certain witnesses' expenses, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 21 - Prison Service (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €383,211,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Prison Service, and other expenses in connection with prisons, including places of detention, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 22 - Courts Service (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €106,245,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for such of the salaries and expenses of the Courts Service and of the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal, the High Court, the Special Criminal Court, the Circuit Court and the District Court

and of certain other minor services as are not charged to the Central Fund.

Vote 24 - Justice and Equality (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €461,045,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Probation Service staff and of certain other services including payments under cashlimited schemes administered by that Office, and payment of certain grants.

Vote 25 - Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €6,733,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 41 - Policing Authority (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €3,366,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Policing Authority**.**

Vote 44 - Data Protection Commission (Revised)

That a sum not exceeding €16,686,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Data Protection Commission.

I am seeking the House's approval of the Revised Estimates for the justice Vote group to provide for much-needed expenditure across the justice sector. Subject to a small technical adjustment of less than €1 million, the Estimates being discussed today are those that were published last December. Pending the Estimates being passed by this House, Departments may spend an amount not exceeding 80% of the amount included in the Appropriation Act for the previous year. A number of Votes within the justice group could reach this four-fifths limit over the period from July to September, hence the necessity to have the existing Estimates reviewed that this point. There will be a number of areas to review and revisit later in the year, including in regard to direct provision and the impact of the Covid pandemic on certain Votes. The transfer functions arising from the reconfiguration of Departments will impact the Department of Justice and Equality Vote in particular, but the Revised Estimates today reflect the existing Vote structure.

The justice Vote group is made up of seven different Votes, with a combined gross expenditure allocation of €2.99 billion in 2020. This allocation comprises €2.72 billion in current expenditure and €269 million in capital expenditure. The gross expenditure Estimate for Vote 20, An Garda Síochána, is €1.879 billion, which amounts to 63% of the funding for the entire group. Since the Estimates were published last December, An Garda Síochána has been confronted with the challenge of Covid-19 and has had to put in place a number of measures to maintain the front-line and visible nature of the actions it has taken to counteract the impact of the pandemic throughout the State.

These measures include a revised emergency roster arrangement to facilitate longer shifts

for teams. This arrangement helps to avoid crossover of members as much as possible, thereby minimising the risk of infection to members while at the same time maintaining the front-line service for members of the public. The revised roster has led to additional costs for unsocial hours payments. In addition, 319 trainee gardaí were attested ahead of schedule in March to provide more front-line resources. This followed the attestation of 201 trainee gardaí in February who had completed the full training period in Templemore.

An Garda Síochána has had to purchase significant quantities of personal protective equipment and, in the expectation that this requirement will continue to year end, the estimated cost is in the region of €13 million. While €9 million is being made available in the Estimates to the Garda Commissioner to strengthen and expand the Garda fleet, further additional investment in the fleet, including fit-out, of approximately €3 million will be required in 2020. This is directly as a result of the Covid-19 response. An Garda Síochána was required to hire 210 additional vehicles for community policing, which are estimated to cost €1.5 million over a six-month period.

The 2020 Estimates provided for an information and communications technology, ICT, investment of almost €74 million. This will support existing Garda ICT systems, enable them to be developed further to meet the ongoing business requirements of the force and enable gardaí to deploy the latest cutting-edge technologies in the fight against crime. This includes the deployment of front-line mobility hand-held devices, which give gardaí unprecedented flexibility on patrol and at crime scenes to access Garda ICT systems in real time. The very significant level of investment has also facilitated remote working throughout the organisation during the Covid crisis.

In addition to these resourcing measures, An Garda Síochána was given specific additional powers by the Government under the Covid-19 regulations. The previous Minister requested the Policing Authority to conduct a regular and independent assessment of the force's exercise of the temporary powers in support of the pubic health guidelines. In all, five reports have been completed to date. It was found that An Garda Síochána is continuing to police the health crisis in a sensitive and proportionate manner and to use the powers under the health regulation only sparingly and when necessary. Throughout this emergency period, Garda members in all communities, rural and urban, have been reaching out to those who are most vulnerable, alone or afraid. Gardaí continue to encourage anyone who needs help to telephone their local Garda station. I wholeheartedly commend the Garda on the role it has played in keeping us safe in these unusual times.

The Estimate provides for €32 million for the capital building and refurbishment programme, including the completion of Fitzgibbon Street redevelopment project and the project to relocate An Garda Síochána from Harcourt Street to Military Road. Similar to most building projects in the State, these projects were on hold during the emergency period but are now up and running again. The OPW, which manages the projects on behalf of An Garda Síochána, is working with the various contractors involved to ascertain the progress and expenditure levels for the remainder of the year. It is expected there will be some reprofiling of expenditure across subheads before the end of the year. For example, if, as expected, there is an underspend in building capital, this will be utilised to offset the additional fleet investment cost due to Covid, etc.

Although An Garda Síochána is looking at every possible means to offset other additional Covid costs, the options are limited. Approximately 84% of the Votes relate to pay and superan-

nuation costs which are, in effect, mainly fixed costs. That limits the capacity to absorb additional costs. The position will become clearer across the Vote later in the financial year, but the Garda Commissioner has indicated that additional funding will be required due to the scale of response required in respect of the Covid pandemic and after taking into account certain offsetting measures within the Vote.

In all the circumstances outlined, I am pleased to present an Estimate of €1.875 billion for 2020. There are now 14,700 Garda members in the service and 3,020 civilian employees. To date in 2020, a further 49 members have been redeployed to front-line policing duties, which brings the total number of redeployments to 650.

A capital provision of €116.5 million is being provided, an increase of 40% on the final Estimate for 2019. Despite the Covid restrictions and the delays to certain projects, it is anticipated that the vast bulk of this funding will be spent at the year end, particularly in the context of ICT and the transport fleet.

A well resourced and funded Garda force is a top priority for the Government. These levels of investment are complemented by an extensive policing transformation programme which will ensure a modern and fit-for-purpose policing service for the many outstanding people who work in An Garda Síochána and the public that it serves.

Vote 24, Justice and Equality, has a gross estimate provision of almost €536 million. This is broken down into five separate programmes comprising almost 60 separate subheads. Substantial funding has been made available to agencies that play a pivotal role in the criminal justice area, such as Forensic Science Ireland, FSI, and the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB. A total budget of €57 million is being provided to FSI in 2020, of which €39.6 million is capital. Although a contract has been awarded and work has commenced on the construction of its new laboratory in Backweston, County Kildare, it appears likely that there will be a significant underspend in this budget in 2020 and it will need to be reprofiled for later this year. The OPW is currently working with the contractor to determine the impact of the restrictions on spend in the current year. Further additional funding of €2.1 million in current expenditure has been provided in response to the increased workload of FSI, as well as the complexity of cases.

Additional funding of €500,000 will bring the total allocation for the Criminal Assets Bureau to €9.1 million. CAB plays a crucial role in tackling money laundering and targeting the proceeds of crime. Across Ireland, CAB is working to ensure that criminals cannot enjoy the spoils of their illegal activities. The increased resources will support CAB in this vital work.

It has been possible to increase the resources available to several regulatory bodies, including the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, to which an additional €500,000 has been allocated, bringing the total allocation to €11.2 million. An additional €500,000 will bring the allocation for the Private Security Authority to €3.8 million in 2020. A significant increase of €700,000 brings resources for the Inspector of Prisons to €1.2 million. Funding of €1 million has been provided for the establishment of the Judicial Council, bringing the total allocation to €1.25 million. The Legal Aid Board has been allocated €42.2 million for 2020, which includes a further €1 million in addition to existing funding to continue the Abhaile scheme for mortgage arrears.

The Department's mission is to make Ireland safer, fairer and more inclusive. I am pleased that a total allocation of more than €930,000 is being made available for equality and LGBTI+

initiatives. Funding for victims of crime has increased by €200,000, bringing the total allocation to €1.9 million.

It was acknowledged in budget 2020 that the funding requirements and policy responses in respect of accommodation for seekers of international protection will need to be kept under review on a whole-of-government basis throughout the year. The budgetary provision in this regard in 2020 is €80.6 million. Expenditure in 2019 was €130 million and is almost €83 million to the end of June 2020. The Covid-19 restrictions have impacted on costs, including the need to secure additional hotel spaces in order to help reduce contacts within centres and to provide self-isolation facilities in a several locations in conjunction with the HSE. It has been necessary to purchase PPE, sanitiser and many other products in order to reduce the risk of an outbreak in centres. This area is giving rise to significant additional costs which, as I outlined, will need to be addressed in the autumn.

On a related matter, an expert advisory group chaired by Dr. Catherine Day, which was announced in December 2019, is now expected to submit its final report in September 2020. The group, which is unconstrained by current or past policy, has been tasked to examine the provision of State supports, including accommodation, for those in the international protection asylum process. The programme for Government commits in the short term to acting on interim recommendations from the chairperson of the expert group to improve conditions for asylum seekers currently living in the system. In addition, the programme contains a commitment to replace the current accommodation model with a new international protection accommodation policy centred on a not-for-profit approach. It is expected that the report of the expert group will contain recommendations on new models for accommodation and other supports for applicants for international protection which will inform future policy in this area.

The travel restrictions as a result of Covid will have a significant negative impact on registration and visa fee income in 2020 in particular. The precise impact depends on the length of time for which the restrictions are in place. A proportion of the registration fee income relates to renewal of registrations rather than new registrations. A clearer picture will emerge closer to the end of the financial year.

Turning to the Vote 21, Prisons, the gross Estimate in 2019 is €392.4 million. The additional current expenditure is almost €19 million compared with the corresponding budget in 2019, including €14 million in respect of additional payroll costs and €5 million across several areas to meet the demands arising from higher prisoner numbers and increased maintenance costs of the prisons estate. The capital budget for 2020 has increased significantly, from €32.3 million last year to €46.7 million. Most of this will be utilised for the redevelopment of Limerick Prison. The potential impact on the project in 2020 due to Covid is unclear. There is likely to be an underspend due to the site restrictions and the impact of social distancing and supply chain issues after the restriction period. A full financial analysis is currently being carried out with the contractor but, although progress will be made, there may be an underspend in capital by year end.

Additional Covid-related costs in the prisons are currently estimated to be in the region of €4 million to 5 million in total. These are preliminary costings and the final cost will depend on the length of the emergency and the impact on the prisons. The costs mainly relate to PPE, additional video link facilities for remote court attendance and additional payroll costs in respect of cover for officers in isolation. To date, no prisoner has been infected with Covid-19 and the Irish Prison Service, IPS, has been internationally recognised for its work in controlling the spread of the virus. It has now shared its experience with other countries through the submis-

sion of a paper to the World Health Organization on its approach to the outbreak. It represents a very strong collective effort that has been made during the Covid-19 pandemic by IPS staff, management and prisoners, as well as Red Cross volunteers . The new infection prevention and control teams that are in place in all prisons have made a significant contribution to the successful handling of the virus. This work is something with which we should be particularly pleased and should be commended. It is vitally important that these efforts continue in order to maintain this remarkable safety record.

A total gross Estimate of €156.4 million is being provided for the Courts Service under Vote 22. This encompasses an additional €1.5 million in day-to-day running costs, €10 million in capital expenditure and a further €4.5 million in gross expenditure on capital and current building works, which has been funded from the dormant courts fund. However, since the Estimate was published, the Courts Service's income has been severely impacted by the Covid emergency. The full impact will not be known until later in the year but there could be a shortfall of €17 million, or 40%, in fee income, which would be unsustainable for the Courts Service's Vote. We will need to address this before the end of the year in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Approximately €9 million is accounted for in the fall-off in fee income from social exemption orders for the licensed trade and hospitality industry. The Courts Service projects that the equivalent of three months of civil business, from April, May and June, will be lost due to Covid-19, with a shortfall in income of approximately €8 million.

A gross Estimate of €16.9 million is being provided to the Data Protection Commission. This is Vote 44, which in 2020 is a separate Vote for the first time. This allocation includes an increase of €1.6 million or 11% compared with the previous year. The Data Protection Commission budget has increased significantly in recent years as the responsibilities and functions of the office have expanded.

A gross Estimate of €3.4 million has been provided for the Policing Authority Vote, which is Vote 41. The gross expenditure budget for the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, which is Vote 25, is €6.8 million, to enable it to continue its important work in promoting and protecting human rights and equality.

With the approval of this House, these Estimates will fund the seven Votes in the justice sector with the financial resources to continue to provide the necessary and varied range of functions and responsibilities across the justice sector. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Revised Estimate with colleagues in the House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Go raibh maith agat. I wish the Minister well in her new role.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I congratulate the new Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, on their appointments, and I look forward to working closely with them in the coming months and, hopefully, years as we move through this process, out of Covid and into a more normal arrangement. The Estimates this year are governed by what happened in previous months with regard to Covid and the crisis that we have come through. The Garda numbers are interesting. The Minister says there are 14,700, with just over 3,000 civilian personnel. I know there was a target of having 4,000 civilian personnel working in the Garda by 2021, and I hope we will see how many front-line gardaí are able to get back out on the beat as a consequence of having the additional civilian personnel taking on those roles, and how much more of that is envisaged.

The capital costs are always contentious. I know there have been restrictions this year with regard to getting a lot of work done because of Covid. I am disappointed to see that provision was made through a public private partnership for the provision of Garda stations in Sligo, Macroom and a number of areas, and the station in Sligo has now been removed. I appeal to the Minister to re-examine it because the Garda station in Sligo is unfit for purpose. It is higgledy-piggledy and all over the place, with several buildings joined together with corridors. It is overcrowded. It simply does not work. That is the case in many areas around the country. For instance, the Garda station in Tallaght is also overcrowded. There was political talk at different times but nothing was ever put on paper, nor was a firm commitment made to provide a new Garda station in west Tallaght. It is the same in many areas around the country where we have a real need to provide new services and facilities to make the gardaí more efficient and effective.

The forensic science laboratory was mentioned and I know that some work has been taking place on that. We see it continue every year. We need to know at what point that project will come to fruition or be finished.

A number of inquiries have to be set up. The previous Government give commitments to do so, particularly to set up an inquiry into the case of Shane O'Farrell. I appeal to the Minister again to make provision in the budget to put that inquiry in place and ensure it is a public and independent inquiry into what happened. I know family have been grieving as a result of what happened to their son and brother. The Stardust inquest is another that has been promised for a long time but has not as of yet come to fruition. These are vital steps which must be taken as quickly as possible.

The Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, was mentioned and the additional resources put in place for it. I congratulate CAB in the work it has done. In many cases, it is very effective at tackling the criminal drug gangs that blight so many communities. In the last few days, the Central Statistics Office published a crime victimisation survey. It found that half of respondents did not trust the justice system. That is particularly the case with older people and people in what would be considered more deprived communities, which are the communities in which these gangs operate. There needs to be a greater effort and emphasis on ensuring we deliver for people in those areas.

With regard to Covid-19, the Minister mentioned a figure of €13 million for PPE. Many people watching the television news every evening will have seen gardaí at checkpoints not wearing any PPE, whereas they saw police services across Europe and elsewhere using PPE. That annoyed many people. A constituent contacted my office just yesterday to complain about being stopped at a checkpoint where the gardaí were not wearing PPE. This issue needs to be dealt with as quickly as possible.

The issue with drugs is the big concern. There was a report this week about the use of crack cocaine. Cocaine addiction in the community is something we need to tackle. I know it is not simply a justice issue and spans many areas, but justice should be a primary part of it. This is an industry driven by substantial profits for a small minority of people who terrorise communities in this city and in other urban areas around the country. It has stretched into every town across the length and breadth of the country. While from the point of view of finances for our security services and such there is never enough, every effort has to be made to ensure the Government demonstrates that it will keep people safe, deliver for communities and keep people first.

Deputy Pa Daly: Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis an Aire nua, an Teachta

McEntee, agus leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta McConalogue. Tá sé soiléir go bhfuil dúshláin agus deacrachtaí nua ag baint le Covid-19 do na Ranna go léir agus don Roinn Dlí agus Cirt. Chonaic mé an tuarascáil ón Irish Human Rights Commission agus tá béim ann ar chomhionannas, cothrom na Féinne agus ceartas sóisialta a choimeád sna polasaithe sa Roinn Dlí agus Cirt i rith an pandemic. There are a number of interesting things in the Estimates. I welcome the announcement of the increase in funding for community policing vehicles and community policing works. I note with interest that funding for the witness security programme is being increased from €120,000 to nearly €1.2 million, an 800% increase. I had a question regarding prisons, given that the number of bed nights was reduced between March and May by 11%, while the Estimate seems to have increased by 9%, but the Minister, in fairness to her, answered that when she said the figures may be revised later in the year.

On the matter of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, the Garda has reported a 25% rise in domestic calls since the restrictions began. Women's Aid has in turn said that the figures are probably much higher, given that many victims do not report incidents to the Garda. It is difficult to reconcile this reality with the Estimate. The Estimate envisages delivering the same numbers of domestic refuges and refuge spaces this year as were provided in 2019, with 22 refuges and 160 spaces. At the same time, funding under the financial human resource inputs heading for criminal justice, for prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, has reduced by 16%. I am sure the Minister will agree that Operation Faoiseamh, which was set up by An Garda Síochána to target crimes of domestic abuse, will be fighting an uphill battle without supports for women to exit abusive relationships being in place and without prevention programmes being adequately supported.

I agree with what the Minister said about the not-for-profit approach being introduced to direct provision. That is a good idea but those direct provision centres which are not fit for purpose, such as the Cahersiveen centre, should be closed now or as soon as possible. I was not sure why funding for the opinion poll from the public attitudes survey was included in the Estimates.

Despite the efforts of some people to heighten fear of crime, it is noteworthy that for 64% of respondents fear of crime has no impact on quality of life. For less than 20% fear of crime is a serious problem. That being said, how do these Estimates and the programme for Government they support measure up to these moral and political imperatives?

4 o'clock

Access to justice is a key legal principle which has often been forgotten. The Courts Service has recently taken the view that the pandemic has created particular challenges concerning the swearing in of juries for trials in the Circuit Court, particularly due to social distancing requirements. For example, in the south western circuit which covers counties Clare, Limerick and Kerry, the Courts Service has decreed that jury trials will be restricted to one location, namely, Limerick city. As a result, members of An Garda Síochána will have to spend their time travelling up and down the road to Limerick from counties Kerry and Clare. That journey is a 200 km round trip from Tralee, for example. The same applies to legal teams, leading to increased inconvenience and distress for witnesses, victims and defendants who have the presumption of innocence.

I note that the programme for Government emphasises the need to prioritise town centres. The neglect of Tralee courthouse has one silver lining, namely, that the building is near the Main Street and the loss of business to the town centre will be particularly acute this year. There are plans which are 30 years old on the wall of the current courthouse. In those 30 years,

the only refurbishment has been to the judge's chambers. Even the long-awaited wheelchair lift in the plans on the wall has never been fitted. Surely the imagination to refurbish this building in a manner which fits the needs of a modern court is out there somewhere. This courthouse, designed by a 17 year old apprentice architect and quarried from limestone in the town centre, has functioned in the present location since the days of Daniel O'Connell, through the War of Independence and on to the wrongful prosecution which led to the Kerry babies tribunal. There is an abundance of underutilised space within the existing structure to provide extra courtrooms, separate entrances for juries, prisoners and judges, and possibly some flexibility for Covid compliance.

Has the possibility of videoconferencing for jury selection in other venues, not only in Tralee but around the country, been explored or even considered? The will and the effort must be applied to ensure that Tralee town centre and indeed many towns in other circuits around the country are protected. Courts and Garda stations have been lost to towns and villages around the country, including seven courts in Kerry since the turn of the century. This has to be reversed. Justice has to be seen to be done and justice should be administered in local courts in local communities. There is a well-founded fear in legal, Garda and business circles that the current crisis will be used as an excuse by the Courts Service to further restrict services. This is not a request; it is a demand. Local court services must be maintained.

Our friends in west Cork fought a mighty battle to save the courthouse in Skibbereen. We should remember Skibbereen, as the song goes, and the battle waged to save that courthouse. Any Government with a serious commitment to town centres should aim to maintain services in provincial towns. Imagination and hard work are necessary, but it is possible if the greater good of the community is in mind.

The Estimates triple the capital expenditure amounts for courthouses. We need to spend the money allocated as soon as possible to inject jobs into the rural economy. We need to facilitate good local builders with experience to complete these projects and keep jobs local. If the current restrictions continue in some form, we should be imaginative about obtaining rooms to swear in juries rather than cancelling or restricting services. I urge the Minister to expedite these works.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I congratulate the Minister, Deputy McEntee, whom I always found to be extremely fair in her previous role. I wish her the best and look forward to working with her. I am delighted that we have a young woman as Minister for Justice and Equality. I also offer congratulations to the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue.

My contribution will focus on the human rights and equality aspects of this, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Despite our having passed this convention, we have not ratified the optional protocol which allows people with a disability to take a complaint to the UN about their rights. By not ratifying this optional protocol, we are failing people with a disability. Unfortunately, the previous Government and, it would seem already, the new Government are failing people with a disability.

In recent weeks, calls have been made to reopen adult day services, closed due to the Covid pandemic, yet we have no date for when that might happen. People who have a disability or family members or others who advocate on their behalf constantly describe it as a battle. They have to battle for a diagnosis, for the various therapies needed, for a school place, for transport to that school, for an adult day service and for transport for that service. For carers it is a

constant battle for any sort of support, particularly relating to respite. In many areas respite is non-existent. My constituency is an example of that; with respite closed for five years. These are all extremely serious and important issues. I hope the new Government will do something about this, take it on board and not just pay lip service to it.

Do the Estimates include money to ensure the optional protocol will be ratified? Can we get a timeframe? Last year, we were told it would not be ratified in 2019 but would be ratified in 2020. Here we are in July with the year slipping by. People will talk about Covid, but it cannot be an excuse for everything. We need a timeframe for when this will be ratified. If the Government is serious about ensuring that people with disabilities, their families and their carers are respected and given the services they need, it would have no difficulty in ratifying this protocol because it empowers people. The Government should be trying to empower people by saying it has nothing to hide and that it wants people to have the right to take a case against it if they feel they have a need to do so. I share the fear of many people in the sector that this protocol has not been ratified to date because I imagine there would be an enormous number of cases taken given all the failings in the sector. Will the money be provided this year to ensure the optional protocol is ratified?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am delighted to have an opportunity to congratulate the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on her appointment as Minister for Justice and Equality. Obviously, we worked in the last Dáil when she had responsibility in the area of European affairs with Brexit as the focus. I also wish the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, well.

In my judgment, the most important task the Minister will have in the coming years is completing the programme of Garda reform. We have talked about this for a decade. The single most important decision made in the justice area in recent decades was the establishment of an independent policing authority. I campaigned for that since the 2000s and I introduced legislation that was voted down by Governments in the early 2000s. I brought people to talk to politicians here. I remember meeting Denis Bradley, the vice chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board at the time. Nuala O'Loan, who was the Police Ombudsman of Northern Ireland at the time, also came down to address a meeting.

We need to follow through on these things and they cannot be unravelled. I have read very carefully the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing and also the minority report or the views of some who disagreed with some elements of what is, by and large, a very good report. I spoke to the chair of the commission, Kathleen O'Toole, on these matters. It is critical - I want to discuss this with the Minister over time - that the essence of having an independent oversight body is maintained. The Policing Authority has done that very well. I pay particular tribute to the first chairperson of the Policing Authority, Josephine Feehily, who was a very wise choice. She is a very strong woman and made an enormous contribution. I wish her successor, Bob Collins, every success.

There is a danger that we might get things wrong now and emasculate the successor body to the Policing Authority. I have no difficulty in amalgamating the authority with the Garda Inspectorate. The inspectorate was the initial response by a Government which did not want to establish a policing authority. I do not think there is a need for both. However, we need to ensure that the nexus of oversight and real authority is separate from the higher ranks of An Garda Síochána. It needs to be independent and strong, and needs to have powers. It needs to be the decision maker on top-level appointments.

The report's proposal for devolution to the 19 divisions needs to be implemented. We need to have the right people in the right jobs. The skill set for a modern policing system requires skills in human resources and financial investigation. These are not everyday commonplace skills and we need ensure we have them and have the right technology. We will be looking carefully at the implementation of those things and I hope to have discussions with the Minister on them.

I will raise a couple of other points in the few minutes that I have left. I tried to talk to the Minister about an issue last week and I hope we can make direct contact with her more easily than has been the case to date. I am sure the difficulties in that regard have related to Covid-19. The operation of the International Protection Act 2015, legislation which I support, excludes direct representations being made by Members of this House. My experience of working in the Oireachtas for several decades tells me that institutions of the State that are not directly accountable through oversight by the Oireachtas suffer for its lack. I ask that the matter to which I refer be reviewed and I will give the details to the Minister. As things stand, any Member of the House who wants to put specific information about an asylum seeker before a decision-maker in the International Protection Office is precluded from doing so. I wrote to the Minister directly, asking for an oversight, and, perversely, received a reply from the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service, INIS, telling me what I already know. The reply quoted the 2015 Act. We must ensure that we have the capacity within the Oireachtas to hold every organisation to account in a modern democracy. I will discuss with the Minister the oversight of INIS that is required. I asked the Taoiseach earlier in the week why INIS did not transfer to the new Department for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration since the direct provision system will fall under the integration aspect of that new Department. He explained that the matter had been debated but not decided upon. That new Department might well still be the best location for it but that is a matter we can discuss at another time.

I also raise the issue of domestic violence. I commend An Garda Síochána on the proactive way in which it has handled the issue during the pandemic. Operation Faoiseamh has been successful. An Garda has been clear in its public utterances that anybody who is experiencing domestic violence can reach out. That has been important and has saved a lot of suffering. I must be honest and say that the true scale of domestic violence during the pandemic is unknown to us. We might never know its scale because much of it is still oblique. Some people, and women in particular, were trapped in houses with abusers, unable to reach out and suffered terribly during the lockdown period. It is important that we ensure the necessary resources are available through the Garda National Protective Service Bureau. There are 245 officers and 16 divisional protective service units across the country but we need to have a debate about whether that is enough. Another Deputy already made the point that supportive step-down places, areas of protection, accommodation and shelters must be available to people in order that they can readily escape positions where they are under incredible pressure and suffering direct mental, physical and sometimes sexual abuse. These are shocking things that we must address through robust mechanisms. An Garda Síochána is well up for that challenge and wants the resources to do a good job.

My final point relates to judicial reform. I welcome the allocation of additional money for the Judicial Council. We have talked for years about establishing such a council in order to have some common policy and training in respect of sentencing across the Judiciary so that it is not a lottery and to ensure consistency and understanding through an update of judicial training.

I look forward to teasing out these and many other matters with the Minister in the course

of the months and, I hope, years to come. A broad range of responsibilities now falls to the Minister and I wish her every success with all of that. I hope my points on the capital side were understood. We need to invest in our court and prison infrastructures and our Garda stations in order to make sure that we can effectively house the people who are delivering our justice systems.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I also congratulate the Minister and Minister of State on their appointments. I wish them well in the coming years. I am pleased that the Minister represents a constituency in the commuter belt, particularly as the lowest ratios of gardaí to population are in Meath and Kildare, respectively. I know it is down to the Garda Commissioner to deploy resources but I am sure that fact will not go unnoticed by the Minister. Those of us in the areas to which I refer noticed a high level of Garda visibility during the lockdown and that is not something we had seen previously. Some degree of equity of service needs to be pressed home.

We would not be considering these Revised Estimates if it was not for Covid-19. Money has obviously had to be spent because of the actions that had to be taken. An Garda was heavily involved in the first instance and, for example, some recruits from Templemore were attested early. The Minister might address how that will play out to ensure that we do not lose the momentum of recruitment because there will also be retirements. Will those recruits who were attested early still receive their full training?

There has been an overspend of nearly €8 million on the leasing of vehicles. We noticed that because it was done quickly. Sometimes when something is done quickly, there is not the capacity to get the kind of value for money that would have been achieved in a long process. Will those vehicles be retained in the fleet? Will the number of vehicles be compatible with the number of recruits? How will that play out in the next few months? Obviously, these may well be considerations for next year also.

There were some changes in rosters and other things that seem to have worked quite well. While such things might be more costly, having gardaí who are fresh is beneficial from the point of view of officers themselves. A total of 319 recruits came into front-line policing. That is the group about which I am talking. I am interested in what will happen to that group and what the role of Templemore will be. With social distancing requirements and all the rest of it, what will happen in Templemore? I think 124 gardaí who were attached to the Garda Training College were redeployed to front-line service.

Will there be funding available for the new divisional headquarters? I was disappointed that the divisional headquarters in the districts of Kildare and Laois-Offaly went to Portlaoise because the population of Kildare is considerably larger than that of the other two counties put together. It is important that we do not lose personnel when numbers are already low. The same thing happened in the Meath area when Mullingar was designated as the divisional headquarters.

What has happened with the passenger locator forms? That was obviously something that would not have happened without Covid and that work is still ongoing. The Department of Justice was temporarily tasked with the administration of the passenger locator forms at the ports and airports. Border management unit officials co-ordinated the regime from their Dublin Airport base. The Garda National Immigration Bureau managed the compliance at ports and sent forms to the border management unit at Dublin Airport. Can the Minister outline the administrative cost of taking this project on? How was the handover back to the Department of

Health conducted? Where does that fall in terms of the Estimates, particularly as it occurred midway through the fiscal year? Has a security gap emerged now that the Garda and the border unit staff are no longer involved? Will the cost now be borne by the HSE and at what stage did that happen?

I reiterate the point about domestic violence. It is not just a Department of Justice and Equality issue. We had a debate recently on that. The Department funded NGOs in this area to the tune of €200,000 and while that was welcome, the scale of what came up was such that it was a relatively small amount of money. This is not exclusively a criminal justice issue. There have to be routes through which people can leave that kind of environment. The punishment should not be on the people who have to leave because they are the ones who are subject to the violence.

I reiterate the point Deputy Funchion made about the operational protocol. This is a group of people who have been badly left behind in the roadmap in the context of adult day services. We really do need to move very quickly to a rights-based approach and we need to adopt that protocol. So many of our services to that cohort are provided by charities. In the absence of that rights-based approach, there is a serious problem in terms of a guarantee of services. I do not think I have ever met a parent of a child with a disability who does not end up with a big file because he or she has become a permanent lobbyist. That is why we have to guarantee services. I am not sure if this is the part of the work of the Department that will be moving elsewhere. I do not think we can say often enough that the optional protocol is critical in terms of guaranteeing a rights-based approach.

What has happened to the civilianisation of the force during the lockdown? Are we going to lose momentum on it this year? I would be concerned about that because it is going to provide us with the balance of resources we all have been hoping to get to. Reconnecting that process in such an uncertain time is going to be problematic.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want to focus on one specific question to the new Minister. It is an issue that is of grave concern to me. It has to do with programme D - An Equal and Inclusive Society (Civil Justice and Equality Pillar). I want to ask the Minister's views on a committee on combating racism that was set up by her predecessor. This committee is to report within three months and to complete its work within a year. I am sure we all wish it the best. Its composition includes many people whom I would strongly welcome in terms of diversity and coming from various sections of society, as well as those with a track record of fighting racism and discrimination. I am, however, stunned by the inclusion of one representative from a global multinational company. Whatever that person's own particular individual record or ability is, they are there as a representative of firm. I find it quite shocking that we would appoint a member of a company to an anti-racism body when that company, quite frankly, has a very disturbing history. It has been the subject of multiple human rights campaigns against abuses and the shocking treatment of migrant workers and minorities in the institutions it runs.

The company to which I refer is Sodexo. It is one of the largest outsourcing companies in the UK. It offers a range of services based on over 100 professions, including on-site services such as school kitchens, privatised prisons, hospitals, and benefits and rewards services like childcare vouchers. It faces copious allegations of racism throughout its employment hierarchy. In 2005, Sodexo was forced to pay $80 million in compensation to thousands of black employees who claimed that they were excluded from promotions and segregated in the company by fellow workers. To mention a couple of other cases that ring alarm bells, in April last year

an inquest found serious failures at a Sodexo-run prison in Peterborough in Britain. The inquest found that the failures there had contributed to the death of Annabella Landsberg, a 45 year old prisoner who was restrained by four officers and left for 21 hours alone on a prison floor. One campaigner in this case noted that in other cases in the British prison system - I am not implying anything about the Irish prison system, it is about the company that runs those prisons - "black women consistently die in contentious circumstances where there are serious concerns about their dehumanising treatment."

Other cases in medical and prison facilities run by Sodexo show that it relies heavily on migrant labour and, disproportionately, on female labour. There are huge question marks over the treatment of these workers. One report noted that it is reliant almost entirely on migrant women from the Philippines, Lithuania, Portugal, Sierra Leone and Brazil. These workers were excluded from the NHS pension scheme, paid less than the in-house staff and forbidden from using NHS canteens and facilities. Those are more recent examples of the behaviour of this company. I ask the Minister to examine this matter and consider it not just as a historical case. Clearly, the company has attempted to rebrand itself with a face of inclusion and diversity. A company that with a history of racism and exploitation that relies on migrant workers may well rebrand itself but it follows a corporate model that takes over key public services and seeks to run them on a for-profit basis. This business model, beneath the veneer of corporate responsibility and progressive sound bites, still rests on precarious, low-paid, mostly migrant women workers. It is not an ally in the fight against racism but is the very bedrock on which racism stands and breathes.

I ask the Minister to reconsider the suitability of this representative for the committee. We were promised in the recent discussions about direct provision and in the outcome of the Government formation discussions that we would see a move away from the for-profit system of direct provision. Why are we including a representative of a profit-driven company on a committee which is carrying out extremely sensitive and necessary work? I find it bizarre and unsettling. Sodexo has no place on this important group.

I also want to repeat the question about a matter we campaigned for and voted on in the previous Dáil regarding justice for Shane O'Farrell, which was to see an independent inquiry into the circumstances and aftermath of his death. Lucia O'Farrell would have met practically everybody in the previous Dáil, including everybody who is sitting here today, and campaigned very strongly for justice for her son. We voted that there would be an independent public inquiry and I have yet to receive an answer from the Taoiseach or the former Minister for Justice and Equality. I hope the new Minister will give us a clear answer on that issue and take this family out of the agony and anguish it is daily facing.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising both of these issues. On the anti-racism committee, as the Deputy has rightly outlined, it was announced and formed in June by my predecessor, Deputy Flanagan. I thank him for his work in this role. Its terms of reference have a wide scope. It is there to review the current evidence on racial discrimination in Ireland, to examine international practice in combating racism, to hold stakeholder dialogues and to identify the views of wider civil society, members of the public, Members of the Oireachtas, the business sector, media and other relevant parties. It is to produce an interim report to Government not more than three months after its first meeting identifying priority issues and a programme of work for the committee. Obviously, a lot of things have been delayed because of Covid-19. The committee will broadly consult on developing new ideas for fighting racism and recommending an action plan for Government. We expect that this work will probably take a

year. I understand that the committee's first meeting took place via Zoom on Thursday, 18 June. It was addressed by the former Minister and the former Minister of State, Deputy Stanton.

I will address the specific matter of the individual mentioned. In determining the membership of the anti-racism committee, my Department was very eager to gain a wide range of experience for the reasons outlined in the terms of reference. The individual to whom the Deputy referred has been appointed to the anti-racism committee in a personal capacity. It is because of her considerable expertise at a senior management level in promoting diversity and inclusion inside and outside the workplace. She has demonstrated a strong leadership role in championing diversity and inclusion in leadership roles within the corporate sector in Ireland and is very personally committed. For her work in the area, she was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite by the French ambassador to Ireland. As a member of the anti-racism committee, I do not believe that she as an individual represents the interest of any particular company.

Deputy Bríd Smith referred to a company, Sodexo. I think she referred to it in the context of the United Kingdom. However, Sodexo in Ireland was awarded the gold standard in excellence through people by the National Standards Authority of Ireland in 2018. It was also voted one of the best large work practices in Ireland in 2018 by the Great Places to Work Institute. This individual will bring something very significant to this role. That is what we have tried to achieve in the membership of the committee, and ensuring that it will fulfil the terms of reference and carry out the work we have asked it to do.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): As there is no one here from the Regional Group of Independents, we move to the Rural Independent Group.

Deputy Michael Collins: I wish the Minister the very best in her role. I commend the work which An Garda Síochána has done in west Cork, from the chief superintendent down to every individual garda, in putting people first. Community policing has been at its best, as it should be. I have argued that gardaí who are appointed to an area should reside in that area in order to build a relationship with the community. It is not always easy to make that happen but that should be the case. It is proven that local community gardaí are invaluable.

The Garda Síochána has been allowed to hire cars from rental companies because of the Covid crisis. There were 210 in total distributed throughout the country. In my travels, I now see only two of these vehicles in west Cork, the most spread-out constituency in Ireland. Why were the vehicles in question not allocated equally throughout the country?

I thank all members of An Garda Síochána in west Cork. To say that they were excellent during the crisis is an understatement. Last night I attended a conference call community alert meeting as secretary of Schull community alert. The call was organised by Sergeant James O'Donovan and Superintendent Declan O'Sullivan and it gave communities like Bantry, Gortnaclooney, Kealkill, Coomhola, Borlin, Glengarriffe, Adrigole, Castletownbere, Drimoleague, Durrus, Ballydehob and Schull a chance to liaise with officers in west Cork and explain how each community has worked with An Garda Síochána through the Covid-19 crisis. The gardaí in question, along with Diarmuid Cronin of Muintir na Tíre gave some great advice on what they have done to date and what they need to do, with the assistance of the community, during this Covid crisis. The Garda budget needs to be increased and a larger force is necessary.

The Government can no longer ignore or sweep under the carpet the need for funding for new builds for those in direct provision. I am well aware of suitable, more humane accom-

modation being made available for people in direct provision and of the fact that every effort is being made to ensure that this accommodation will not be considered. I know of a case where a very suitable building outside my constituency was available. From March, Ministers, including the current Minister, were written to outlining how people could live in very humane conditions, unlike those in which they live today. Unfortunately, there was no response. Why is this happening? Why is the Government not looking for a solution to this crisis? It is engaging in box-ticking exercise for the eyes of the world. The Government takes these people in but will not explain the conditions in which they live. This cannot be allowed continue. I urge the Minister to look at centres and the new builds which are being offered to the State for direct provision in order to help the people who come to the country to be treated in a humane and fair way.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I begin by wishing the Minister and the Minister of State the best of luck. I look forward to engaging with the Minister constructively.

I will raise some points relating to Laois Offaly. Members of the public in the constituency complain that there is not enough Garda visibility. This is not the fault of gardaí, it is a matter of resources. The recruits are not to be seen on the ground. During the lockdown, my offices received reports of anti-social behaviour in many towns. The community policing model must be implemented. Gardaí need to be seen out and about and we must ensure that they act as roll models for young people, which is the basis of the community policing model. Older people also feel safer when they see gardaí. That was the old model which worked quite well. It would like to see it in operation.

I hope there will be increased funding allocated for domestic violence as it is a huge issue. During the pandemic, such violence escalated. The *Leinster Express* reported families sleeping in cars in County Laois. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that domestic violence support services in Laois-Offaly are funded and the issue dealt with in the strongest way. More must be done in the area which probably does not get the attention it deserves.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising two very important points. The report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland underlines exactly what the Deputy spoke of regarding a human rights-based approach and also a community policing model whereby gardaí work on the ground and are visible and engaged with the community. Covid-19 gave a good glimpse of what that would look like, where gardaí engaged with the community to give support and protection and ensure that the health measures were implemented in full. Significant work is under way in implementing the commission's report. Considerable work has been done, some of which was delayed because of Covid-19, but the Commissioner assures me that work will continue, particularly in respect of Garda numbers and ensuring that there is a presence on the ground. The target is to have 15,000 gardaí in place by next year. We are still on target to reach that. Many Deputies mentioned civilian staff. That allows more front-line gardaí to be out engaging with people. It also brings a wealth of other experience and knowledge regarding ICT and other matters.

Many Deputies referred to domestic abuse. Unfortunately, we have seen an increase in such abuse during the pandemic. Additional funding was provided to different services. I agree that it is probably not enough and that we must look at the matter further. I assure Deputies of my commitment to this. From any conversation I have had with the Commissioner, I know that it is a priority for him and his team in weeks, months and years ahead.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I echo the sentiments of others on domestic violence. It is very

topical and was highlighted by the lockdown. This issue needs to be looked at very seriously. There is also a need for increased expenditure to ensure there are more places for people and shelters for people who require them. I am thinking particularly of people in my own county of Donegal where the only shelter is in Letterkenny. For such a large county, this is a very restricted position. The focus needs to be on this issue as well. I know the Minister will do that as it has been mentioned by all Members here.

I welcome what the Minister said on the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland report and highlighted what is going to happen. If I understand correctly what the Minister said, we are going to see increased numbers of gardaí on the ground through the implementation of that report. That would be welcome as the lockdown procedure has shown that the gardaí have worked very well and have been very visible. They have been available and have been seen in public, which is very powerful. This was highlighted to me a couple of weeks ago during the lockdown. When I was on my way home, I stopped three times by local gardaí in County Donegal. That showed the work they were doing on the ground and that they were very visible, which was positive.

For that to continue into the future, there has to be a recognition that increased funding is required. While the civilianisation of the police service in terms of administration might free up some more people, there has to be a recognition that increased funding is necessary to ensure the service is there. This is particularly so when, in the normal run of things, in my own area of south-west Donegal, where it is probably 35 miles from Inver Bridge to Glencolumbcille, that two gardaí are on duty at the weekend, with only one squad car, if they are lucky. That is the reality of the situation on the ground and it does not make sense and is not workable. There are nightclubs in Killybegs and in Glenties and there are late night pubs in Ardara and two gardaí cannot police such an area. That is not to mention the other towns and villages throughout the area. The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, would know the area well and would know it is not feasible to have two gardaí, who may not even have a car, policing it. This cannot be allowed to continue. If this Covid-19 period has shown anything, it has shown this has to change. I hope the Minister recognises this and that we will see this change through an increase in the budget and expenditure over the years ahead.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for his contribution. It might be good for me to outline some of the work that has been done, particularly in the implementation of the commission recommendations and in A Policing Service for the Future, which is a four year plan to implement the report. An increase in garda numbers and ensuring that continues as well as ensuring training continues are extremely important. It is not, however, just about the garda numbers but it is also about ensuring the recommendations and the reform structures are implemented.

I am pleased to inform Deputies that much has already been achieved under the plan. We have, for example, the roll-out of a new operational model for An Garda Síochána has commenced. This model is designed to streamline Garda administration and to promote more visible, responsive, and localised policing service to communities nationwide. We can very clearly see this on the ground.

Already An Garda Síochána has established and strengthened the resourcing of a human rights unit and re-established the strategic human rights advisory committee. The National Security Analysis Centre has been established and the director was appointed in 2019. On garda recruits, approximately 600 new garda recruits were attested and were assigned to front-

line policing duties. An Garda Síochána has also recruited approximately 750 staff, which has allowed approximately 600 gardaí to be reassigned from administrative front-line duties, as I mentioned earlier, to operational policing duties where their expertise can be used to best effect.

The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act has been enacted. It gives gardaí access to the Workplace Relations Commission for the first time and provides for a modern industrial relations framework within An Garda Síochána. Other areas are also being progressed, in particular in terms of legislation. Government has given approval for legislation to be drafted by my Department to underpin the use of recording devices, which includes the body-worn cameras, and for the codification of legislation defining police powers of arrest, search and detection. The development of a general scheme of the policing and community safety Bill is well advanced by the Department, which will provide a coherent framework for the governance and oversight of An Garda Síochána. These measures only represent some of the wide-ranging actions that have been progressed under the plan, A Policing Service for the Future. I can update Deputies with further information on this as things progress. Implementation of this plan is overseen by a dedicated policing reform implementation programme office, which is located in the Department of an Taoiseach.

The new Garda operational model is being rolled out at the moment. This is to meet commitments in the A Policing Service for Our Future report, the four-year implementation plan giving effect to the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. This is a model that has been long been recommended by independent policing specialists, including the Garda Síochána Inspectorate. While this is new to Ireland, it is standard in many other countries and is designed to provide a more responsive Garda Síochána, and to provide more localised policing services to communities and to streamline Garda administration and reorganise resources in order to do so. There is a great amount of work going on now, not just legislative and restructuring but also to ensure that we continue to allow recruits to be trained. A competition will be opened later this year to ensure that we reach the targets that we have set for the end of next year.

I thank the Deputies for raising this issue and I thank An Garda Síochána who have done tremendous work in the last number of months both working with us and in protecting us throughout this Covid-19 crisis.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire and so say all of us on the issue of an Garda Síochána.

I move on to an Páirtí Fianna Fáil, and the Deputies Crowe, Devlin and Browne. I call Deputy Crowe now to speak.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Acting Ceann Comhairle. I will be sharing my time with Deputies Browne and Devlin.

At the outset I want to sincerely congratulate the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, on their promotion. It is good to see a young and capable team working together now in the Department of Justice and Equality and I wish them the very best of luck during their tenure.

There are a number of issues I will raise and in the first instance I will discuss the Garda contingency roster. This came into operation at the outset of the pandemic. Heretofore gardaí would have worked five days on, three days off, but now they are working on a four-day on,

four-day off basis, and end up working a 12-hour shift. This is proving very popular with front-line gardaí. These are the men and women in blue,they are human beings who have families and the current roster allows them to work a more structured week. It is also having immense benefits on the ground, in that small rural stations are now seeing a nicer turnover of shifts and more coverage is given with more on-site and on the ground street policing. This roster is to run out in September and given how well it has gone and been received by the force and communities would the Minister consider extending it beyond the autumn and looking at having it as a more permanent arrangement.

The next matter I want to touch on is staffing levels. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 Templemore College had to close and the students were assigned back to their home counties. They now line out on duty with their Garda colleagues. In Clare there was a gain of 12 personnel and in the Limerick Garda division there was a gain of 25 personnel. I refer to the Limerick division because the Limerick Garda division overlaps into a considerable portion of Clare. That has been quite beneficial to both Garda divisions where we have seen more policing on the ground which has helped crime detection. Naturally, when Templemore reopens, there is an expectation that these young trainee gardaí will return to college and that those numbers will be lost. Insofar as is possible I hope over the next 12 months or so that we will try to get back to those figures because I can assure the Minister that they have been well appreciated in my constituency.

The next issue is the mooted Garda retirement age. It has long been talked about that this might increase from 60 to 62 years of age. Gardaí can retire after 30 years service, but many gardaí feel when they reach the age of 60 that they are fit, healthy and well enough, and they want to keep working in the force. That should be looked at.

A further issue is Ardnacrusha Garda station in my own locality. We have four gardaí there at present serving population of 10,553 people. In ratio terms that is one garda to every 2,600 citizens, which fairs very poorly across county averages. Across Clare there is a county average of one garda to every 350 citizens and in the Limerick division there is one garda to every 332 citizens. I refer the Minister to the situation in Ardnacrusha in particular. The Government of the 1920s recognised the strategic importance of having a Garda station there given it is in the immediate proximity to the Ardnacrusha power station. It is in the footfall of the University of Limerick, and it is also in the shadow of Limerick city and the Knockalisheen direct provision centre is located there. There is also a very high population of young people in this area. It is much appreciated that we have a Garda presence there. It is a complex area to police and co-ordinate and there is need for higher staffing levels there.

I note there is no Sinn Féin Deputy here but I would like to speak to a particular issue nonetheless. I was appalled that Republican Sinn Féin wrote to a plethora of Deputies last week concerning Liam Campbell and his extradition to Lithuania. We all know Liam Campbell has been held civilly liable for the Omagh bombing. I was asked by Republican Sinn Féin to lobby the Taoiseach and the Government to oppose his extradition. As I said, there are no Sinn Féin Deputies here at the moment but I note that its MEP, Martina Anderson, has also written to the former Taoiseach to oppose that extradition. We need some clarity on that. I sincerely hope the Taoiseach and this Government would resist all efforts to stop that extradition. I do not think we should be meddling in such issues. People who keep such company would want to have a good look at themselves.

I hope the Minister will have an opportunity later to respond to some of the issues I have

raised.

Deputy James Browne: I congratulate Deputy McEntee on her appointment as Minister for Justice and Equality. I also congratulate Deputy McConalogue on his appointment as Minister of State at that Department. They are capable and able Ministers.

Each year, a significant amount of money is expended on the Department of Justice and Equality and consideration of that expenditure by Members of Dáil Éireann is a critical aspect to taking account of how our Government and Departments spend money. The Department of Justice and Equality encompasses the Garda Síochána, the Courts Service and the Prison Service and various other important agencies such as the Data Protection Commission, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Policing Authority, the Property Services Regulatory Authority and Insolvency Service Ireland.

I want to touch on a number of important and key issues relevant to the Department. Before doing so, I want to offer heartfelt thanks to An Garda Síochána in County Wexford and throughout the country and to those in our Prison Service as well, who continued to work throughout the Covid emergency. Gardaí within the communities did fantastic work in terms of reaching out to vulnerable people and helping those who, very often, were in serious and concerning situations.

The Garda Reserve is a feature of policing that could be utilised more in terms of aiding the word of the Garda and protecting the public. In May 2020, there were 436 members of the Garda Reserve. In 2014, there were 1,124 members in the Garda Reserve. According to the Department of Justice and Equality website, the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland recommended a pause in the recruitment of the Garda Reserve pending completion of a strategic review of the Reserve. That strategic review is one of the priority projects being progressed by An Garda Síochána in 2019. The review was due to be completed by the end of quarter 2 2019. Will the Minister clarify if that review has taken place and what measures are being taken?

On the Prison Service, and in particular the issue of mental health therein, I appreciate the Minister has bona fides in the area of mental health having previously been a Minister of State with responsibility for mental health. I know she has great interest in this area but nonetheless last October there were 614 prisoners awaiting psychological supports from within the prison system and delays in terms of access to the Central Mental Hospital, in some cases of up to almost two years. I am aware the new central mental hospital in Portrane is due to open soon but I do not think it will be sufficient to meet demand either. The Revised Estimate references that in 2018 the output target was 800, almost 1,200 were seen and yet we ended up with a significant delay. The output target in the current Revised Estimate is 850. Based on what we know in regard to the delays around mental health in the Prison Service I do not think that target is high enough to address the significant backlog within the mental health services. I ask that the Minister give that particular attention because it is a matter that has not received the attention it deserved in the last number of years.

On the Courts Service, there are no plaudits for putting money into a Courts Service or appointing new judges. An inefficient and ineffective courts system impacts on our society in a number of ways. Justice delayed is justice denied. I practised as a barrister for 14 years and I know that in the Criminal Court it would often take up to five years to get a case completed. Within that time witnesses' memories diminish or key witnesses die and families and victims of

families end up suffering intolerable stress as a result of the delay in getting a case to completion. In terms of our Courts Service, the target is a maximum use of every judge being available every day and every court room being used to its maximum capacity and even with that, there are significant delays within our Courts Service. I accept the Courts Service is not an area to the fore of the public's mind but it has a very real impact on people. It also has a real impact on our economy. If we do not have an effective, a timely and an efficient commercial system, it impacts on how our economy functions. Without an effective social justice system, faith in our system is lost and this undermines social cohesion as well. Our Courts Service needs particular attention over the next couple of years.

I would like now to focus on the issue of domestic and gender based violence, which was touched on earlier by a number of colleagues. It is reported that there has been a significant increase in domestic violence in our communities since the onset of Covid. Much of this has been the uncovering of a significant under-reporting of domestic violence that has been going on in our society for some time. In April, UN Secretary General, Mr. Guterres, stated there was a horrifying global surge in domestic violence. The Garda deserves huge praise in respect of Operation Faoiseamh but we need to examine what additional supports are required for people who are subject to domestic violence, the vast majority of whom are women but men are subject to it as well and children suffer greatly as result of the outcomes of the domestic violence. We need to provide greater supports in this area such that when people need supports they can access them in a safe manner without alerting their abusers. We must ensure there are refuges available for people who need them.

The final issue I want to touch on is Traveller and Roma initiatives. The Revised Estimates provide a significant increase in funding for Traveller and Roma integration services. I accept this area may be moving from the Department of Justice and Equality to another Department. The programme for Government, under the heading of mental health, provides targets to deal with issues relating to the Roma and Traveller communities. I made sure this was specifically included in the programme. I would like to see greater integration between the Departments to address Roma and Traveller community issues and to give them the supports they need.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will try to respond to a number of the questions. On the retirement age, as with many issues, this issue is highlighted in the commission's report. It provides that An Garda Síochána should reflect the diversity of Irish society and should, therefore, develop recruitment strategies to try to achieve a more diverse intake. These recommendations echo those of the Garda Inspectorate following its examination of entry routes into An Garda Síochána, part of which deals with a possible change in the retirement age from 50 to 62. This matter is being examined but the appropriate age for recruitment question will be considered as part of the wider review taking place in regard to entry into An Garda Síochána. Work is currently under way on drafting terms of reference around this specific issue.

5 o'clock

On the roster system, this is essentially a matter for the Garda Commissioner. The roster reform and changes that have been put in place have been well received. I understand that a review is under way, with engagement between Garda management and the Garda associations on possible revised proposals but again this is a matter for the Garda Commissioner.

I understand, however, that it is being examined.

On overall Garda numbers and the placement of recruits who were put on the front line

earlier than is the norm, many of those in the two classes will return to training in the coming weeks. In general, we need to focus on ensuring we continue to recruit and train members and that there is equality in the provision of service by An Garda Síochána in every county. As Minister working with An Garda Síochána, I will very much strive to achieve that.

On the issue of the courts and the importance of working with them, funding them and ensuring they work to the best of their ability, Covid has placed significant pressure on our courts system. The Chief Justice, the President of the Court of Appeal, the President of the High Court, the President of the Circuit Court and the President of the District Court have during this crisis established special measures for the conduct of business. As well as that, to support this the Courts Service has introduced a broad range of measures to scale back significantly the number of cases coming before the courts while also trying to preserve essential access to the administration of justice. To this end, my Department has established a cross-functional Covid-19 response team, comprising senior officials from within the Department and from the key agencies, including the Courts Service. A great deal of work is under way to try to ensure that the changes that have taken place, in particular the use of video conferencing, which we have all had to adapt our work practices to suit, can carry on and that we create efficiencies where we might previously have been slow to do so. Much work is being done to try to ensure we learn from the changes that have taken place so that we benefit from them.

On the question about the Garda Reserve, I am not sure of an exact timescale for the review that is taking place. The Garda authorities have informed me that, as the Deputy noted, the Commissioner commenced the review in 2019. I am also informed that the class commenced training in March 2019 but, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the completion of training, the certification and the attestation are taking longer than is usual. I understand that, unfortunately, the commencement of further recruitment to the Garda Reserve, which was closed in November 2019, will very much depend on factors such as the capacity to provide training. Many matters have been impacted by Covid but we hope they will be back up and running sooner rather than later because the Garda Reserve plays a vital role and provides a critical level of support for An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am sharing time with Deputies Carroll MacNeill and O'Dowd.

I join others in congratulating the Minister on her very well-deserved appointment and promotion and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, on his appointment, as well as paying tribute to their predecessors, Deputies Flanagan and Stanton, respectively, for putting in a highly impressive period in their respective portfolios.

There is quite a bit in the Estimates we can discuss but I would like to address one specific area. I refer to Vote 20 and the €1.879 billion allocated to the funding of An Garda Síochána. Like everyone else, we welcome the resources provided, the additional Garda numbers, the €13 million of personal protective equipment that had to be purchased to deal with the Covid-19 crisis, the €9 million additional fleet capacity and the €32 million worth of capital projects. We have to ensure that when all this funding is granted, the best of equipment, of cars and of capital projects is supplied to ensure An Garda Síochána is able to face the many challenges it faces every day with the best equipment and the best training. That means there also has to be the best and most advanced use of ICT and of continuing professional development.

One area Deputy James Browne referred to in respect of the Prison Service was that of mental health. I am very interested in the Minister's thoughts, particularly as someone who has held

the junior ministerial portfolio with responsibility for mental health and who has done so much good work in the area, on what is being budgeted for mental health provisions for members of An Garda Síochána. My concerns have arisen from numerous discussions with members of the organisation who are constituents of mine or with whom I have come in contact. The issue really became apparent when I was watching the documentary on Virgin Media One, "The Guards: Inside the K", when an officer was repeatedly abused by somebody being taken into custody who repeatedly said to the officer he would find the officer's children and rape and kill them. Irrespective of what we do in our life, such language and abuse takes its toll, especially when it is in a stressful professional environment where people put their lives on the line every day. They put their lives on the line to protect us.

We have to consider the recent report of the Garda Representative Association that stated one sixth of members of An Garda Síochána suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. A total of 27% are known as the walking wounded and, sadly, seven suicides have been committed by members of the organisation. We rely so much on An Garda Síochána and we have seen how brilliant it has been in the very tough recent months for our society. Its members protect us but are we doing enough to protect them? I would appreciate the Minister's thoughts on what in the Estimates could be put towards ensuring we meet our obligations to those men and women who sacrifice so much for us.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I too offer my congratulations to the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, on their deserved promotions and wish them the very best in their offices. I also congratulate and thank the previous Minister, Deputy Flanagan, and the previous Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, who worked exceptionally hard in recent years.

I again highlight the issue of domestic violence, some of the practicalities around that at the moment and the question of how funding and policy are connected. Domestic violence and criminal law remain issues very much within the remit of the Department of Justice and Equality but so much of the funding and liaison are delivered through Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. We must always ask whether we are achieving, through those means, the correct gathering of information, the correct distribution of funding and the provision of essential supports for users of domestic violence services. We must gather information not just on people who contact the helpline or who come to refuges but also on people for whom those services provide outreach services in their homes. Deputy Catherine Murphy noted that it seems outrageous that somebody who has been the victim of domestic violence is the person who has to leave the family home. Given that it has been difficult in the courts system, and that it has been difficult to obtain a barring order as quickly as may be necessary for the urgent circumstances of domestic violence, we have to provide those additional services.

The problem of the disconnect I outlined arises again and again because there is another area where it is relevant. I raised this with the Minister yesterday and with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy O'Gorman, today. I refer to section 47 assessment reports, which are produced under family law. Such assessments are carried out in difficult cases of parental separation, where the court tries to assess the best interests of the child, as well as his or her views in certain circumstances. They may occur in what we might call fairly regular divorce or separation proceedings, but where it has come from a background of domestic abuse or violence, it is even more important that we are fully aware of all the tools abusers may use to manipulate the process, either to try to achieve further and continuing control over the family or members thereof, or to have access to the children where, in some circumstances, access has to be questioned. I am aware of a number of cases in my constituency that cause me great concern

every day where people whose partner has received criminal convictions, either for manipulation or in one case for multiple incidents of domestic abuse, are engaged in a section 47 process where the other partner has real concerns about the capacity of that partner to manipulate the section 47 assessor.

I ask the Minister, therefore, to please consider within the courts Vote allocating some money for the training of judges in respect of coercive control to ensure they are fully up to date on that in circumstances where they are involved in family law cases. It should be provided for that section 47 assessors are fully up to date on coercive control and manipulation and how that can follow a family through the family law process in a serious way. I am aware that the Minister has already made a commitment on these issues. I am also aware how much is to be done and I really appreciate the Minister's thought and effort in this regard.

I congratulate the Irish Prison Service on its astonishing achievement in keeping the prison population safe from Covid-19. The Covid committee has examined congregated settings in a range of contexts. It has not examined the Irish Prison Service. It is essential that it be recognised in the work of the Covid committee. We have not yet put the Central Mental Hospital on record as having no patient case. I believe there was one staff case but no patient case. These are congregated settings that are run in their entirety by the State as opposed to some of the other congregated settings we have examined. I congratulate them in this regard.

It is very welcome to see additional funding provided for the Judicial Council. It is imperative that we protect and support the Judiciary and have a strong judicial institution. It is unfortunate that we have to remind ourselves continually about the importance of the separation of powers and that judges have no function in interfering in or advising on the development of legislation or our legislative decision-making in the Oireachtas. Similarly, Members of this House have no place commenting on or criticising the decisions of judges of our courts in this State.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I congratulate the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, on their appointments. I pay tribute to the former Minister, Deputy Flanagan, and the former Minister of State, Deputy Stanton.

I live in Drogheda town, which has suffered greatly as a result of a crime wave. The gardaí there are doing a fantastic job fighting it and are very tough on crime. In particular, Chief Superintendent Christy Mangan, Superintendent Andrew Waters, their fantastic gardaí and the community are fighting crime and the evil that has struck at the heart of our society, not just in Drogheda but also elsewhere. Local independent councillor Paddy McQuillan suggested very properly at our joint policing committee meeting this week that the Minister should visit us. It was also suggested that we should make sure the proceeds of crime, especially from drug seizures, are used to help support the communities that suffer most as a result of crime waves. Our chief superintendent said that more than €1 million in cash - the proceeds of drug sales - has been seized in County Louth recently. That is an enormous sum for the smallest county in Ireland. Based on this, there is a large amount of crime and a massive amount of money being made throughout the country. I ask the Minister to consider putting the proceeds of crime, particularly drug crime, into a special fund to fight the effects of crime in our communities.

We are tough on crime but we must be much tougher on its causes. The programme for Government mentions housing. The position on housing is very unacceptable, and there are young families with nowhere to go. Employment is being dealt with through the new stimulus package, but at the heart of crime is poverty and at the heart of poverty is a lack of choice for

young people. I argue very strongly, therefore, that the money seized on our streets should be spent on our communities. We need the legislation to do this, however. I ask the Minister to consider that.

The Minister, being from the adjoining county of Meath, is well aware of the question of policing in Drogheda. Owing to the growth in the town, many citizens who avail of all of their services in Drogheda are served from Ashbourne Garda station instead of Drogheda Garda station. I am aware that the Garda is considering this actively. Whatever it does, it must make sure that there is an adequate and proper Garda station in east Meath, especially in the Laytown–Bettystown area. The existing station is too small for the number of gardaí based there and further availability is required at the public offices. That is not to say the gardaí are not always available - they certainly are - but people would like to see them in their offices more than at present.

I congratulate the Minister and look forward to her visit to my constituency, particularly to the town of Drogheda. She will be most welcome at a meeting of the joint policing committee.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the three Deputies for raising these issues. First, let me touch on the issue raised by Deputy Richmond, namely, the support for An Garda Síochána. The Deputy is correct that gardaí are often placed in very difficult circumstances and asked to respond to very challenging situations. They put themselves at risk every day of the week. We have seen this most recently with the unfortunate death of Detective Garda Colm Horkan. We need to make sure that we protect our gardaí and that services are in place for them when they feel they need them. The overall review is under way as part of the plan A Policing Service for the Future. I refer to the implementation of the commission review. The Garda is carrying out a review of post-incident support and signposting policy. It is important that this be done. Moneys were provided last year by my Department for the transformation fund to support the development of a health and wellness strategy for the members. This strategy is being rolled out on an ongoing basis. I very much welcome the overall review, especially in respect of how we can support members of An Garda Síochána when they need support most, given that they support us when we need them most.

On Deputy Carroll MacNeill's question, I spoke to the Deputy yesterday, particularly about manipulation and how it can occur throughout the progress of a case through the system. I welcome the fact that the Deputy raised this. I will certainly speak to her about how we can try to address this matter.

Let me touch on domestic abuse a little more. While I said funding has been allocated, I believe more will probably be needed. What is important about what has happened in recent months is that we learn from it and ensure we continue to implement the existing measures but also implement new ones. My Department is leading efforts to identify the lessons we can learn from the inter-agency plan we have put in place to combat domestic abuse in the context of the Covid pandemic. This is a process that includes input from the community and, most important, the voluntary sector working in this area, and my Department. I envisage what is almost a second action plan. We are reviewing the adaptations made in the context of the pandemic that can be made more permanent in addition to other reforms that can be brought into play. There is considerable work being done in this area. It is extremely important.

On Deputy O'Dowd's point, especially on the use of the proceeds of crime to combat the effects of crime and to support victims of crime, I am very interested in making progress. I am

aware the Deputy raised policing in the Drogheda area with the Commissioner at the recent joint policing committee meeting in his own area. Obviously, this is under the review. The Commissioner is taking on board the points the Deputy made.

Deputy Patrick Costello: Like everyone else, I congratulate the Minister and Minister of State on their recent appointments and wish them luck in the years ahead.

I will start by talking about the national protective services, the district protection units. These are really positive initiatives on the part of An Garda Síochána and they can help to address many of the issues Members have been talking about regarding domestic violence. One important resource that these units need is social workers from Tusla sitting around the same table and working together. There is a major need for co-operation and communication in cases dealt with by the services. While I appreciate that this is more an issue for the Minister responsible for children, Deputy O'Gorman, with whom I have raised it, I feel that instead of just waiting for Tusla to show up, it is sometimes important to invite people to the dance. As I did with the Minister's predecessor, I ask her to be proactive in linking with Deputy O'Gorman and Tusla to ensure social workers provide a joined-up service that will really benefit people.

This is linked to wider issues concerning how we deal with domestic violence, gender-based violence and child protection issues. It relates to the specialised family courts. I ask the Minister to ensure, despite the challenges to the Courts Service, that the specialised family courts are prioritised and drive ahead. The specialised family courts are really important in improving service and reducing trauma to families who have to go through the family courts and they provide a vehicle for developing the expertise for delivering the training and ensuring judges are aware of all the important matters raised by Deputy Carroll MacNeill. This is to ensure the experience of those using family courts is positive rather than another trauma in a long history of such trauma.

I also mention the Prison Service. It is commendable that the service has achieved a position where there are no Covid-19 infections in the prison population. Like in the rest of society, there was a very quick and strong reaction to prevent infection and we saw a complete suspension of family visits. This was clearly a proportionate measure at the time of the pandemic, but it is positive to see that restrictions are being unwound and family visits will start to begin again. In some areas we have seen an acceleration of the easing of restrictions where public health allows, and I ask that the Minister ensures that if the opportunity exists to accelerate the easing of restrictions on family visits, it would be done.

In society during the Covid-19 pandemic, many things that were impossible suddenly became possible. With the Prison Service, one such action was the facilitating of video link visits for families. This was innovative and an excellent way of supporting prisoners to maintain the relationship with families, particularly young families where a parent is in prison. This is very important for many reasons, including ensuring a connection to family and community to help to prevent recidivism and improve mental health, as mental health problems are so prevalent in prisons now.

As we see an unwinding of restrictions and a return to family visits, it would be really positive if we could keep video visits as an option for visitors. This should not replace in-person visits by families but rather supplement what is there. This would have a very positive impact on the family and community life of prisoners when they leave prison as well as on their mental health while they are in prison. This is a major issue that must be addressed.

The budget for the Data Protection Commission has increased but it is only a third of what was requested by the Data Protection Commission to do the job it needs to do. Our Data Protection Commission is the single most important such commission in Europe. Most of the technological companies are based here and any matters arising from the General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR, will be dealt with by our Data Protection Commission. However, we have a very low number of specialised and technical staff there. Although budgets are increasing, they are still being outstripped by the increase in and complexity of complaints coming to them. The Data Protection Commission still does not have the resources it requires to administer the GDPR effectively, and without proper and effective administration and enforcement of the GDPR, there is a risk that this very important legislation will wither on the vine.

The importance of our Data Protection Commission and the impact of a lack of funding has been called out by privacy campaigners and even by other data protection commissions in Europe. They have identified the Irish Data Protection Commission as a bottleneck and a roadblock on Europe-wide investigations and enforcement. If GDPR is to be meaningful and to facilitate the reforms, controls and protection for European and Irish citizens that it is supposed to, we must ensure we can give proper funding to the Data Protection Commission.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy raised a number of matters. Whereas the separation of some elements of my Department is still under consideration, I absolutely assure the Deputy that I will work as closely as possible with the Minister with responsibility for children, disability, equality and integration, Deputy O'Gorman, on the range of matters where I feel the connection remains and where it is necessary.

There is much work under way on family courts and the overall system, not least the family courts Bill. A memorandum for the Government was approved by the former Minister on 30 December last year and it was circulated to Departments in January 2020. It was considered afterwards by the Government but it is something that will be a priority for me. Separate to that are a number of other comprehensive proposals for the modernisation and reform of the family courts system. These include a broad consideration of the best means of providing access to various family law mechanisms available to families in private family law cases, not least through the legal aid scheme. We will also look at the various recommendations from the joint committee report on reform of the family law system. I am 100% committed to establishing a more efficient and more family-friendly user system. It is something we need to do. Putting in place a new dedicated structure and family court within existing structures will be vital.

The Deputy is correct on the matters of visitation. To support our prisoners through their rehabilitation and in preparing them for getting home, it is extremely important that family visits continue. The arrangements mentioned were put in place with the support of prisoners, and that is why we saw such a successful outcome. Videoconferencing was allowed and a great success but I do not know exactly if they will be allowed to continued. I am absolutely certain there will be a review, as there is in many cases, to see how we can learn from what we have undertaken and the various changes that have come about because of Covid-19. Physical visits will begin again on 20 July and I do not anticipate that they will occur any sooner. That is Monday week, so it will be very soon.

There is much work being done on the Data Protection Commission. The fact that our budget has gone from €3.6 million to €16.9 million is an acknowledgement of the significance of the office. I acknowledge that there is work to be done in many areas.

I use this opportunity to congratulate my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, on his appointment and I very much look forward to working with him in the Department.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): On behalf of all of us present, I congratulate both the Minister and the Minister of State.

Votes put and agreed to.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Dara Calleary): It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that No. 7*a*, motion re report and recommendations of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform, be taken now without debate.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Before proceeding to that business, 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, which was circulated this evening. Can we take those arrangements as read and, if so, are they agreed? Agreed.

Report and Recommendations of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders -

(a) the rotas in relation to Leaders' Questions, private members' time, and Priority Questions, as contained in the Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform dated 8th July, 2020, be adopted for the month of July 2020 only, and

(b) the following sequence and times shall apply in relation to the speaking arrangements on private members' time for the month of July 2020 only:

(i) where Sinn Féin is the sponsor -

Sinn Féin – 20 minutes

Government 10 minutes

Sinn Féin – 10 minutes

all other parties and groups in Opposition – 10 minutes each

Government 10 minutes

Sinn Féin – 10 minutes

(ii) where any other party or group in Opposition is the sponsor -

Sponsor – 20 minutes

Government – 10 minutes

Sponsor – 10 minutes

Sinn Féin – 20 minutes

all other parties and groups in Opposition – 8 minutes each

Government 10 minutes

Sponsor – 10 minutes.

Question put and agreed to.

Affordable Housing: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Eoin Ó Broin on Tuesday, 7 July 2020:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— the absence of any targets for the delivery of affordable rental or purchase homes in the Programme for Government;

— the absence of any definition of affordable housing or any price points for affordable housing in the Programme for Government;

— the delays in delivering an affordable cost rental scheme since it was announced by the Government in 2014 and again in 2016;

— that rents have increased by 26 per cent since 2016, with average rents at €1,402 per month and €2,000 per month in Dublin;

— that in Dublin, house prices have increased by 12 per cent since 2016 with average prices now at €373,248;

— that Economic and Social Research Institute research shows that 70 per cent of private renters and mortgaged households in the lowest quarter of the income distribution have high housing costs; and

—that during four years of a Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Confidence and Supply Arrangement, not a single affordable home to rent or buy was delivered through any central Government scheme;

and calls on the Government to introduce an affordable housing scheme that:

— delivers mixed income and mixed tenure public housing developments on public land lead by local authorities, approved housing bodies and community land

trusts;

— has a minimum target of 100,000 public homes to meet social and affordable need over five years;

— determines tenure mix in accordance with local need, combining social rental, affordable rental and affordable leasehold purchase;

— ensures that no land will be sold or transferred out of public ownership for the purpose of delivering public housing;

— defines housing affordability as no more than 30 per cent of net disposable income;

— is available to households whose gross incomes are below €75,000 for a couple and below €50,000 for a single person;

— delivers affordable homes to buy for €230,000 or less in cities and surrounding commuter belts;

— delivers affordable homes to buy for €220,000 or less in non-urban centres and non-commuter belt areas;

— delivers affordable cost rental homes to rent between €700 and €900 per month;

— ensures flexibility in the final entry level rents and purchase price to take account of variations in regional rental and purchase markets, with a particular emphasis on lower price markets in predominantly rural areas and smaller towns;

— is consistent with the National Planning Framework requirements for urban densification and mixed-use, mid-rise and higher-density master planning by the local authority; and

— is financed through a combination of capital expenditure, serviced sites fund, capital advanced loan facilities and long-term low interest public borrowing from sources, including the Housing Finance Agency, the European Investment Bank and credit unions.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"acknowledges the extensive range of measures included in the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future, building on the initiatives already undertaken and in progress, which will be brought forward to support individuals and families to access affordable housing and, in particular, notes that:

— this Government has confirmed its overarching housing policy principle that everybody should have access to good-quality housing to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard, and located close to essential services, offering a high quality of life;

— this Government believes that the provision of more affordable housing has a profound benefit socially and economically, and that the State has a fundamental role in enabling the delivery of new homes and ensuring that best use is made of existing stock;

— building on the progress made to date, this Government is also committed to supporting the delivery of homes through the Serviced Site Fund, the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund, the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan and the Help to Buy scheme;

— under the Serviced Site Fund, local authorities have indicated they will deliver 3,200 new affordable homes across 35 projects already approved;

— consistent with the National Planning Framework and the Building Control Reform agenda, this Government is committed to the delivery of quality homes and a planning

system that delivers homes in a strategic manner to meet the demands of a modern society; and

— the Residential Tenancies Board published a report in June 2019, prepared by the Economic and Social Research Institute, which shows that Rent Pressure Zones are having a moderating effect on rent price inflation to the magnitude of 2-3 per cent per annum; and

further notes the Government's intention to:

— embed affordability at the heart of Ireland's housing system;

— prioritise the increased supply of social and affordable homes;

— finalise and open a State-backed affordable home purchase scheme to promote home ownership for households that would otherwise be frozen out of the market;

— increase the social housing stock by more than 50,000 homes, with an emphasis on new builds, to ensure that those in the greatest need can access quality housing and to take pressure off other areas of the housing system thus ensuring more affordable supply for first-time buyers and renters;

— create the conditions for the delivery of the greatest number of affordable homes possible, including setting a target for the delivery of affordable homes over the lifetime of the Government, to be available for qualifying purchasers as a matter of priority;

— accelerate delivery of affordable homes by local authorities under the €310 million Serviced Sites Fund, to deliver 6,200 new affordable homes and expand the projects under the Fund and examine opportunities to expand the scope and potential of the Fund;

— ensure that local authorities remain central to delivering public social and affordable housing working with approved housing bodies, the Land Development Agency (LDA) and other state and private sector partners;

— work with the private sector, through the planning and regulatory regimes, to ensure that an appropriate mix and type of housing is provided nationally and locally;

— monitor and work to address, with key stakeholders and industry, issues arising in the area of construction costs, viability and productivity, particularly against a background of Covid-19 and Brexit;

— improve the supply and affordability of quality rental accommodation and the security of tenure for renters;

— recognise the need to re-invigorate our towns, put in place a new scheme to provide seed capital to local authorities to provide affordable serviced sites in towns and villages to allow individuals and families build homes;

— retain and expand the Help to Buy scheme for new properties and self-build properties;

— expand the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan;

— expand Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 to encompass affordable as well as social housing;

— roll out the cost rental model for the delivery of housing that creates affordability for tenants and a sustainable model for the financing, construction and management of homes;

— complete the audit of State lands, identifying land banks in public ownership that are suitable for housing and other purposes;

— mandate the LDA to work with local authorities, State agencies and other stakeholders to develop masterplans for strategic sites; and

— avoid over-concentration of particular housing types in areas, by requiring local authorities to complete Housing Need Demand Assessments to inform the delivery of an appropriate mix of housing typologies to cater for the needs of disparate household types and sizes."

- (Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding affordable housing. On Tuesday, 7 July 2020, on the question that the amendment to the motion be agreed to, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 60; Staon, 0.		
Tá	***Níl***	***Staon***
Berry, Cathal.	***Andrews, Chris.***	
Brophy, Colm.	***Barry, Mick.***	
Browne, James.	***Boyd Barrett, Richard.***	
Bruton, Richard.	***Brady, John.***	

Burke, Colm.	***Browne, Martin.***	
Burke, Peter.	***Buckley, Pat.***	
Butler, Mary.	***Cairns, Holly.***	
Cahill, Jackie.	***Carthy, Matt.***	
Calleary, Dara.	***Clarke, Sorca.***	
Cannon, Ciarán.	***Collins, Joan.***	
Carey, Joe.	***Collins, Michael.***	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	***Connolly, Catherine.***	
Chambers, Jack.	***Conway-Walsh, Rose.***	
Collins, Niall.	***Cronin, Réada.***	
Costello, Patrick.	***Crowe, Seán.***	
Coveney, Simon.	***Cullinane, David.***	
Cowen, Barry.	***Daly, Pa.***	
Crowe, Cathal.	***Donnelly, Paul.***	
Devlin, Cormac.	***Ellis, Dessie.***	
Dillon, Alan.	***Farrell, Mairéad.***	
Donnelly, Stephen.	***Fitzmaurice, Michael.***	
Duffy, Francis Noel.	***Funchion, Kathleen.***	
Durkan, Bernard J.	***Gannon, Gary.***	
English, Damien.	***Gould, Thomas.***	
Farrell, Alan.	***Guirke, Johnny.***	
Feighan, Frankie.	***Harkin, Marian.***	
Fitzpatrick, Peter.	***Howlin, Brendan.***	
Flaherty, Joe.	***Kelly, Alan.***	
Flanagan, Charles.	***Kenny, Gino.***	
Fleming, Sean.	***Kenny, Martin.***	
Foley, Norma.	***Kerrane, Claire.***	
Griffin, Brendan.	***Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.***	
Harris, Simon.	***McGrath, Mattie.***	
Haughey, Seán.	***McNamara, Michael.***	
Heydon, Martin.	***Mitchell, Denise.***	
Higgins, Emer.	***Munster, Imelda.***	
Hourigan, Neasa.	***Murphy, Catherine.***	
Humphreys, Heather.	***Murphy, Paul.***	
Kehoe, Paul.	***Mythen, Johnny.***	
Lahart, John.	***Nolan, Carol.***	
Leddin, Brian.	***O'Callaghan, Cian.***	
Lowry, Michael.	***O'Reilly, Louise.***	
MacSharry, Marc.	***O'Rourke, Darren.***	
Madigan, Josepha.	***Ó Broin, Eoin.***	
Martin, Catherine.	***Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.***	
Matthews, Steven.	***Ó Murchú, Ruairí.***	
McAuliffe, Paul.	***Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.***	

McConalogue, Charlie.	***Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.***	
McEntee, Helen.	***Pringle, Thomas.***	
McGrath, Michael.	***Quinlivan, Maurice.***	
McHugh, Joe.	***Ryan, Patricia.***	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	***Sherlock, Sean.***	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	***Shortall, Róisín.***	
Murphy, Eoghan.	***Smith, Duncan.***	
Murphy, Verona.	***Stanley, Brian.***	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	***Tóibín, Peadar.***	
O'Brien, Darragh.	***Tully, Pauline.***	
O'Brien, Joe.	***Ward, Mark.***	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	***Whitmore, Jennifer.***	
O'Connor, James.	***Wynne, Violet-Anne.***	
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Dowd, Fergus.		
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.		
Ó Cuív, Éamon.		
Phelan, John Paul.		
Rabbitte, Anne.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Ring, Michael.		
Ryan, Eamon.		
Shanahan, Matt.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Smyth, Ossian.		
Stanton, David.		
Troy, Robert.		
Varadkar, Leo.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Dara Calleary; Níl, Deputies Denise Mitchell and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: : “That the motion, as amended, be agreed to.”

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 61; Staon, 0.		
Tá	***Níl***	***Staon***
Berry, Cathal.	***Andrews, Chris.***	
Brophy, Colm.	***Barry, Mick.***	
Browne, James.	***Boyd Barrett, Richard.***	
Bruton, Richard.	***Brady, John.***	
Burke, Colm.	***Browne, Martin.***	
Burke, Peter.	***Buckley, Pat.***	
Butler, Mary.	***Cairns, Holly.***	
Byrne, Thomas.	***Carthy, Matt.***	
Cahill, Jackie.	***Clarke, Sorca.***	
Calleary, Dara.	***Collins, Joan.***	
Cannon, Ciarán.	***Collins, Michael.***	
Carey, Joe.	***Connolly, Catherine.***	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	***Conway-Walsh, Rose.***	
Chambers, Jack.	***Cronin, Réada.***	
Collins, Niall.	***Crowe, Seán.***	
Costello, Patrick.	***Cullinane, David.***	
Coveney, Simon.	***Daly, Pa.***	
Cowen, Barry.	***Doherty, Pearse.***	
Crowe, Cathal.	***Donnelly, Paul.***	
Devlin, Cormac.	***Ellis, Dessie.***	
Dillon, Alan.	***Farrell, Mairéad.***	
Donnelly, Stephen.	***Fitzmaurice, Michael.***	
Duffy, Francis Noel.	***Funchion, Kathleen.***	
Durkan, Bernard J.	***Gannon, Gary.***	
English, Damien.	***Gould, Thomas.***	
Farrell, Alan.	***Guirke, Johnny.***	
Feighan, Frankie.	***Harkin, Marian.***	
Fitzpatrick, Peter.	***Howlin, Brendan.***	
Flaherty, Joe.	***Kelly, Alan.***	
Flanagan, Charles.	***Kenny, Gino.***	
Fleming, Sean.	***Kenny, Martin.***	
Foley, Norma.	***Kerrane, Claire.***	
Griffin, Brendan.	***Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.***	
Harris, Simon.	***McGrath, Mattie.***	
Haughey, Seán.	***McNamara, Michael.***	
Heydon, Martin.	***Mitchell, Denise.***	
Higgins, Emer.	***Munster, Imelda.***	
Hourigan, Neasa.	***Murphy, Catherine.***	
Humphreys, Heather.	***Murphy, Paul.***	

Kehoe, Paul.	***Mythen, Johnny.***	
Lahart, John.	***Nolan, Carol.***	
Leddin, Brian.	***O'Callaghan, Cian.***	
Lowry, Michael.	***O'Reilly, Louise.***	
MacSharry, Marc.	***O'Rourke, Darren.***	
Madigan, Josepha.	***Ó Broin, Eoin.***	
Martin, Catherine.	***Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.***	
Matthews, Steven.	***Ó Murchú, Ruairí.***	
McAuliffe, Paul.	***Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.***	
McConalogue, Charlie.	***Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.***	
McEntee, Helen.	***Pringle, Thomas.***	
McGrath, Michael.	***Quinlivan, Maurice.***	
McHugh, Joe.	***Ryan, Patricia.***	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	***Sherlock, Sean.***	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	***Shortall, Róisín.***	
Murphy, Eoghan.	***Smith, Duncan.***	
Murphy, Verona.	***Stanley, Brian.***	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	***Tóibín, Peadar.***	
Noonan, Malcolm.	***Tully, Pauline.***	
O'Brien, Darragh.	***Ward, Mark.***	
O'Brien, Joe.	***Whitmore, Jennifer.***	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	***Wynne, Violet-Anne.***	
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Dowd, Fergus.		
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.		
Ó Cuív, Éamon.		
Phelan, John Paul.		
Rabbitte, Anne.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Ring, Michael.		
Ryan, Eamon.		
Shanahan, Matt.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Smyth, Ossian.		
Stanton, David.		
Troy, Robert.		

Varadkar, Leo.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Dara Calleary; Níl, Deputies Denise Mitchell and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

Rent and Mortgage Arrears: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin on Wednesday, 8 July 2020:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises:

— the exceptional circumstances of Covid-19;

— the necessity of shutting down non-essential economic activity to prevent the spread of viral infection and to save thousands of lives;

— the loss of income suffered by many households, through no fault of their own, notwithstanding extraordinary measures taken to offset these;

— that many households will have been unable to keep up with rent or mortgage payments during the period of lockdown;

— that accumulated debt from rent or mortgage payments will suddenly crystallise for many households once the economy reopens and current exceptional protections are removed; and

— that the ban on rent increases and evictions during the pandemic has led to a decrease in the number of people presenting as homeless; and

calls on the Government to:

— ensure that no one becomes homeless or suffers penalty charges due to an inability to meet rent or mortgage payments during the lockdown period;

— introduce an extended moratorium on rent increases and evictions until there is sufficient supply of new housing;

— ensure there is a specific provision in law to protect people threatened with eviction due to rent or mortgage arrears accrued during the pandemic;

— establish a State scheme to substantially reduce rent-related debt that has accrued through no fault of households who were unable to pursue their livelihoods during the period of lockdown;

— stop the banks from charging penalties or surcharges on mortgage arrears accrued during the pandemic; and

— clearly state what other actions the Government will take to alleviate the situation of housing-related debt caused by the Covid-19 lockdown on the economy.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"recognises that the Programme for Government – Our Shared Future acknowledges that Covid-19 has presented the global community with a terrible set of challenges to add to the ongoing climate and biodiversity emergency;

acknowledges the extensive range of measures included in the Programme for Government – Our Shared Future, building on the initiatives already undertaken and in progress, which will be brought forward to support individuals and families in dealing with the financial implications of Covid-19 and to access affordable housing and, in particular, notes that:

- the Government has confirmed its overarching housing policy principle that everybody should have access to good-quality housing to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard, and located close to essential services, offering a high quality of life; and

- the focus in recovery will be to get people back to work as quickly as possible. The Government's aim is to create 200,000 new jobs by 2025 as well as helping people currently unemployed due to Covid-19 get back to work;

notes that the Programme for Government – Our Shared Future acknowledges that the Covid-19 emergency has illustrated the resilience and responsiveness of our system. Hundreds of thousands of people have had their incomes largely protected during the restrictions and thousands will continue to rely on the State for months to come. As this Government moves forward with a new social contract with citizens, the Government will ensure a balanced progressive approach, which provides a safety net to those most severely impacted by Covid-19 while increasing incentives and access to reskilling to enable people to get back working;

further recognises the role that income supports, such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, and the flexibility provided through Rent Supplement, have played and continue to play in supporting our citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic; and

further notes the Government's intention to:

- extend the moratorium on the termination of tenancies, in line with public health advice, if the requirements of section 4 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 are met;

- improve the supply and affordability of rental accommodation and the security of tenure for renters; and

- introduce the necessary reforms to our personal insolvency legislation and ensure

that sufficient supports are in place for mortgage holders with repayment difficulties and to assess the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears, including the available suite of alternative repayment arrangements, and ensure it has full legal effect."

- (Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding rent and mortgage arrears. On Wednesday, 8 July 2020, on the question that the amendment to the motion be agreed to, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 61; Staon, 0.		
Tá	***Níl***	***Staon***
Berry, Cathal.	***Andrews, Chris.***	
Brophy, Colm.	***Barry, Mick.***	
Browne, James.	***Boyd Barrett, Richard.***	
Bruton, Richard.	***Brady, John.***	
Burke, Colm.	***Browne, Martin.***	
Burke, Peter.	***Buckley, Pat.***	
Butler, Mary.	***Cairns, Holly.***	
Byrne, Thomas.	***Carthy, Matt.***	
Cahill, Jackie.	***Clarke, Sorca.***	
Calleary, Dara.	***Collins, Joan.***	
Cannon, Ciarán.	***Collins, Michael.***	
Carey, Joe.	***Connolly, Catherine.***	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	***Conway-Walsh, Rose.***	
Chambers, Jack.	***Cronin, Réada.***	
Collins, Niall.	***Crowe, Seán.***	
Costello, Patrick.	***Cullinane, David.***	
Coveney, Simon.	***Daly, Pa.***	
Cowen, Barry.	***Doherty, Pearse.***	
Crowe, Cathal.	***Donnelly, Paul.***	
Devlin, Cormac.	***Ellis, Dessie.***	
Dillon, Alan.	***Farrell, Mairéad.***	
Donnelly, Stephen.	***Fitzmaurice, Michael.***	
Duffy, Francis Noel.	***Funchion, Kathleen.***	
Durkan, Bernard J.	***Gannon, Gary.***	
English, Damien.	***Gould, Thomas.***	
Farrell, Alan.	***Guirke, Johnny.***	
Feighan, Frankie.	***Harkin, Marian.***	
Fitzpatrick, Peter.	***Howlin, Brendan.***	
Flaherty, Joe.	***Kelly, Alan.***	
Flanagan, Charles.	***Kenny, Gino.***	

Fleming, Sean.	*Kenny, Martin.*	
Foley, Norma.	*Kerrane, Claire.*	
Griffin, Brendan.	*Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.*	
Harris, Simon.	*McGrath, Mattie.*	
Haughey, Seán.	*McNamara, Michael.*	
Heydon, Martin.	*Mitchell, Denise.*	
Higgins, Emer.	*Munster, Imelda.*	
Hourigan, Neasa.	*Murphy, Catherine.*	
Humphreys, Heather.	*Murphy, Paul.*	
Kehoe, Paul.	*Mythen, Johnny.*	
Lahart, John.	*Nolan, Carol.*	
Leddin, Brian.	*O'Callaghan, Cian.*	
Lowry, Michael.	*O'Reilly, Louise.*	
MacSharry, Marc.	*O'Rourke, Darren.*	
Madigan, Josepha.	*Ó Broin, Eoin.*	
Martin, Catherine.	*Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.*	
Matthews, Steven.	*Ó Murchú, Ruairí.*	
McAuliffe, Paul.	*Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.*	
McConalogue, Charlie.	*Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.*	
McEntee, Helen.	*Pringle, Thomas.*	
McGrath, Michael.	*Quinlivan, Maurice.*	
McHugh, Joe.	*Ryan, Patricia.*	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	*Sherlock, Sean.*	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	*Shortall, Róisín.*	
Murphy, Eoghan.	*Smith, Duncan.*	
Murphy, Verona.	*Stanley, Brian.*	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	*Tóibín, Peadar.*	
Noonan, Malcolm.	*Tully, Pauline.*	
O'Brien, Darragh.	*Ward, Mark.*	
O'Brien, Joe.	*Whitmore, Jennifer.*	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	*Wynne, Violet-Anne.*	
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Dowd, Fergus.		
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.		
Ó Cuív, Éamon.		
Phelan, John Paul.		
Rabbitte, Anne.		

Richmond, Neale.		
Ring, Michael.		
Ryan, Eamon.		
Shanahan, Matt.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Smyth, Ossian.		
Stanton, David.		
Troy, Robert.		
Varadkar, Leo.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Dara Calleary; Níl, Deputies Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and Duncan Smith.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Catherine Connolly - to discuss the provision of bus transport to enable children with special needs to participate in the July provision programme; (2) Deputy Emer Higgins - plans to install temporary buildings for another school on land earmarked for an extension for Scoil Chrónáin in Rathcoole; (3) Deputy Neasa Hourigan - to discuss plans to issue best practice guidelines to local authorities on pedestrian and cycling measures in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic; (4) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss proposals to ring-fence moneys seized from proceeds of crime and redistribute them to front-line community services; (5) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss plans to provide financial assistance to private bus operators in the aftermath of Covid-19; (6) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss funding allocations for the Regional Drug and Alcohol Taskforce to implement the national drugs strategy; (7) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss drug crime in Dundalk; (8) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the Age Action Ireland and Irish Red Cross Covid-19 hardship fund to support elderly people affected by the Covid-19 pandemic; (9) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss the resumption of overnight respite and day services for adults with intellectual disabilities; (10) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss accommodation for the North Wicklow Educate Together post-primary school; (11) Deputy Mattie McGrath - to discuss Covid-19 supports for the Irish music, arts and entertainment industry; (12) Deputy Joe Flaherty - to discuss a bespoke affordable housing scheme for County Longford; (13) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss remote working and accelerated roll-out of high-speed broadband for rural areas; (14) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss future funding for the Cloyne Diosecan Youth Service in Carrigtwohill,

Cork; (15) Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - to discuss the pandemic unemployment payment and access issues for the self-employed; and (16) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss the regulation of the use of lead gunshot.

The matters raised by Deputies Connolly, Higgins, Cahill and Buckley have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Special Educational Needs

An Ceann Comhairle: Can Members not participating in the Topical Issue debate please leave the Chamber quietly? The first matter for discussion comes from Deputy Catherine Connolly, who wishes to discuss the provision of bus transport to enable children with special needs to participate in the July provision programme.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle agus i dtús báire ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a ghabháil leis an Aire nua guím gach rath uirthi in a ról nua. Faraor géar tá orm an t-ábhar seo a ardú inniu. Cheap mé go mbeadh sé réitithe mar tá an t-ábhar thar a bheith goilliúnach agus tá gá le córas iompair a bheith ag na daltaí chun freastal ar an July provision. I congratulate the Minister and wish her the best in her new role.

Unfortunately, I have to raise this topic today. I wish I did not. The school wrote to the Minister and I wrote to the Minister. I realise that she is in a new role and getting familiar with the brief. The matter relates to a specific school in Galway, Ábalta, with children who have special needs, including autism. We fought a battle in the Dáil to ensure that the July provision would go ahead. The Minister's colleague and former Minister, Deputy Joe McHugh, did tremendous work to ensure that the July provision would go ahead and that it be extended, which I welcome. Unfortunately, we appealed to the schools to come forward and they came forward, including Ábalta in Galway, but it was not matched with school transport. I understand that in this particular situation, all the arrangements were made. The drivers, bus escorts and everybody else was in agreement and able to comply with whatever social distancing requirements there were, but they have received no response from the Department other than an acknowledgement, and no explanation as to why school transport could not be provided and paid for by the Department. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that.

I do not need to take all of my time. This is an important issue generally. How can the July provision function properly if children cannot access that service? This also raises the question of what will happen with schools in September. I would appreciate if the Minister could answer that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Connolly. I join in congratulating the Minister on her appointment and acknowledge that, for her first week here dealing with the Topical Issue debate, she has had more than her fair share of cases.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. Before I address the specific issue raised, I would like to provide to the Members an outline of the extent of the school transport service.

School transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of my Department. In the 2019-20 school year, more than 120,000 children, including more than 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in more than 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering more than 100 million km at a cost of more than €219 million in 2019. The purpose of my Department's school transport scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children whose homes are remote from their nearest school.

With regard to transport for the summer provision programme 2020, given the exceptional circumstances in planning for delivery of the programme and the shorter than normal timeframe in which to plan for school transport services, in addition to the expansion of the programme and coupled with the social distancing requirements as per health advice, the Department was not in a position to provide school transport for the programme this year.

However, my Department will provide grant funding to support families with the cost of transport arrangements for those children who are eligible for school transport and who have been approved to participate in the summer programme. The grant payment is based on the distance that a family resides from their child's school of attendance. The calculation is based on four trips per day - home to school and school to home, morning and afternoon - multiplied by the number of days a child attends school for the programme. The current rate of grant is 39.12 cent per kilometre for the first 6,437 km travelled and 21.22 cent per kilometre for each kilometre travelled thereafter.

Families who are already in receipt of the special transport grant for children with special educational needs will be paid as normal following the completion of the summer provision programme 2020. Families who currently avail of a transport service will be contacted by school transport section following the completion of the summer provision programme 2020 in regard to the arrangements for payment.

Families who are not in a position to make their own transport arrangements in order to avail of the school-based programme may contact the special education section of my Department with a view to inquiring about the home-based programme.

I again thank the Deputy for raising this matter and for affording me the opportunity to provide an outline of the extent of the school transport scheme and to respond to the specific issue raised.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I wish the Minister the best in her new role, but I am not happy with her reply, which is the same as a reply we got already. Along with colleagues, I tabled a parliamentary question and that was the standard reply we got. I am trying to go behind that reply.

A number of children with special needs have suffered enough because of Covid. They now cannot attend the July provision because there is no transport. I already know the outline the Minister has given me, and I thank her for that. I am asking her as a new Minister to go behind that, stop the bureaucracy and look for a way of sorting this out so that children with special needs can attend the July provision. There is no way the Minister for Education and Skills can stand over children not being able to attend the school having been deprived of a service since mid-March. This is a very special circumstance. Providing funds is welcome, but it does not sort out the problem.

It has never been explained to the parents and the school why it is not possible. In this situation, all the arrangements have been made to comply with the requirements under Covid. We have no idea why it is not happening. Perhaps we could have a refreshing start of a new Minister, i mBéarla nó i nGaeilge, is cuma liom ach go mbeidh réiteach don fhadhb ar an talamh.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate that the Deputy has acknowledged the importance of what the summer scheme means. There was considerable difficulty in getting it on stream given that the announcement was made on 12 June. Schools were notified on 15 June and it began operation on 29 June. From that point of view, there was a difficulty in putting transport in place. I accept that the Deputy said that in her specific case, this transport seems to be in place. It is important to acknowledge that there is the opportunity for grant assistance for families. The Deputy raised a specific issue relating to this particular school. I will give a commitment that my officials will look specifically at that and I will revert to her.

School Accommodation

Deputy Emer Higgins: Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire on her new role. Scoil Chrónáin in Rathcoole is bursting at the seams. Census data show very clearly that Rathcoole is one of the fastest-growing areas in the country. To keep up with this demand, Scoil Chrónáin erected six temporary prefabs on its playing pitch, which has deprived pupils of that facility. An additional two prefabs will shortly be added.

Scoil Chrónáin has looked forward to securing funding for a long-awaited school building for 45 years. When the Department purchased land from South Dublin County Council adjacent to the current school and it was assigned to a new school for Scoil Chrónáin, there was hope that finally the school would have the quality accommodation it deserves.

This hope was crushed last month when the Department published plans to build temporary accommodation for another school on this land. While the school is supposed to be temporary, once that school goes ahead there is concern that it may never leave. There is no permanent approved site for the new school, and it seems like history repeating itself. This move by the Department is blatantly unjust and unfair.

Scoil Chrónáin has been embedded in the community in Rathcoole for generations and deserves the opportunity to expand to meet the demand for education through the Irish language in the area. That fact that land is available for the school's extension adjacent to its current building seems to give it an ideal opportunity to allow a new school building to be built there when it is so badly needed.

It is unbelievable that the Department earmarked this land for the school and overnight made a decision to hand it over to a different school without any consultation with Scoil Chrónáin or the local community. It is a smack in the face for the school and the Irish-speaking community throughout south Dublin and our community in Rathcoole.

Rathcoole Educate Together is equally deserving of school accommodation, but just not on land earmarked for another school. It is dishonest of the Department to mislead Rathcoole Educate Together into believing that it will have a temporary situation in Rathcoole. As the Minister will be aware from her background in education, once a temporary school is built it often remains in use for years to come. If this temporary school is built the likelihood is that

children coming into junior infants in September will graduate from the same shabby temporary accommodation in years to come and Scoil Chrónáin will still be awaiting its long-promised building. If that happens, no one is a winner - not the school, the children or the parents.

This decision has triggered outrage in the local community, and I am sure the Minister can understand why. It was an overnight decision made by the Department that also places the Educate Together school in an unfair and difficult position. Because of the Department's failure to have the basic courtesy to even consult the community, hundreds of objections to the planning permission for this school have been made, which makes it inevitable that it will be appealed to An Bord Pleanála.

The Department has now had to advise the Educate Together school, which had believed that junior infants would be starting in a new building there in September, that new temporary alternative accommodation has to be found. The Department has made a bit of a mess here and Scoil Chrónáin, the Educate Together school and the community in Rathcoole will lose out. Will the Minister reverse this decision, provide funding for Scoil Chrónáin to build its long-awaited school on the land beside its school and resolve the situation for the Educate Together school?

Deputy Norma Foley: I again thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Scoil Chrónáin is an existing all-Irish co-educational primary school, under the patronage of the Archbishop of Dublin and centrally located in the village of Rathcoole. A building project to provide a new 16-classroom school plus a two-classroom special educational needs unit for the school is included in my Department's school building programme. The new building will be provided on a site adjacent to its existing site in Rathcoole, County Dublin. This site is being acquired by my Department from South Dublin County Council.

Rathcoole Educate Together national school is a new English medium primary school being established in 2020 under the patronage of Educate Together. This new school will be an English medium, co-educational,16-classroom school, plus a two-classroom special educational needs unit. It will be located in a Department-owned site at Coolamber Drive, Rathcoole, County Dublin. Access to this site will require the construction of a new road which is currently being planned by South Dublin County Council. As the Coolamber site is not currently accessible and as the Department now has access to the land adjacent to Scoil Chrónáin, it was determined that the interim accommodation for Rathcoole Educate Together national school could be provided temporarily on that site.

The Department wrote to the board of management of Scoil Chrónáin on 19 March 2020 with regard to the proposed construction of a permanent school building for the school and outlining the Department's plans in this regard. The letter outlined that the Department was in the process of acquiring an additional site area adjacent to their existing site for this purpose.

Scoil Chrónáin was informed of my Department's intention to commence the architectural planning process for the construction of its new school building. The Department also outlined that in tandem with this it would also initiate the architectural planning process for the construction of the new primary school, Rathcoole Educate Together national school. The letter outlined that the building projects for both schools would be advanced in parallel.

The letter further outlined the need for my Department to provide interim accommodation to facilitate the new start-up school accommodation for Rathcoole Educate Together national

school and that this interim accommodation was intended to be temporarily placed on the additional site area being acquired for Scoil Chrónáin. It outlined the process which was to take place, including lodging a planning application for the interim accommodation for Rathcoole Educate Together national school and also advised that the Department plans to move this temporary accommodation for the new school to its Coolamber Drive site as soon as site access is secured and in order to facilitate the construction of the permanent building for Scoil Chrónáin.

My Department had also intended to arrange a meeting with Scoil Chrónáin to explain these matters in more detail but then the Covid situation occurred which has prevented this meeting taking place to date. Now that the country is reopening for business, my officials will be in contact with Scoil Chrónáin to arrange that meeting shortly. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Minister for providing an outline of her Department's position on this matter and agreeing to hold the meeting. Unfortunately, the experience of schools in my constituency does not inspire hope. Scoil Chrónáin has been awaiting a new building for 45 years. St. Joseph's secondary school in Lucan has been awaiting a new building for 15 years. Scoil Áine Naofa and St. Thomas' junior national school in Lucan remain in prefabs. Lucan Community College has been awaiting an extension for as long as I can remember. Griffeen Community College is operating out of another school and my own secondary school, Holy Family community school, has been waiting for a new building since before I graduated. This simply is not good enough.

I got involved in politics to shout about these kinds of issues in my constituency and bring them to the attention of senior Ministers so I appreciate the Minister taking the time to listen to me today. I know from the Minister's background as a teacher and local politician that she understands the importance of providing adequate school accommodation for children and I am asking her to help me secure these new buildings. Each of the buildings in question is promised, budgeted for and needed. I thank the Minister for her response.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy's response. I think there is a clear acknowledgement in the reply I gave that the Department is committed to providing the facilities that the Deputy has mentioned. I will ensure that my Department officials meet with representatives of the school.

Bus Services

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I wish the Minister for climate action, communication networks and transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, all the best in his new portfolio. My question relates to financial assistance for private bus operators. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in Ireland in March, private bus and coach operators have suffered a devastating blow to their operations. National tourism has halted, school buses are not running and large-scale events have been cancelled. Therefore, these companies faced a surreal situation whereby business essentially ground to a halt overnight.

I have had talks with private bus operators regarding the situation. I am informed that they are facing a drop in turnover of 95% which equates to a loss of €586 million. This industry is now facing an uncertain future with the collapse of revenues only adding to the fact that these operators are normally highly indebted due to the high capital costs of buses and coaches. Ac-

cording to economist Jim Power's assessment of the Covid-19 issues facing private bus and coach operators, there are 1,721 coach operators in Ireland with 9,264 vehicles, with over 75 million journeys operated annually for tourists, school children and private hires. It supports 11,457 jobs and adds €164 million annually to the Exchequer in tax revenue. Overall, coach tourism provided €400 million to the Irish economy in 2018, with a turnover of €617 million in 2017.

The simple fact is that the loss of many of these operators would be detrimental to rural Ireland and its local economy. In my own county of Tipperary, for example, there are 73 bus and coach operators, operating 423 vehicles. The loss of any of these services would be bad news for local areas and the jobs they support. The impending closure of these operators will also put more cars on the road which may well undermine the programme for Government's commitment to a 7% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from next year until 2030. It will also increase the likelihood of higher traffic congestion and will affect the rebuilding effort of Ireland's tourism industry.

It is calculated that 17% of total costs are still incurred, even though all buses and coaches are parked up. The expected turnover for the industry this year is €620 million, with approximately €180 million to come from school transport, €170 million for scheduled services and €20 million from HSE contracts or Local Link-type services. A remaining €250 million comes from tourism and the private hire industry. Applying 17% to this figure would indicate a yearly subsidy of €42.5 million. The industry is proposing a subsidy equating to €32 million for a nine-month period to the end of March 2021. The industry also proposes a financial support package of €125 million for scheduled services, a further €1 million for student services and €14 million for specific services which combine to a total of €140 million. It is proposed that these payments will be made on a monthly basis with operators submitting monthly returns on passengers and revenue. This would allow a gradual reduction in subsidies when there is a gradual increase in passengers.

The programme for Government made many commitments, including improving connectivity in rural Ireland, giving greater priority to bus services by expanding quality bus corridors, supporting the tourism sector and accelerating sustainable transport plans for schools. Taking all this into account, can we get a firm commitment from the Government that it will support the private bus and coach industry in its recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and explore avenues to ease the financial burden it has incurred as a result of the collapse in services such as those I have mentioned? This industry is in significant trouble and its survival depends on Government intervention.

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to congratulate the Minister for climate action, communication networks and transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on his appointment and thank him for being here to deal with this Topical Issue matter.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport(Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I am pleased to be here to answer Deputy Jackie Cahill's question and continue to engage with him on this vital issue. We have been able to continue to provide a limited but important public transport service through the Covid-19 crisis. I worked in the tourism sector for many years and recognise the important role that private bus and coach operators provide to the Irish people. We must ensure that they survive this crisis as best we can.

While the majority of public transport in Ireland is provided by the publicly subvented

bus and rail services funded through National Transport Authority's public service obligation programme, the public transport system also includes non-subvented bus services provided on a commercial basis by bus and coach businesses of varying sizes. I understand that approximately 90% of the commercial bus operators have suspended their services or are providing significantly reduced services at present. The licensed bus sector provides essential public transport services across the State and in 2018 operated over 90 million km, carrying in excess of 27 million passengers.

Such operations are an integral part of the overall provision of transport services to the public and supplement the services provided under public service contracts with the National Transport Authority, NTA.

From my Department's engagement with representatives of the licensed bus operators, and indeed from the NTA's regular engagement with them throughout the crisis, I understand the very difficult business environment these operators are operating in. Indeed, across Government we are acutely aware that the Covid-19 situation presents huge challenges for many business sectors. The sector will continue to play a crucial role over the coming months in supporting the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and the Economy, particularly with a more significant return to work and recommencement of retail activities in addition to the expected increase in trips to hospitals, pubs, restaurants and entertainment venues, or for visiting friends and family and, indeed, the return of school transport in the autumn. It is critical for the sector to be functioning so that it can carry the passengers that we need to return to work and to other activities as they reopen. These operators provide essential transport services for people who need to get to work and are vital to ensure economic recovery.

7 o'clock

For that reason, I am pleased to advise the Deputy that temporary funding supports, in accordance with EU and national legislation, have been approved for the licensed bus sector. This support is a positive development and has been welcomed by the industry. It is aimed at ensuring the continued operation of essential licensed bus services for a period of up to six months. The support will be restricted to operators where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention and will be targeted at compensating the gap between specified costs and the revenues generated on the services. The NTA, as the public transport licensing agency, will administer the support through the establishment of contracts between the NTA and the relevant operators. This is, of course, additional to the wider programme of Government supports for impacted businesses which were introduced, including new schemes of wage subsidies, rates waivers, restart grants, lending facilities, equity injection, and business advisory supports.

Over the course of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department has been working closely with the NTA to ensure public transport services continue and to plan for the provision of enhanced public transport services in line with the Government's roadmap. A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network. At the onset of the Covid emergency in mid-March, there was a sharp drop to approximately 10% of pre-Covid numbers. This situation continued until mid-May. Since the implementation of the Government's roadmap, however, passenger demand has increased, albeit from extremely low levels.

With the commencement of phase 3 of the roadmap for reopening on 29 June, changes to the existing public transport social distancing restrictions were agreed, allowing a move from 2 m social distancing to utilising 50% of the passenger carrying capacity of fleet. This will help to

underpin public transport services provided by public and commercial licensed operators during these unprecedented times, with a view to safeguarding public transport capacity in phases 3 and 4 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I thank the Minister for his reply and accept that he acknowledges the great difficulties this industry is encountering. The industry has put forward a detailed proposal about exactly how much funding it needs. I would press on the Minister to give careful consideration. The industry has stated that 17% of operators costs have to be grant-aided for them at this time. The Minister talked about six months. That will not be long enough. The industry's proposal is up to 1 April. I plead with the Minister to recognise that. It is going to take a significant period for the tourism industry to reach anything like full capacity again. There is going to be continual aid needed there.

I would like to make a point about the way Southern operators are treated for VAT compared with their Northern counterparts. Northern operators pay zero VAT on supplies but can claim a full VAT rebate. Southern operators are exempt from VAT meaning they are not charged any VAT but are not able to reclaim VAT. This puts Southern operators at a distinct commercial disadvantage to their competitors from Northern Ireland. It is something that needs to be examined. It is an ongoing problem within our coach industry. It needs to be resolved to put everyone on an even playing pitch.

The cost of insurance in the Twenty-six Counties has been mentioned many times in this House. It is a great burden on this industry. This week it has been discussed in the House. The heavy burden it puts on commercial operators in the State needs to be tackled. The coach business is highly regulated and will be a cornerstone to our recovery post-Covid. I plead with the Minister to listen to what the coach operators are saying and come forward with a package that allows these industries to be in place when our economy gets back on an even keel.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We will very much take the figures and the information Deputy Cahill has provided will help. My colleague, the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Catherine Martin, recognises that the coach industry in the tourism sector is in real trouble, along with so many other aspects of the sector. We need to be sector-specific in recognising this. The loss of the coach tourism business has been cataclysmic this summer and it is facing into a difficult winter. I will certainly try to incorporate the ideas the Deputy has raised.

Tourism is one part of this business. The commercial operators and bus companies operating particular passenger routes outside the tourism sector may, I hope, be able to recover sooner rather than later, particularly if we can avoid a second wave. Confidence in that regard in getting the public back on buses will depend on us getting the public to buy into using a face covering on public transport. If we can get that, public confidence will be much stronger and passenger numbers will come back. I hope within the coming days to have news that will help that in terms of using health regulations to manage that. I hope that will help the commercial bus operators.

I will also mention to the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform the Deputy's ideas on the different VAT regimes North and South. I should signal that we also have a challenge facing us in terms of bus services across the Border in a no-deal Brexit situation. We will have to work on that. The likes of McGinley Coaches, whose buses I have used many a day, have to have certainty around how they can operate across the Border, to take one example from my own experience. We have a lot of work to do there to protect bus and coach

operators in the event of a no-deal Brexit. I will commit to doing that and supporting this vital public transport service.

Youth Services

Deputy Pat Buckley: I welcome the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, to the club. Sometimes he will get an easy ride and sometimes he will not.

This issue was only brought to me late last night. What is known in Carrigtwohill in east Cork as the CDYS, the Cloyne Diocesan Youth Service, is facing closure because of a lack of funding. From the information I received, it is a youth cafe that may close by 22 July and it is down to funding. In my conversations with the co-ordinator for the area and also with the parents and a couple of young kids who use the services, it really got me worrying last night. It has done so much fabulous work in the area in its short time. It has got massive buy-in from the local community but it has only been supported by a one-off philanthropy grant, the St. Vincent de Paul and a local parish priest. We had Brexit and now we seem to be blaming Covid for everything. I raise this out of my former capacity as mental health spokesperson. These young kids are very vulnerable. We have had ongoing issues with new schools in Carrigtwohill as well, so the kids do not know where they are going to school in September. If they are not sports-minded, they have no other outlet.. The kids are genuinely worried about this.

There are many sports clubs around east Cork and I thank all those involved for their work in the community. These clubs are outlets to aid positive mental health. We also have the east Cork music project. Other than these great facilities, we will not have stability or security for young people in a few weeks. Parents are very distressed. East Cork stretches over a very wide area. The Cloyne Diocesan Youth Service offers a therapeutic service for young people in Mallow, Charleville, Mitchelstown. Creative Community Alternatives, CCA, is another vital service that offers play therapy, art therapy, counselling, community and psychotherapy. All this could fall.

I hope the Minister will recognise that I speak to him in an empathetic, honest way. My concerns are genuine. I hope I will not get a standard response. Is there a possibility of keeping this vital service open? If his answer is "No", I will explain to him why it is so important. For every action, there is a reaction and we are a reactive rather than proactive society. If this service is closed, there will be a domino effect. Some young people will not return to school in September - if the schools open - because they will not be alive. Their mental health will be so damaged that we will be facing bigger issues than we do already.

An Ceann Comhairle: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. We all wish him well in his brief and we are grateful that he is present to take this important matter.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank the Ceann Comhairle and Deputy Buckley for their kind words. I look forward to working closely with all Members of the House in my new role. I assure the Deputy of my commitment to young people and the youth sector which provides them with such critical support. I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue.

I am pleased to note that funding to the youth sector has been protected during the extraordinary challenges recently. This has enabled the youth sector to continue to provide supports

to young people, particularly to marginalised, disadvantaged and vulnerable young people, throughout the Covid-19 crisis.

In budget 2020 my Department was allocated €61.8 million in funding to support the provision of youth services nationwide, including the UBU Your Place Your Space strategy, which opened on 1 July. This new funding scheme provides €39 million annually to youth services supporting young people aged between ten and 24 years who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or marginalised. The first cycle of this scheme runs to December 2023.

My Department also funds more universally focused, volunteer led youth work through the youth service grant scheme. We also have some other funding schemes, including the youth capital fund and the new youth climate justice fund.

We are facing challenging times ahead. As the Deputy and everyone else will understand, we must manage the resources we have and use them well. In respect of this year, and the current circumstances, the work of youth services across the country is both necessary and essential, and funding levels are being maintained on that basis. With regard to future funding, it is my wish that funding for the youth sector will be maintained and hopefully increased. I will continue to advocate for that in each successive budgetary process.

On the specific issue raised by the Deputy, while my Department does not currently fund any youth services in Carrigtwohill, it funds four Cloyne Diocesan Youth Service projects to a total of almost €300,000 in 2020. The education and training boards, ETBs, have a specific role in acting as a funding and governance intermediary for my Department in the area of youth funding. This role is underpinned by local area need assessments conducted by the ETBs in conjunction with youth services in their areas.

The Deputy noted that he had only heard about this issue last night. My Department only heard of it today. I urge the service to engage with the relevant ETB in the first instance. Any issues relating to requirements for additional funding should be discussed in the first instance with the relevant ETB, which can consider the various options available. The ETBs are the conduit for the funding that my Department provides.

The Deputy will be aware that the youth sector responded quickly to the current crisis. It has adapted and innovated and the sector did not close. This proactive, innovative approach has allowed it to support many vulnerable young people through the current crisis. Many youth workers and volunteers were redeployed in other sectors to help with Covid-19 crisis responses. I recognise that and acknowledge the work undertaken by people in the youth work sector during the crisis.

My Department is looking at a number of wider schemes to ascertain the impact of the Covid crisis on young people. In particular, we undertook a consultation, How's Your Head - Young Voices during Covid-19, to get a deeper understanding of the impacts of the current crisis on young people, including the issue raised by the Deputy.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister for his reply. He will get to know me. I am straightforward and I do not mess around with politeness that is not needed. The Minister mentioned assessments, ETBs and so on. The first hurdle is Covid. If the virus comes back, will we blame Covid? I understand this matter was raised with the Minister at short notice but that is also the case with me. There is a bigger picture at play.

What do I tell people in Carrigtwohill, east Cork and the Diocese of Cloyne, including the service providers and users, about what will happen to this café? Will there be a ripple effect? Will red tape and Covid be used to mask the loss of this service? This will create a void and I will be back in the House with the Minister or the Minster for Health discussing another cluster of youth suicides and asking why it is happening. I will be told there was a youth service but it is gone and some Deputy raised it at some point. This service does not cost much. The Minister mentioned a figure of €300,000. East Cork is a massive area. Considering the amount of voluntary work which goes on in the area, that sum is extremely small. I appeal to the Minister on behalf of all those who need youth services. We start from the bottom up, not the top down. We need to nurture our children now, educate them and give them support and security. I will contact the Minister's office at the weekend. I would like to sit down with him to see if we can do something to keep these services open and give the people involved an opportunity to tick all the boxes and jump over a couple of fences to get past the Covid barriers. That will not happen overnight and I appeal to the Minister to give me a commitment to keep this service open.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I also like to think of myself as a fairly straight talker. I have come to the House with information my officials have just gathered. I would love to be in a position to say definitively that we will keep this service open but I cannot do that. To do so would be unfair to the Deputy and, more importantly, to the people who are using the services.

The Deputy was a member of Cork County Council. I do not know if he was also a member of his local education and training board. I was a member of the ETB in County Dublin and I am familiar with the huge work it did in supporting youth services. I am aware of the fundamental importance of youth services and the work done by ETBs in assessing needs in particular areas and directing funding to where it is necessary. I understand from my officials that there is a shortfall in funding of about €35,000, which is certainly not a huge amount of money. I ask the Deputy to convey to the service the message that it needs to contact the local ETB as quickly as possible. I will also engage with my officials and will seek to ascertain what exactly are the steps that need to be taken. If the Deputy wishes to get in touch with my Department, I will be very happy to assist in any way I can. I would like to see this facility kept open and I understand the importance it has for the Deputy's area. I do not want to make a rash commitment now that I cannot back up. We will continue to engage on this.

Teachtaireacht ó Choiste - Message from Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Standing Business Committee of Dáil Éireann has completed its consideration under Standing Order 30 of the request by the Minister for Finance to waive the requirement for pre-legislative scrutiny under Standing Order 173 on the general scheme and draft heads of the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) Bill 2020 and has agreed thereto.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill 2020 without amendment.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.21 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 14 July 2020.