



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 9 Meán Fómhair 2020

Wednesday, 9 September 2020

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Note: Ministerial and Departmental titles have been updated in the Question text in anticipation of the relevant Government orders to give legal effect to the Taoiseach's announcement in Dáil Éireann on 27 June 2020.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Third Level Fees

20. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on whether it is fair to expect students to pay the highest fees in the EU at a time when many students have lost work and many households have seen a drop in their income, particularly if courses are to be conducted partially or completely online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22244/20]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The question is on college fees. The Minister will know that there was a problem here already in that our fees are the highest in Europe. Many countries, including Austria, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Greece, have no fees at all. My question is on high fees generally but also the fees being charged this year. Many students feel that it is grossly unfair to charge the same fees while they are not availing of the same campus facilities and so on. Can we have a reduction in fees?

Minister without Portfolio (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the Deputy for the question. One of the few jurisdictions that has higher fees is Northern Ireland. I presume the same logic would apply in terms of the Deputy wanting to see a reduction in fees in Northern Ireland where

Sinn Féin is in government and where the fees are £4,395 sterling per annum and students, therefore, are leaving colleges in Northern Ireland heavily indebted through a student loan system that I view as wholly unfair.

Under the Department's free fees schemes, the Exchequer provides funding toward the tuition fee costs of eligible undergraduate higher education students at an average annual cost of €6,500 per student. Students pay a student contribution of €3,000 per annum, which can be paid in instalments, but importantly and rarely commented on, the State pays the contribution in full or part for an estimated 44% of all students eligible for free fees funding through SUSI. This means that 44% of our students are either having their contribution fee fully or partially paid by the State at an estimated cost of €180 million for 2019-20. In addition to the student contribution funded by the State, we are also providing €340 million through the SUSI grants in 2019 and 2020.

The programme for Government commits to develop a long-term sustainable funding model for higher level education. In addition, I intend to specifically examine student supports to ensure all students have access to educational opportunities and supports that will help them to fulfil their potential. While the balance of costs and benefits of higher education will be considered as part of the reform of higher education funding, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which, in fairness, the Deputy is correct to raise, has an immediate burden on students. For this reason, in July, I announced €168 million in funding to support the sector and students, including a doubling of the student assistant fund from €8 million to €16 million, a €5 million fund for mental health supports and a €15 million fund for technology supports to purchase laptops for students. I accept we have a lot more to do in removing cost as a barrier on this island and I intend to take a number of steps to try to help remove those barriers.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome that the Minister has acknowledged that fees are too high and I agree that they are too high across the island and need to be reduced. There is no comparison between the two jurisdictions given we do not, as yet, have control of exchequer finances in the North. In a recent survey of students carried out by Sinn Féin, 70% said that they have lost employment opportunities. This has compounded everything this year because they do not have the jobs now that they previously had. One of my questions regarding Covid payments for students and whether they are to be continued and be taken into account in regard to fees, has been transferred to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. A reduction in fees by, say, €500 this year would cost €39.3 million. While I welcome all of the announcements the Minister has made, they need to relate to tangible measures that students can access because too many people are excluded from SUSI as it is and they have significant bills coming in the door next week.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with the Deputy. Opportunities that are often available to students will not be available in the current college year, the most obvious being employment opportunities. Many students work part time to supplement the cost of living and the cost of going to college. For this reason, we decided to make a targeted intervention this year in doubling the student assistance fund. This fund is available through access offices in colleges and universities around the country for students who fall on hard times, in addition to SUSI grants. We also made sure that there was a flexibility in SUSI in terms of a sudden change in a family's income arising from Covid. It is also why we changed the rules relating to supports for people in direct provision to access SUSI grants as well. Let me be clear: I fully accept that there is more that needs to be done. The programme for Government references the need for a fundamental overhaul of the student support system and that is something I hope we can advance in

the coming months.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister for his reply. On the student assistance fund, I ask that this be made very accessible, particularly for people who on the face of it may appear to have a gross income that should sustain their needs, but it will not. I refer particularly to cases where there are two front-line workers in one family, yet they cannot afford to send their children to college. The only way to do this is to look at the fees and have them reduced rather than having the different packages available. Sometimes it can be so complex that people cannot get access.

Colleges really need to look at what they are providing this year and the cost of those provisions. This of course relates to the gross underfunding of institutions, and they are trying to get students to carry the can for the chronic underfunding within the institutions themselves. There is gross unfairness in that because of an unaffordability element that really concerns me.

Deputy Simon Harris: I very much welcome the survey done by the Deputy and it is important to directly hear the voices of students. In 2015, the State was investing approximately €1.4 billion of Exchequer funds in higher education and that has now risen to €1.8 billion. When we add the SUSI costs, the figure rises above €2 billion. We need to do more and the programme for Government commits us to doing more.

We can consider the SUSI support schemes. I remember when SUSI was introduced. It brought about much improvement as it removed fragmentation around the country but there are anomalies that we need to address. These must all be part of the normal budgetary process. I can give an example. SUSI does not take into consideration childcare costs, and this could present a barrier to many families, particularly one-parent families, in accessing education. We must introduce reforms relating to postgraduate supports and for part-time learners. This is an indication of my thinking as we approach the budgetary process for this year and in the lifetime of this Government.

Higher Education Institutions

21. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on providing targeted funding for colleges and universities to establish hubs or micro-satellite campuses to enable rural students to complete courses online; and if he will provide further funding for students to access existing rural digital hubs. [22805/20]

Deputy Holly Cairns: One of the main barriers for students in rural Ireland is broadband. With most courses involving blended learning now and some courses and institutions going exclusively online, now more than ever it is essential that as many students as possible have access to broadband. Will the Minister provide targeted funding for colleges and universities to establish hubs or micro-satellite campuses to enable rural students to complete courses online? Will he consider providing funding for students to access existing digital hubs?

Deputy Simon Harris: I was delighted to see this question as I had an exciting meeting the other day with representatives of HEAnet, the organisation that is involved in rolling out technological solutions for students. The Deputy knows that eduroam is a Wi-Fi system used not just by students on campus in Ireland but around the world. HEAnet is in the process of

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developing proposals to see how this eduroam Wi-Fi system can be made available off campus as well as on campus. The Deputy's question concerns how to roll out connectivity with hubs. I welcome that I can work with the Deputy on this and I would be very happy to organise a meeting between her and representatives of HEAnet to see how we can feed in her suggestions in this regard.

Higher education institutions have been undertaking detailed planning and contingencies for their reopening and communicating these to students, trying to move from emergency remote learning towards a more structured model of blended learning, combining both online and on-site provision. The details of these arrangements are being finalised, with all higher education institutions having published their academic calendars with information on the dates for orientation and the beginning of teaching for the autumn semester.

In July, as I mentioned, I announced funding for students, including a €15 million fund for technology supports. With respect to the Deputy's proposal to utilise hubs or micro-satellite campuses for online learning, some higher education institutions already operate more than one campus and are considering all relevant approaches to a return to college where appropriate. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, a number of higher education projects were already receiving funding from the Higher Education Authority, HEA, under the innovation and transformation fund to assist students to access courses virtually. For example, Letterkenny Institute of Technology runs the iNote project, building digital capacity for flexible learning delivery in the west and north west. Dundalk Institute of Technology provides a virtual hub to support all learners under its Gateway to Success project and the Institute of Technology, Sligo, provides online and blended degree programmes for students unable to be on campus due to location or disability.

Connectivity can be an issue for some students and rolling out the national broadband plan is a key element in resolving this. There is something we can do with HEAnet in trying to take the Deputy's idea of creating hubs in communities and extending the eduroam Wi-Fi system to such areas. I am happy to work with the Deputy on that.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I am delighted to see the Minister's enthusiasm and I hope he will be as enthusiastic in funding this. A network of hubs and satellite campuses would not only be important during the pandemic but would also enable greater participation more broadly. Considerable accommodation and living costs are a barrier for some students, and mature students, part-time students and parents would benefit from local facilities as well. Through their links with universities and colleges, hubs and campuses could also facilitate more research of rural issues and serve as incubators for innovation. Representatives of the third level institutions I have met are very enthusiastic about the idea and would be willing to work with the Minister on it.

This year's students will need targeted support, such as funding to avail of existing hubs, which have to run on a commercial basis. I welcome the idea of working with HEAnet but there are existing facilities like the Ludgate Hub in Skibbereen, the newly opened Bantry Bay Works and so many more that provide student rates. It would be good to work with them and support local business. The businesses already provide student rates but the Minister's intervention could help subsidise this further and roll out such a process across rural Ireland, which would make a significant difference to many families. Will the Minister consider providing funding for existing local businesses to try to support them as well as pursuing the HEAnet project? I am open to looking at that too.

Deputy Simon Harris: I suggest we engage on this matter if the Deputy wishes to send me some proposals in this regard. We fund the HEA through the innovation and transformation fund and I have a long list of projects I could read out that it is already funding. The Deputy has identified a real need, particularly in some of the more rural parts of the country.

HEAnet is funded through the HEA and it is seeking pilot projects where it can roll out connectivity. That includes going from on-campus sites to those which would be off campus. The people from HEAnet would be excited to hear the Deputy's proposals, as I am, and if she sends me some details, I will be happy to engage on the matter.

Deputy Holly Cairns: That would be great. I know the hubs in my area are very enthusiastic about remote campuses. In addition, students are concerned about committing to accommodation and other costs associated with moving when it is uncertain how much classroom learning they will be doing or how much will be online. The provision of additional places is welcome but it puts further pressure on institutions to implement social distancing, which will inevitably push more courses online. Waterford Institute of Technology has already announced that all lectures and tutorials will be delivered remotely with only laboratory work and workshops taking place on campus. All students need the certainty that Waterford Institute of Technology has provided.

Will the Minister provide greater clarity to students and institutions on what will be the format for the new college year? Households with overstretched budgets and students cannot afford accommodation that they may not use. The campus student experience is so important and if the majority of courses go online, there will be limited access to campus facilities. In such an absence, a smaller remote campus could go some way towards creating that kind of campus experience.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy has honestly highlighted what is a very delicate balance. Deputies in the House are quite rightly calling on me to ensure we provide extra college places and it is perfectly appropriate. At the same time, we must meet the needs of existing students, and all in a world of Covid-19, where health and safety must come first. As I stated, I expect all students to receive details of their on-site versus off-site learning mix in the first two weeks of September, and I am conscious we are through one of those weeks now. It is the commitment given to me by the universities.

With accommodation, I very much welcome that a number of institutions are now providing more flexible arrangements. For example, if a student is on-site two days a week, he or she may book a room for two days rather than having to take a lease for five or seven days per week over the full college year. I encourage more of our colleges and universities to do that.

Third Level Admissions

22. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on whether it is fair to expect students to pay the highest fees in the European Union at a time when many students have lost work and many households have seen a drop in their income, particularly if courses are to be conducted partially or completely online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22596/20]

51. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science the way in which the Central Applications Office, CAO, will ensure that students who sat the leaving certificate in 2019 are not disadvantaged by the model used to produce predicted grades; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22597/20]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister for his indulgence in taking Question No. 51 as well. He knows it is important that we create a level playing field for leaving certificate students and ensure they are not put at a disadvantage with the predicted grades scheme. I know the Minister has said there are extra places, which I very much welcome. He mentioned the creation of 5,000 places but going on the Department's predictions of what would be needed even before Covid-19, according to the 2018 report, an additional number in excess of 4,000 places were required by 2020. Did the Minister take this and other factors into account in creating the level playing field that is now required?

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 22 and 51 together.

I was very grateful to Deputy Conway-Walsh for wanting to transfer questions in order to highlight this matter as I know the issue is important and timely. This year has been one like no other, and it was a year when a leaving certificate class could not do a leaving certificate exam. At every twist and turn, everybody in this House and across society has wanted to see a system that is as fair as possible put in place to protect the integrity of the leaving certificate and to ensure we could have a pathway for as many people as possible to move on from school to college. That was not always guaranteed if one did not devise a system for doing it. Many Members of the House, including the Deputy, rightly called for the removal of the school profiling piece of the standardisation and that has happened. That will have a knock-on effect on grade inflation, but the school profiling needed to be removed. What can the Government do? We had already increased the number of places for higher education in the budget by 2,700. On top of that, we funded 1,415 additional places for key skills needs in areas of the economy such as ICT, engineering and science. The Deputy will recall that last week I received approval from the Government for 1,250 extra college places and, rather than try to decide in the Dáil or in the Government where to direct them, we asked the HEIs to identify their high-demand courses and to allocate those additional places to match those courses if they had the capacity or flexibility. That was welcomed across the board.

I have been working in the last few days to see if it is possible to create more capacity, even at this stage, and I am pleased to inform the Deputy that, through our engagement with the Higher Education Authority, HEA, and the institutions, I am in a position to confirm that there will be a further 800 additional college places on top of the 1,250 we announced last week. I hope this will go some way towards relieving pressure. To be clear, I expect the points to rise. Higher grades will result in higher points. There is no way around that. However, the most practical, sensible thing we can do is try to provide as many places as possible. I thank all the institutions and universities throughout the country for their leadership on this because, as Deputy Cairns said, it is not easy to ask people to create more places in a Covid environment, but I hope this is welcome news to many.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Yes, the extra 800 places are indeed welcome and I hope this will go some way towards alleviating the anxiety people among the prior leaving certificate students are feeling today. It is a pity we have left it to such a late stage because these students have had months of anxiety. I was first contacted in June about this, and we must never let this happen again. I acknowledge what the third level institutions are doing to try to facilitate what needs to be done here. Should we be in a situation on Friday or Monday next in which those

extra places have not alleviated the issue, could the Minister consider some of the other points that I and my colleague, Deputy Ó Laoghaire, have put forward? The Minister said there were some legal issues with some of the suggestions. I have written to the Minister separately to seek clarification of that legal advice, particularly with regard to seeing if we could have the prior leaving certificate students assessed on the points that were required in the year they did their leaving certificate.

Deputy Simon Harris: I acknowledge the Deputy's and Deputy Ó Laoghaire's constructive engagement on this issue. I have looked at all the options because this year calls for us to look at absolutely everything we can possibly do. The clear advice available to me, and I am happy to write to the Deputy on this, is that the ring-fencing of places is legally fraught for a variety of reasons, principally on the basis that if a 2020 student missed out versus a 2019 student, and there are a number of issues in that regard, the idea of recalculating grades to bring 2019 in line with 2020 does not work. The 4.4% is an average figure. It does not mean everybody in 2020 rose by 4.4%. The clear legal and policy advice available to me was that the most logical and sensible thing to do, based on my engagement with the institutions, was to increase the number of places.

Let us be honest, however. Every year people apply to the CAO from different years. Many are happy and get their first choice. I expect many more people to get their top preferences this year than in any other year. We also know it is a day of disappointment for other people. All Members of the House must point out that there are many pathways to get to where one wishes to go. I encourage people to have their plan A for Friday but also to have their plan B, that is, if they do not get their choice to look at what else they might like to do this year. There are many options. They should talk to a teacher or guidance counsellor and get that good advice.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Like the Minister, I encourage people to look at all the pathways that are available. I am concerned about the students who are contacting me who went through all the options last year. One student, for example, got 517 points. He had to have his grades re-examined and by the time he did so he was too late for a college place this year. It is those students who worked the hardest and gave the highest level of commitment but who were disappointed last year who felt sure they would be getting those places this year. I am concerned about the physical and mental health of these students. We must do everything we can to alleviate that and facilitate them. We also must be looking at the class of 2021 to ensure that we have learned from this year and that these things never happen again.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with much of what the Deputy said. Let us hope a year like this year never happens again. It has been an extraordinary year that nobody could predict. I welcome what the Deputy said. There has been an effort by some, not the Deputy, perhaps to pit one year group against the other. Every student and year group has experienced a difficult impact as a result of the pandemic. The class of 2020 has had a rotten year. The people of 2019 are now concerned. There has been anxiety and stress for everybody. We are all trying to alleviate that as best we can, while accepting that every year there are students who are disappointed that they do not get their choice. We are saying that they may get a second or third choice and there are always ways of moving from one choice to another choice. My strong advice is that they try to get themselves into the system. I note that over 15,000 people last year applied for health and welfare courses and 5,700 or 5,800 got places. Every year people apply for their first choice and do not get it. Some of those who accept their second choice go on to have the careers they wanted. There are always ways to get to where one wishes to go. We are continuing to do what we can to maximise the capacity but, to be honest, we are now very

much at the outer limits of the additional capacity we can add to the system this year with the additional 800 places today.

Third Level Costs

23. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the reason full fees are applicable for students in third level institutes when full services are not available to the students, for example, access to libraries and printing facilities; the supports available to students who struggle with online learning due to limited broadband facilities; if he will work with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to introduce protections for students in student accommodation in terms of deposits and refunds in view of the difficulties encountered by many as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22958/20]

Deputy Mattie McGrath: In view of what the Minister said, I wish to ask about the situation regarding students returning, college fees being demanded upfront and the students not getting refunds. There is also the fact that there is limited broadband in rural areas. Will the Minister talk to the Minister with responsibility for housing about the huge difficulties with accommodation?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for this important question. The short answer is that I will. I have already spoken to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, about this. He was planning a meeting with the Union of Students in Ireland, USI. That either has taken place or will take place shortly. The union has a number of proposals that it wants the Minister to consider and he wants to engage with USI on that. I will support him and the union in any way I can in progressing that.

With regard to students having to pay fees upfront, as I said earlier approximately 44% of people who will go to college this year, or almost half, will have either all or part of their student contribution fee paid through the SUSI grant system. Approximately 2,500 more people applied for the SUSI grant this year, a sign of the times. We have made sure that those grants have been processed as quickly as possible. We have doubled the student assistance fund. This fund is accessed through the local access office. If somebody is having a hard time because he or she used to have a part-time job at the weekend but does not have one now, he or she can seek financial assistance. We have provided funding for laptops. Almost 17,000 laptops will be purchased, and I can send the Deputy a breakdown for his area. These are being sent to the universities and will be there in time for the start of the college year.

On the issue of broadband, I will not take up time by repeating the points I made to Deputy Cairns. I believe there is work we can do in terms of looking at the WiFi access students have on campus and seeing if we can extend that off-site. There are some exciting pilot projects that we can run in the course of the year. I will be happy to meet the Deputy with regard to Tipperary and how we can possibly roll that out there.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: In the first instance, I thank the staff in SUSI. They are doing an enormous job and they are under great pressure this year. They have got on top of their game in the last number of years and they do excellent work. I also welcome the leaving certificate results. Everybody involved with that, including the Minister, Deputy Foley, all the staff, families, students and schools, worked together and put their shoulders to the wheel. It was a good

outcome.

Covid-19 has changed the issues in the third level sector and those facing families with third level students. The scandalous position students and their families were put in from last March must not be repeated in terms of their lack of protection from unscrupulous accommodation providers. Unfortunately, they exist. The failure of accommodation providers to issue refunds was scandalous. I know that the Department providers did provide refunds, but some private providers did not. That is totally unfair to hard-pressed families. It puts awful pressure on the students and parents. In August, tens of thousands of students and their families were put under pressure to pay the deposit and three months rent upfront. That is shocking in the middle of Covid with people out of work and everything else. Indeed, some colleges told students that they would be on campus and that everything would be working. That was wrong and they should not have done so. They were not available and they should not have given that misleading information. The students clearly were not able to be on campus.

Deputy Simon Harris: I welcome the Deputy's kind words for the staff of SUSI. I met them last week and it is incredible that almost all of them have to work remotely to keep everybody safe and follow public health guidance. They are still managing to process a serious amount of applications so I join the Deputy in thanking them.

I asked for a note from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government on private accommodation in light of the Deputy's question.

Students who are renting private accommodation under a lease are entitled to the same legal protection as any other tenant. Tenants' rights are set out in the Residential Tenancies Act and information on tenants' rights and responsibilities is available on the website of the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB. Student accommodation licence terms including cost, duration, refund and cancellation policies should be set out in the licence agreement signed at the beginning of the academic year. I have asked higher education institutions to provide flexible renting options for students seeking accommodation and welcome the fact that a number of them are doing so. I also hope that private accommodation providers will show flexibility to students in current times. Quite frankly, I believe we should not be as reliant on private providers as we currently are and I hope we can make progress on increasing college-owned student accommodation in the coming years.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I appeal to the Minister to work with the Minister with responsibility for housing, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, because while there are many good providers, both public and private, there are also rogue operators who make enormous demands of students. Then there is peer pressure, with students worrying that they do not have a place. The scramble for accommodation every year is unbelievable.

I was contacted by a woman in Tipperary whose daughter attended grind school. She worked very hard and achieved a good result in her HPAT selection test, with a view to studying medicine. However, her results were downgraded in four subjects. She knows that her teachers provided better grades and she wants those grades to be provided. She also has an issue with the appeal date. As the Minister knows, the CAO offer of places is on Friday but appeals cannot be submitted until Monday. Can the appeal process be opened earlier? I am sure there are many other people in a similar situation. This is an excellent student who put in huge effort. Her parents supported her with fees for the grind school and everything else but there is an anomaly in the system. We cannot have people in such situations being discriminated against either.

Deputy Simon Harris: The appeals process and the standardisation is a matter for the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Foley, and I will pass on details of the issue raised by the Deputy regarding that family in Tipperary to her. My understanding is that the appeals process opens on Monday but in addition to that, the marks that teachers gave to students will also be provided to all students from next week. I would make the point that a standardisation process needed to be put in place. We are already dealing with the issue of grade inflation but one can imagine how much more significant that issue would have been had there not been a standardisation.

On the issue of the window, my understanding is that the universities have aligned their own timetables, in terms of start dates and the like, to take into consideration the window of the appeal but I will write to the Deputy to confirm that.

Mental Health Services

24. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the funding which will be made available to each of the third level colleges and institutions to address potential mental health issues that may have arisen in students from the Covid-19 situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22957/20]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This question relates to the mental health supports that are available to students in the various colleges around the country, particularly in the light of Covid-19 and the extra pressures on young people in terms of their mental health. Studies conducted by USI prior to the Covid-19 outbreak showed that over 25% of students had to wait more than four weeks to see a mental health professional within their colleges. What will be done to make that situation different this year?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Pringle for raising this important matter, which he also raised with me last week during a debate on these matters. This is a very serious issue and as the Deputy is aware, I have allocated an additional €5 million for mental health supports. Admittedly, €2 million of that was a budget day announcement of additional funding and then a further €3 million was announced as part of the Covid-19 reopening plan, giving a total of €5 million more.

In advance of this question, I got a breakdown by institution in tabular form which I will provide to the Deputy. Of particular interest to Deputy Pringle will be the data for Letterkenny Institute of Technology, which has received an additional €171,000 through the Higher Education Authority, HEA. The purpose of this additional funding, recognising that this is a time of great urgency in terms of student supports, is to increase access to counsellors and psychologists, to implement the consent framework and other initiatives identified in the national student mental health and suicide prevention framework. Student counselling services are the dedicated mental health support services available in all of our institutions. They provide psychological counselling to students experiencing personal adjustment, developmental or psychological problems that require professional attention. They assist students in identifying and learning skills that will help them in effectively meeting their educational and life goals.

The HEA has been assisted by a broad range of stakeholders, including the HSE, the National Office for Suicide Prevention, the Union of Students in Ireland, Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education Ireland and institutional representatives, as well as my Department, in

preparing the national student mental health and suicide prevention framework, which I intend to publish in the coming weeks. This will provide a further resource, as we start the new academic year, for supporting student mental health. What I am hearing from students across the country is that in general, the quality of mental health supports is very good but as is often the case with mental health, the main issue is access. What we are trying to do with the €5 million is increase the number of professionals in post who can provide services.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: As the Minister himself said, access is the key. There is no point in having fantastic mental health services if only 2% of the students who need them can actually access them. USI conducted a survey on access and prior to Covid-19, over 25% of students were waiting more than four to six weeks for mental health supports, which is over half of a term. That was the situation prior to Covid-19 and we are going to see an increase in demand now, given what has been happening. I am doubtful as to whether the €5 million referred to is an actual increase in funding. What will it actually mean in terms of delivering extra services? I do not think it will come anywhere near what is required when one considers that in terms of the rest of the education budget, we are talking about hundreds of millions of euro. A sum of €5 million for mental health seems to be minimal. I hope I am wrong and that it will benefit students because I believe there will be an increase in demand for services this year. We must step up to the mark and make sure that the demand can be met.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is objectively one of the largest increases we have seen for student mental health services in many years but whether it is enough is always a fair question. Do I want to continue to invest more? Of course I do. The Deputy asked what will happen with the funding and what the institutions will do with it and that is a key question. I have outlined in my answer what we want them to do with the funding. We want them to hire more student counsellors and psychologists and to beef up their services in order that students can get better access to what are, generally, high-quality services. We have given an allocation through the HEA to each individual institution and I will provide the Deputy with the full breakdown by institution. There is a degree of local flexibility in terms of what institutions can do because the situation varies from institution to institution. That said, I am not fond of money going into black holes or out into the ether and having to chase it for ever more so we have asked the HEA to report back on how that money has been spent and I will be able to keep the House updated in that regard.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: That is vitally important because we must make sure it meets the needs of the students. Figures from USI indicate that 38.4% of students experienced severe levels of anxiety, 29.9% experienced depression and 17.3% experienced stress. That was in the pre-Covid era so we are going to see an increase in all of that. There is also the added difficulty in reaching students and making services available to them when they are not on campus. We must keep a close eye on this to make sure that the funding provided is actually achieving what it is setting out to achieve. We must monitor it closely because that will be key to service provision.

Deputy Simon Harris: I assure the Deputy that we will do that. I am more than happy to keep the Deputy and the House updated in that regard.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Technological Universities

25. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the timeline for the amalgamation of Institute of Technology Carlow and Waterford Institute of Technology to form the Technological University for the South East Ireland. [22600/20]

Deputy Verona Murphy: I seek an update from the Minister on the timeline for the amalgamation of Institute of Technology, IT, Carlow and Waterford IT to form a technological university in the south east of Ireland.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Verona Murphy for asking this question which she has asked of me many times in the last eight weeks. I know it is a priority for her and for all Oireachtas Members from the south east because it is potentially a transformational project in the context of regional development and access to higher education. I assure the Deputy that it is a priority for me as well. Indeed, the progression of technological universities is a key national strategic objective in terms of advancing the higher education agenda but also in terms of skills, access, research and regional development. The programme for Government specifically references the establishment of a technological university for the south east and it falls on me to do everything within my power to make sure that happens.

Obviously, as autonomous higher education institutions, it remains a matter for the governing bodies of the individual institutions engaged in a consortium seeking technological university designation under the requirements of the Technological Universities Act 2018. The Technological University for the South East Ireland, TUSEI, consortium of IT Carlow and Waterford IT continues to actively develop its application for technological university designation. As the Deputy knows, in late July I announced that I had appointed Mr. Tom Boland as the independent programme executive director for the TUSEI project. He and his team are now tasked with driving the necessary change management process and ensuring an application is submitted to me under the 2018 Act. I recently met Mr. Boland and this month I will meet him, the presidents of the two relevant institutes of technology and the chairs of their governing boards. When I met Mr. Boland I underlined the Government's expectation that significant progress should be made in the months to year end on developing a robust project plan. It is key to have a project plan with milestones, accountability and implementation with a view to submitting a high quality application under the Technological Universities Act as soon as is feasible. Subject to speaking to the presidents, my understanding at this juncture is that an application is being readied with a view to submitting it by quarter 2 of 2021. In other words, I will need to be in a position to designate this by next summer if we are to go ahead with a commencement date in January 2022. It is my intention and Mr. Boland's intention that 1 January 2022 will be the start date for this new technological university. There is a hell of a lot of work to be done in order to achieve that.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I wish Mr. Boland well in his task. I will be available to assist on the project as a representative of the Wexford constituency. The south east is experiencing a period of significant change due to rapid population increase. In an economy that is diversifying in light of the shifting annual European and global environments, new patterns of population

distribution particular to the county as a whole have come about, with easy access to the regions though the road infrastructure being one of the contributing factors. A technological university of international standing will be a key component of the infrastructure which is required to drive sustainable regional economic and social development. In particular, Wexford must have a new university campus in the immediate future to enable the county to retain a trained and highly skilled work force that will attract a fair portion of foreign direct investment which is badly needed there. I envisage that the campus would host the science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, courses which are essential as the cohesive force for a centre of knowledge. The Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Communications, Climate Action and Environment already being *in situ* in Wexford will enable research and innovation to assist such courses in the region. Can the Minister confirm that he is committed to establishing a university campus in Wexford?

Deputy Simon Harris: Absolutely. It is key to the success of this project that there be a Wexford campus. That has always been the intention and it needs to happen. The consortium recently designed a change management programme and established a project office with three full-time executives and support staff. That office has been working on making progress and updating the draft application which is now being reviewed in the context of the recent success of the Munster technological university consortium application process. In other words, it is learning from technological universities that have already been through the process.

As evidence of the priority attached to this project, I brought a memorandum to the Government on 22 July, informing the Cabinet on the progression of the TUSEI proposals, the appointment of Mr. Tom Boland and the plans that we wish to put in place to create a real momentum around the project. There have been too many false dawns relating to it. We are still aiming for technological university designation on 1 January 2022. That is the goal and the moment of transformation for the south east. There is a significant amount that I can and will do. I will give it a lot of time and energy. There is also a significant amount that we need the individual institutions and the stakeholders in the south east to do. I know they will undertake that significant body of work. Everyone needs to put their shoulders to the wheel and get a lot of heavy lifting done between now and the end of the year.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I am a former student of Carlow IT and have heard the Minister speak at length in recent days regarding further and higher education. I undertook a bachelor of arts degree in law in 2006 as a night student in Carlow IT. As a full-time worker and the mother of a teenage daughter, I would not have had that opportunity if that course was not available. Students from Wexford have access to the Carlow campus but I passionately believe that we need a new technological campus in order to service further and higher education needs, as the Minister stated. Not everyone can take the conventional route and head off to college or university in the big smoke. Particularly in these times of financial strife, parents wish for their children to have the opportunity to stay in their native county to study.

Deputy Simon Harris: In light of the week that is in it, I am very pleased that Deputy Murphy has told of her experience of the benefits of further education because it can be transformational. There are many pathways to get to where people wish to go. I have heard many stories this week of persons who missed out on a place in university that they desperately wanted. They were disappointed at the time, but did a year in further education and then got a place in university the next year. They benefitted from that year. I encourage everybody in that situation to follow a similar course.

On the Deputy's point regarding regional development and the cost to families, this is another key game changer. We know that the longer people can stay and live in an area, the more likely they are to set up their family there, buy their home there and make their life there. From a balanced regional development approach, these technological universities are potential game changers. I know Deputy Harkin will shortly ask me about a technological university for the north east. The technological universities are key from an educational point of view and if we are serious in this House about regional development and caring about the regions. The days of everyone having to go to the big smoke, as the Deputy called it, in order to access to higher education must come to an end.

Mental Health Services

26. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to provide additional mental health supports to students returning to higher and further education. [22632/20]

Deputy Brendan Smith: I wish the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, well in their very important work. All Deputies are aware that the reopening of schools in recent weeks has shown there is a wide understanding of the strain that Covid-19 has placed on the wellness and mental health of young people and society in general. That strain does not end when a student leaves second level. I ask the Minister to outline what much-needed additional supports will be provided and deployed for students in further and higher education for the coming year.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is correct that there has been an effort by some Deputies - not him or me - to pit one generation against another with regard to Covid. The reality is that it has had a serious impact on all generations, including young people. I was very moved by the "Prime Time" television programme broadcast last night which showed all the milestones young people have missed as a result of the pandemic.

It is important, right and proper that the Government invests in helping students to make the transition from school into further or higher education. There are four areas in which we have tried to invest. One is the SUSI grant process and ensuring the applications are being processed and turned around. We have received 2,500 more applications so far. We are also making sure the system is flexible enough to understand that an applicant's family's income may have changed suddenly this year as a result of Covid and that that needs to be factored into the consideration. I have been meeting the staff responsible for SUSI regularly on that issue. The second area of investment relates to the issue of realising one cannot tell a student to pursue online learning without ensuring that he or she has access to a laptop. Families that one might presume could afford to put together several hundred euro in order to secure a laptop may be having difficulty doing so. We have invested €15 million in buying technological devices, including laptops, for students. They are being divvied out among all the institutions and will all be available before the new academic year starts.

We have doubled the student assistance fund. Its funding is usually approximately €8 million per year but this year it will be approximately €16 million. It is a fund which people can go to their local access office to draw down if they fall on hard times, have difficulty with a bill or lose a part-time job. There is €16 million in that fund.

As I outlined to Deputy Pringle, we have allocated an additional €5 million to student mental health, €2 million of which was allocated on budget day for extra spending this year, with the remaining €3 million allocated more as part of the July announcement. That has been divided among the individual institutions through the HEA. They are being asked to focus on hiring more counsellors and psychologists to ensure there are good supports for students. We are continuing to keep a watching brief on this issue. We will keep working with students' unions, listening to staff and putting in more supports as the need arises.

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Minister stated, Covid is not generational. Rather, it has affected every cohort in society. He referred to SUSI. My colleague, Deputy O'Connor, has tabled a very good question regarding the need for flexibility in respect of some independent students who had to move home and may not have the utility bills for a certain period that are an important part of the application process.

It is an unfortunate reality that September and October usually see an increase in referrals for mental health. It is probably the case that, this year, that increase will be exacerbated by Covid and the uncertainty it has created for all generations. The most recent report on mental health by the Union of Students in Ireland found that a significant cohort of students suffer from depression and anxiety. In the current circumstances, the normal safety nets which exist for students have come under strain. Students who are remote learning to a much greater extent will find it difficult to connect with or spend time with friends. The supports which are available on campuses may not be as obvious in these circumstances. A more proactive approach will be needed to support those students. I ask the Minister to confirm that the supports will become more proactive. We need to ensure that there is connectivity with the students who will be off campus.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I support my colleague. The Minister mentioned a financial package of €5 million for additional student counsellors and to recruit additional psychologists for institutes. I am concerned that the Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, Cavan Institute and Monaghan Institute will miss out on this very important funding. I ask that the Minister consider this in future allocations. Not every county has a third level institution and the area of further education is equally deserving of investment to create a safe, respectful and supportive environment.

Deputy Simon Harris: On overhauling SUSI, the programme for Government commits to a fundamental reform to student support structures. I hope we can make progress on this in the coming period.

Deputy Brendan Smith is correct that we must be much more visible in terms of students knowing how to access these supports. I encourage everybody, including every Deputy, to direct people towards *yourmentalhealth.ie*. For the first time, we have a 24-7 text line for people who are experiencing mental health challenges. We must also talk more about how this pandemic is having an impact on everyone's mental health and well-being. Sometimes students, and everyone else, can feel they are the only ones feeling that way but that is not the case.

I will examine the issue Deputy Niamh Smyth raised regarding Cavan Institute and Monaghan Institute. The counties the Deputies represent, like my county, do not have a university but they do great work through further education. I will talk to SOLAS and revert to the Deputy on the matter.

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Deputy Brendan Smith: I assure the Minister that, having fought for them over the years, we now have two very good institutes of further education in Cavan and Monaghan and I am very glad to be associated with the development of both. We would be glad to welcome the Minister and Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, whenever it is suitable.

We are all aware that the members of the class of 2020 have had a very difficult time. They experienced uncertainty with the leaving certificate and will now go to further or higher education colleges. Some of them have not yet received a timetable setting out how much time they will spend on campus and how much will be done through blended learning. Those starting out in college now have particular challenges. They may not get the on-campus experience which is part of lifelong learning and a particular part of learning for that age cohort. We must ensure that students who are off campus are not left behind. We must also avoid an increased drop-out rate among students in further and higher education arising from the additional challenges facing this particular class. These young people have gone through a difficult time as a result of the uncertainty with the leaving certificate. I compliment everyone in the Department of Education and Skills and the Minister, Deputy Foley, on dealing with a very difficult situation. I ask the Minister to ensure this cohort of new students is given particular attention and that additional supports are provided to ensure that as well as blended learning, these students are also able to blend into college life as much as possible.

Deputy Simon Harris: I look forward to visiting Cavan and Monaghan with the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, and seeing the two institutes in question. The Deputy is entirely correct and I have been making the same point to the Irish Universities Association and the education and training boards. One cannot orientate someone into college via Zoom. Students need to be brought in to the college. To be fair, the institutions are positively discriminating, for want of a better phrase, in favour of first year students and often fourth or final year students and those who need to do practical classes. It appears a common sense approach is being taken. To become attached to an institution, students need to be able to visit it and get a feel for the place. This will be a very different college year and some of the normal college experiences the Deputies and I may have had will not be available this year because we have to keep staff, students and their communities safe first and foremost. A different experience should not mean a lesser one, however. That is the challenge we must continue to work with.

All first year students have been given start dates. The Deputy's point about uncertainty provides me with the opportunity to again encourage everyone to get on to some course this year, whether it is in further or higher education or an apprenticeship. The world is very uncertain and the routine and structure of that could be very helpful as we work our way through what will be a difficult few months.

Student Support Schemes

27. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the dilemma for candidates applying to the SUSI system for doctoral funding as an independent candidate who cannot claim to have been living independently from the previous October due to circumstances in relation to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22639/20]

Deputy James O'Connor: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to this new position. I am no stranger to some of the work he is doing in the Department and I wish him well.

This is an incredibly important time for many undergraduates and postgraduates. The lives of all citizens have been changed by Covid-19. Today I highlight the ability of young people to access higher education funding under the SUSI system. Many young people have moved home from across the globe and elsewhere Ireland due to Covid-19. They are now ineligible to be classified as independent candidates under SUSI as they have not been deemed as living independently since the previous October. Does the Minister recognise this dilemma? Has his Department brought forward steps to address this particular issue for doctoral funding?

Deputy Simon Harris: I congratulate Deputy O'Connor on his election. I think he is the youngest Deputy in the House, as I once was, although I have now reached the ripe old age of 33.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, on which he also wrote to me. The decision on eligibility for student grant applications is a matter for Student Universal Support Ireland. For student grant purposes, students are categorised according to their circumstances either as students dependent on parents or a legal guardian or as independent mature students. A student may be assessed as an independent student, that is, assessed without reference to parental income and address, if he or she has attained the age of 23 on 1 January of the year of first entry to an approved course and is not ordinarily resident with parents from the previous 1 October. Otherwise, he or she is assessed as a dependent student.

A student's status for grant purposes is defined at his or her first point of entry to an approved further or higher education course or at his or her point of re-entry to an approved course following a break from studies of at least three years, and continues to apply for the duration of his or her studies. Therefore, for students seeking entry to the 2020-21 scheme as independent, 1 October 2019 would be the relevant date for determining their status. This obviously predates the exceptional circumstances arising from the response to Covid-19 earlier in the current year.

Applicants who do not meet the criteria to be assessed as an independent student for grant purposes, or who cannot supply the necessary documentation to establish independent living for the required period, may still apply to SUSI to have their grant eligibility assessed as a dependent student. The relevant information, including details of parental income, would be required.

Students in third level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the student assistance fund. This fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. This can be accessed through the access officer in the third level institution attended. We have doubled the funding in the scheme which is administered on a confidential basis.

I get the sense that Deputy O'Connor has a particular issue on the need for common sense to prevail this year. I would welcome his taking the opportunity to expand on that.

Deputy James O'Connor: The system to qualify as an independent candidate under SUSI sets a very high bar. Having to live independently since the previous October, and having to be over the age of 23 years when first entering higher education or having a three-year gap in higher education to qualify as an independent candidate, can be very difficult for many families. I do not think we can suggest that these criteria are solely for the purpose of means testing in the current economic climate. I ask the Minister to recognise that the criteria deter young people

from continuing in higher education.

Covid-19 has shown the importance of continuing to support research and development. I welcome the creation of the Minister's Department and hope he gets the opportunity to address this problem.

Will the Minister explain further the rationale for the eligibility criteria? What alternative funding has the Department made available or does it plan to make available to meet the current shortfalls? Many young people will continue to pursue higher education if the necessary funding is provided.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I endorse Deputy O'Connor's remarks. I know of people who had to change their plans and move home. They now hope to go on to education but they are unable to produce a utility bill as evidence of independent living. They had to move to their parents' house due to the emergency and that should be taken into consideration.

Deputy Simon Harris: The determining date will be 1 October 2019 but if it is necessary for me to provide further clarity or assistance on that, I will be happy to do so. Deputy O'Connor makes a valid point. Through this example and other correspondence he has sent me, he highlights the need to overhaul the entire student support scheme. He has asked me to stand over the logic of the system. I can read out long explanations for how the logic was arrived at and why the legal position, underpinned in this House in statute, is in place. However, times change and lives change. The way in which we live our lives changes, as does the education system. That is why, when we negotiated the programme for Government, we included a firm commitment not only to review but to radically overhaul the student support scheme. This is an area I will examine in that context.

Budget 2021 will be announced in October. We cannot do everything in one day but the budget may provide space to carry out the comprehensive review of the student support scheme over the coming months. The student assistance fund is the alternative funding available in the meantime, which we have doubled to €16 million this year.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for that information. I appreciate that he is going to review the Student Support Act 2011. This is an opportunity for the Minister to think outside the box and look at what other countries are doing to provide funding for PhD candidates. The Netherlands offers a very interesting example, which is very different to Ireland. PhD candidates there are treated as employees of their university or third level institution. Perhaps there is an opportunity for us to look at alternative ways of addressing this problem that could be sustained in the future, not just during the pandemic. Now is the time for radical action on this. The Minister himself has said this is an issue. I look forward to working with him on it in the future. I sincerely hope that in the next number of weeks, he will take the time to address the problems I have outlined to him today.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy O'Connor. I am more than willing to work with the Deputy on this, knowing his knowledge, interest and past experience in the area. I assure him that we will look to best practice in other countries. I hope the establishment of our new Department provides an opportunity to bring a new focus and energy to these issues in a way that may not have been humanly possible when they were part of the broader remit of the Department of Education and Skills.

The Deputy's implied point about precarious employment is a very valid one. We are begin-

ning to see the impact of that in several areas. I refer particularly to the issue of harassment, which has been discussed in recent days. I have heard that precarious employment often leaves people feeling very vulnerable in certain scenarios. That is not good enough. I will certainly look at the issues the Deputy refers to concerning the treatment of PhD students and how they can be protected and offered a degree of security and certainty.

Student Support Schemes

28. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the supports being put in place to support third level students returning to education to ensure their health and well-being during these challenging times. [22644/20]

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. My question concerns mental health and well-being. That has already been interrogated very thoroughly by Deputies Brendan Smith and Pringle. Rather than going over the same ground again, I would like to ask about the 2,700 additional places the Minister referred to and the further 800 that have been announced. The services are already overstretched and under-resourced. Is the Minister confident that the new funding he is allocating will help to deal with this problem?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for her willingness not to repeat the debate we have had. I know the issue of mental health is very serious and important. Some €121,000 will be allocated to IT Sligo and €164,000 will be allocated to Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT. I will provide the Deputy with a full breakdown of the funding by institution. The additional places we have announced in recent days will come with additional resources. We will not ask the institutions to provide these services for free. I do not say that in a flippant way. We will provide them with the funds and resources necessary for those students. Roughly speaking and from memory, the 1,250 extra places will come at a full-year cost of €12 million. An incremental cost will arise from the 800 extra places I have announced this morning.

The point the Deputy has made is a very fair one. This is all a question of balance. We are asking our universities, along with everybody else, to live and work in a very different way. We are asking them to maintain social distancing and offer blended learning. When the intake of students is increased, that challenge becomes harder. The higher education institutions have come up with these figures. We have not dictated what they will provide from Dublin. Because of the extraordinary year, we have asked them to look at the full resources of their campuses to determine whether they can safely provide any more spaces. The latest figure of 800 represents what they can do. Let me be truthful with this House and with students and parents throughout the country. There will not be capacity to do more beyond the announcements made this morning and last week. That is an honest evaluation of our position.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Minister. I have spoken to Sligo IT's representatives and the €120,000 will be most welcome and useful. That will mostly be used for mental health services but it will also go to other areas like access. I hear what the Minister is saying. The services were already overstretched. With the increased intake of students and the particularly difficult year students have had, we must seriously consider increasing resources for mental health services, perhaps in the budget or later.

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I would like to raise another point which is directly related to mental health and well-being, namely, gender-based violence in third level institutions. I know this is an issue close to the Minister's heart. It certainly contributes significantly to issues of poor mental health and well-being at third level. A recent survey found that more than 6,000 students, mostly female, reported rape during their time in college. That is absolutely shocking. Some 10% of males and 28% of non-binary students have had the same experience. How is the Minister addressing this issue in the specific context of mental health?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Harkin for raising this issue. We can talk about mental health in a general sense, and it is important that we do so, but the sexual harassment and sexual violence taking place in our institutions must be called out by all of us. It is an issue for both students and staff. I intend to approach this with a degree of priority and focus that may not have been there in the past. My predecessor, Mary Mitchell O'Connor, started some really good work on this issue and I want to build on that.

I have several ministerial vacancies on governing authorities. Starting as early as today, the type of people I will appoint to those governing authorities will send a very clear message to anybody in a leadership position. My representatives, the representatives of the people of Ireland on those governing authorities, will be there to keep an eye on those issues and ask questions in that regard. We must do more. Our general frameworks are important but how they are implemented in the institutions is key. I have written to each university president to state that within six months, he or she must produce an action plan for dealing with this issue in his or her institution. The HEA will oversee its implementation. This is a big issue. It is not confined to third level, but it is a challenge in this sector and we must address it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Everyone has been very co-operative. If we continue to be co-operative, more people will have time to ask their questions.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I will be briefer this time, because I did run over slightly. The Minister has said he will call this out. Recent media reports have shown that this is not confined to the student body, but extends to lecturers, professors etc. It is a problem throughout the sector. Calling it out is fine and I take the Minister's point about governing bodies. That will matter. However we will also need resources and programmes to help those who have been victims of gender-based violence and to prevent any incidences of such violence on third level campuses. Again, I point out to the Minister the importance of resources devoted specifically to this.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is a reason I have asked for several actions to be taken by the group chaired by the National Women's Council of Ireland in advance of planning for the coming budgetary year. I want to do more. Funding for third level institutions also comes from research agencies such as Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council. We must make sure those agencies are aware of any allegations of wrongdoing on the courses they fund. Let us be honest - we must ensure a linkage between people getting on top of this issue and levels of funding. That is why I want the HEA to have an oversight role. I do not want this to be done in-house. I want action plans to be published, with metrics that can be measured by the HEA. Later this year we will introduce the general scheme of legislation on the governance of this whole sector to the House. I hope we can all work on that together to achieve the necessary increases in oversight. I have not lived under a rock for my whole life but the prevalence of this issue is causing me significant concern. However it is not beyond us to get on top of this and bring about the cultural change that we need. I accept that this will require resources.

Dáil Éireann
Third Level Fees

29. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to abolish third level registration fees in view of the fact that many students will not be attending lectures as normal, will have extra IT costs due to online learning and will find it more difficult to find work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22648/20]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: By any standard, the students who enter higher education in 2020 will have a very greatly diminished student experience. Against that background, it is completely unjustifiable to charge the highest student contribution fee in Europe. It is completely unjustifiable to charge students anything at all but to charge them €3,000 a year when they have no ability to get part-time work, their family incomes may have been hit and they will have a diminished student experience is unacceptable. The Minister should abolish or dramatically reduce those fees.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am aware of Deputy Boyd Barrett's views on this. I intend to address the funding for higher education, an issue that has been avoided for many years. A new Government and a new Department provide that opportunity. Issues around the registration fee are decided on through the budgetary process. I hope the Deputy will acknowledge that I have taken several measures to provide students with additional resources to meet the costs they face. We have doubled the student assistance fund, a progressive measure by any standards, from €8 million a year to €16 million a year; introduced the first dedicated technology fund to purchase 17,000 laptops for students; and increased mental health supports by €5 million, with a further €3 million included in the budget day announcement. The previous Oireachtas was asked to look at the issue of the Cassells report and decided to ask for an economic evaluation of all the options. That work is due to be concluded at the start of 2021 and I will act on the findings. I do not believe we should go down the route of levelling students with lots of debt as they start out and I am not convinced that the student loan model works, either. More Exchequer funding is the general direction of travel. We increased Exchequer funding from €1.4 billion in 2015 to €1.8 billion in 2018. The cost of providing education will be higher this year. In a Covid world where we have to have fewer people on campus, a different way of doing things, IT licenses and all that, the cost will go up. We are not increasing the student contribution fee. I would like it reduced over the lifetime of the Government. There is a budget next month and, in the meantime, we are targeting a lot of additional resources at students most in need.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Germany, Iceland, France, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Slovenia and the Czech Republic have no student contribution fees. Spain, a country that was hammered by austerity, has an annual student contribution fee of €500 yet we are charging €3,000. Now we are going to be charging that for a hugely diminished third level experience for the class of 2020. Any additional funding is welcome but the key metric is funding per student. Under various Fine Gael Governments, that has dropped by 43%. The numbers in higher education are going up. They have doubled since 2000 and another 40,000 additional students in higher education are projected over the next decade. The actual funding per student has crashed. If the Minister wants to know why there is a mental health difficulty, at least part of the answer is the enormous pressure and stress, financial and otherwise, put on students because of the chronic underfunding of higher education.

Deputy Simon Harris: We both agree on the need to increase funding for higher education.

Let us be honest, though. Approximately 80% of the higher education budget is going on fixed staff costs and that is right and proper. The Deputy would be the first to tell me if that was not being addressed. We cannot pretend that the cost of providing the education system this year is decreasing, in fact, it is increasing. What we can do is look at ways of providing support. One of the things that is never said in these debates is that 44% of students in Ireland have their student contribution fee in full or in part paid through the Exchequer. Not every student is paying the student contribution fee. Some 44% of people are not; the most vulnerable, most disadvantaged and lowest income people are not paying it. I want to review the student supports and see how we can take more people out of the net of paying the contribution fee. Work is under way in that regard.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I just pointed out a number of European countries where they do not have a contribution fee. That is the standard we should reach rather than having the highest fees. The level of investment per student in this country for most categories of students is less than the amount of public investment into horses. I like horses but I prefer students. I think they are more important and they add something very significant over their lifetimes additional to Exchequer revenues and so on. We need to dramatically increase the investment. Where could the Minister get it? I will give him a simple idea. I have said this many times. Some €700 million and rising is going in research and development tax relief to a handful of multinational corporations that are already supremely profitable. Has anybody done a cost-benefit analysis of whether that €700 million is better going to Google, Facebook and Apple or to our public universities? I bet no one has but we should. I think we would find it would be a lot more socially and economically beneficial to this country.

Deputy Simon Harris: I like horses and I too prefer students. That is why as Minister with responsibility for further and higher education within the first eight weeks in the job the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, and I have made a number of measures and initiatives to significantly increase the supports going to students. The model we have in place at the moment ensures that those on the lowest incomes, those most at risk of disadvantage, do not pay student contribution fees. We almost have a situation where nearly half of our students are not paying a contribution fee at all. I want to look at how we can build on that and how we can build a sustainable model based on public funding. There is a review due back at the start of next year which we have commissioned with the European Commission. It will provide us with a pathway as to how we can address this issue which, in my view, due to political cowardice across the divide has been avoided for far too long.

Third Level Education

30. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to incentivise young persons typically excluded from higher education due to socioeconomic status to engage in education past school in view of the high youth unemployment rates. [22606/20]

Deputy Thomas Gould: In light of recent high figures of unemployment, I ask the Minister of State his plans to incentivise young people typically excluded from higher education due to socioeconomic status to engage in education past school. Covid-19 has shone a serious light on the need to get young people into higher education to improve their chances of employment and the quality of that employment and to break the cycle of poverty.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Niall Collins):

I thank the Deputy for his question. My priority is to offer accessible and inclusive further and higher education and training for all. Supporting inclusion is one of the three key pillars around which the new further education and training, FET, strategy is built and the core vision of the national access plan for equity of access to higher education is to ensure that the student body in higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and socioeconomic mix of Ireland's population.

A number of direct financial supports are in place across further and higher education to incentivise young people to continue to engage in education past school whatever their socioeconomic status. These include the payment of income support in place of social welfare in FET, the student grant scheme and the student assistance fund. In July, the Government announced an additional €168 million funding package for further and higher education, which includes €15 million allocated to technology devices for students, a doubling of the student assistance fund, €3 million extra funding for mental health services for students and more funding for students with disabilities. The July stimulus package offers a €200 million investment in training and education. Under this package the Government is making available 35,000 additional places in further and higher education, and introducing the apprenticeship incentivisation scheme to support employers to take on new apprentices.

I would encourage young learners to contact the free and confidential guidance services available through the education and training boards and the access offices and guidance services in higher education institutions to explore their options.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We have heard an announcement here about additional places in third level to be offered to students. Will students be included who are exploring alternative routes to third level through schemes like the higher education access route, HEAR, for socioeconomically disadvantaged students or the disability access route to education, DARE, scheme for students with additional needs? These are wonderful schemes and it is important this year especially that they are not excluded from the new plans. Covid-19 has shone a light on the disadvantage that people face. On youth unemployment figures, more than 13,100 people under the age of 24 were unemployed in July. That is getting more people into third level education is vital at this stage.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Deputy is right. No student or anybody seeking education or further training should be excluded. Certainly what myself and the Minister, Deputy Harris, are working towards is providing more places right across the whole range of disciplines, apprenticeships and courses. I just want to point out to the Deputy that the youth guarantee is a commitment by all member states of the EU to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 are offered good quality employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. Under the youth guarantee, young people under the age of 18 who have left school without completing secondary education or who have failed to find employment should be provided with a second chance.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I accept some of the points the Minister of State made. For the people I represent, sometimes the barrier to education is not just points. There are many more issues that affect people. There are transport, accommodation and finance considerations, and people who are involved with care-giving duties. In the area I represent, only 10% of the people who go to third level education consider themselves from disadvantaged areas. My constituency includes a rural area and a city. Across the constituency, there are different types of people

at third level. We need to get more people into third level education. The experience of people living in areas where people do not typically go to third level is that when they go to third level they feel isolated and alone. We need to work with these young people to ensure they can stay on at third level.

Deputy Niall Collins: I agree with the Deputy. The experience of people in the area I represent, which is predominantly rural but close to the urban setting of Limerick city, is similar. We have some larger towns and people in my constituency have experienced and articulated to me some of the challenges Deputy Gould outlined.

The Youthreach programme is very important. Many of the people we speak of are younger people who have left school for various reasons. The programme is delivered in two ways, namely, through Youthreach centres and community training centres, which are doing some very good work. I encourage those who have issues with access to use this avenue.

The Deputy raised the issue of barriers. The back to education initiative provides part-time and further education training programmes for young people and adults who have left full-time education with less than an upper second level qualification. That support and help is there for people also.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. With the Minister's co-operation we will get two more questions in.

Technological Universities

31. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the progress of the Connacht and Ulster alliance of Sligo Institute of Technology, Galway and Mayo Institute of Technology and Letterkenny Institute of Technology on forming a technical university. [22602/20]

Deputy Verona Murphy: I am the spokesperson for the Regional Group and obviously our interest is in the regions. Will the Minister give an update on the progress of the Connacht-Ulster alliance of Sligo IT, Galway and Mayo IT and Letterkenny IT on forming a technological university?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Murphy for the question. I am sure she will not mind me also acknowledging that Deputy Marian Harkin raised this with me earlier in the interests of her constituency.

The establishment of technological universities, including a technological university in the Connacht-Ulster region, is an important part of the Government's higher education policy as underscored in the programme for Government. Technological universities will provide increased choices for students, an enhanced student experience and greater access for students in tackling educational disadvantage, with technological universities offering a broad range of higher education provision from apprenticeship to doctoral degrees. Technological universities will also support an increased intensity of research-informed teaching and learning and research activity, which will provide increased opportunities for collaboration with industry, attraction of foreign direct investment, retention and expansion of skills and, crucially, deliver regional development and socioeconomic benefits to the region.

Under the statutory framework detailed in the Technological Universities Act 2018, it is a matter, in the first instance, for the relevant institutes of technology participating in a technological university consortium to progress their plans and, when ready, to make an application to the Minister seeking an order establishing a technological university subject to their meeting the eligibility criteria prescribed in the 2018 Act.

The Connacht-Ulster alliance of GMIT, LYIT and IT Sligo has advised my Department that it is making significant progress towards meeting the relevant technological university criteria and it is understood that the alliance plans to submit an application under the relevant legislative procedure by the end of this year. It is working its way through that. The governing bodies met in November 2019 to accelerate their proposals. The consortium has to date received €5.9 million in Exchequer funding through the higher education landscape funding to assist in its technological university development proposals. A steering group is in place along with four working groups and 19 sub-groups, involving more than 150 staff and students from across the range of the consortium. A huge amount of work is under way. My message to everybody is that we need this train to leave the station soon. We need the delivery of this technological university for the north west.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank the Minister. Technological university status is essential, as is having third level education remain in the region. It must happen sooner rather than later. A technological university of the west and north-west will be one of the largest multi-campus universities on the island, bringing together students, enterprise and communities spanning a unique geographical region in transition on the periphery of Europe, which has a predominantly dispersed rural population. Until that university status is achieved, which will allow for further future independent development financially, will the Minister commit to ensuring the alliance is completed in the quickest possible timeframe?

Deputy Marian Harkin: I spoke to the Minister earlier on this. I believe that the Connacht-Ulster alliance is on target to reach the qualifying metrics. I have two brief points. Extra intake of students means the metrics will change slightly with higher numbers required. The Minister might take this into consideration because it could happen that by the tiniest margin some colleges might not reach the qualifying metrics. There are three colleges - and I earnestly hope all three will reach the criteria as it would be brilliant for the region - but if it were to happen that only two reached the qualifying metrics this year, I hope those two colleges could go ahead and the third could join at an appropriate time.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputies Murphy and Harkin. I note those metrics and will reflect on them. In the period between now and December the Connacht-Ulster alliance plans to finalise its memorandum of understanding with the Teachers Union of Ireland; hold monthly meetings with representatives of professional management and support staff; verify key achievements of technological university criteria and metrics; consider the final reports from their due diligence consultants; continue internal and external communications and consultations as part of stakeholder engagement; prepare business process alignment, including for IT services; and finalise and submit an application for technological university designation to me under the Technological Universities Act 2018 at the end of this year. Clearly there is a lot of work going on and I commend the alliance on that. The main issue for the consortium relates to attainment of the research-related eligibility criteria under the Act, and it is working towards achieving that objective. Currently, the research metric is at 3.4% but I am informed that projections for enrolments in September indicate achievement of this metric. The consortium believes it is in a good place in that regard. Processes are also in place to quantify and document

the achievement of staff qualifications. I will keep the Deputies informed.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I will not labour the point other than to say that the region has a predominantly dispersed rural population. The need for the technological university will provide a critical mass in academic debt to attract, educate, nurture and retain the region's workforce post education, and to ensure job security for the future for the region.

Further and Higher Education

32. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which he remains satisfied regarding the adequacy of the number of suitably qualified science and technical graduates to meet the continued requirements of the workplace; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22626/20]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question relates to the ready availability of suitably qualified graduates, academic and technical, to meet the requirements of the workplace.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Durkan for the question. There is an exciting opportunity with the creation of this new Department. For the first time, we are bringing further and higher education together with research, innovation and science. This is an education Department but it is also a business Department. It is about trying to get those two working together. Education is about a lot more than just business but it is also important, as we invest more and more in education - and we need to do more - that we continue to ensure we produce the graduates and skills we need now and for the future.

The tertiary education system has a number of key strategies in place at all levels to ensure we meet existing and future skills demands. These include policies designed to ensure a pipeline of suitably qualified science and technical graduates, and initiatives to equip young people and the working population more generally, with the skills and capacity to meet these demands. These strategies and initiatives include the National Skills Strategy 2025, Technology Skills 2022, Springboard+ and the human capital initiative.

Deputy Durkan will also be aware of the focus we put on this in the July stimulus package with investment in more places in these areas. We have allocated 1,450 additional higher education places this year specifically targeted at areas of key and demand needs in the economy including in science, ICT and engineering. I could not agree more with the Deputy. I am satisfied the strategies are in place but as is always the case with strategies, it is about implementation.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Is the Minister satisfied that in future years the effect of Covid-19 will not materially affect the supply of qualified academic and technical graduates to the workplace?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am satisfied that the great work done by the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Department of Education and Skills ensured that this year we could have a calculated grades system that provided a pathway from second level education to third level education.

That will ensure that the pipeline of high quality graduates in key areas continues and that there is not paralysis for a year, which is good. I am also encouraged by the fact that more

and more young people are now talking about science and seeing science in action. More and more people want to be the next Professor Luke O'Neill, Professor Kingston Mills, Dr. Ronan Glynn or Dr. Tony Holohan. As we talk further about the pandemic and Covid and its impact, I hope a new generation will become excited to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, subjects. I also hope it will excite and encourage more women and girls to take up those places.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sin deireadh le ceisteanna chun an Aire breisoideachais agus ardoideachais, taighde, nuálaíochta agus eolaíochta. Nach iontach na hainmneacha atá ag na Ranna Stáit nua seo?

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I raise with the Taoiseach the issue of the British Government's clear intention to renege on the Irish protocol. As the Taoiseach will know, the protocol was secured after a very long negotiation. It represents the bare minimum required to protect Irish interests. It is essential to protect our economy, to ensure no hardening of the Border on our island and to ensure our peace agreements are protected. As the Taoiseach will also know, it is binding under international law.

Today, legislation will be published. The British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has made very clear that this legislation will breach international law. In other words, the British system is now breaching international law with its eyes wide open and is making no secret of that fact. It is interesting and should be noted that the secretary of state has managed to speak out of both sides of his mouth on this issue. On Monday evening, he met with my colleague, Ms Michelle O'Neill, the joint Head of Government in the North, and sought to assure her that the legislation would in no way interfere with the protocol. He then took to his feet on Tuesday and said the precise opposite. As the Taoiseach knows, he has conceded that the British Government will in fact act to breach international law.

All of this demonstrates how far Mr. Boris Johnson's government is prepared to go to satisfy his Tory Brexiteers and, frankly, his own blunt English nationalism. It should be recorded that the British Prime Minister was the champion of Brexit. The Taoiseach may also recall that he was also an advocate of a no-deal proposition. He had to be dragged to any meaningful negotiation by his own parliament. In the past, I have described his approach and position as stupid and dangerous. I reiterate that today; the position of Mr. Johnson and his government is both stupid and dangerous. It is very clear that perfidious Albion is alive and well and living at No. 10 Downing Street.

The British Prime Minister believes that it will either be his way or no way. He mistakenly believes he can now pressure or bully Ireland. It needs to be made very clear to him that is not going to happen. I take some heart from the international reaction, not least from the statements of Congressman Richard Neal, chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means, and others.

This story broke on Sunday night; it is now Wednesday. I am alarmed that it has taken this long for the Taoiseach to indicate that he will intervene with the British Prime Minister. I appreciate and understand the value of diplomatic back channels but, in this instance, it falls to the

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Taoiseach, as Head of Government, to defend and represent Irish interests. When he takes the phone call with the British Prime Minister - I assume the call will be made today but the Taoiseach might clarify that - will he make it absolutely clear that there can and will be no reneging on the Irish protocol and no return to a hard border on our island and that the Good Friday Agreement will be upheld in all of its parts?

The Taoiseach: The foundation stone of any agreement and of the conduct of negotiations rests on mutual trust. No one party to any agreement can unilaterally undermine or deviate from it. I have been very clear about that in statements I made this morning at a press conference on Brexit readiness for the entire country. The unilateral nature of this decision by the British Government does undermine trust. The withdrawal agreement is an international treaty and it is binding. Ireland is with the European Union on this. As far as we are concerned, the withdrawal agreement and the protocol is the legal position and remains the legal position. It is what has been agreed to and will not be resiled from.

Last evening, I spoke to the President of the European Commission, Dr. von der Leyen, and we agreed that this was a very serious development. There was no prior notification to the Irish Government at any level as to this decision or measure. There was no heads-up. Whatever issues the Government of the United Kingdom has with regard to the implementation or working through of the protocol should be dealt with in the negotiations which are to commence this week. That is why the joint committee and the specialised committee were established under the withdrawal agreement.

What the secretary of state announced yesterday in very crude terms represents a very new departure in the conduct of international relations and the conduct of relationships between governments. The European Union is very concerned about this, as am I. As I announced this morning, I will be speaking to the British Prime Minister today, primarily to register our position and not to become embroiled in some exercise in which the British Government is becoming involved. We have to be extremely clear and firm with regard to where we stand as a country in respect of the withdrawal agreement and protocol, as we intend to be. We have to register with the British Prime Minister our complete opposition to the decision that has been taken - I will do that - and also the *modus operandi* and the manner in which the decision was taken and the lack of any prior consultation or engagement. I have been involved in negotiations with UK governments before and was involved in negotiations with the European Union with regard to the Lisbon treaty and so on. Proper negotiations are conducted on the basis of no surprises and on the basis of proper engagement in advance utilising various channels to try to get to an agreement. That did not happen in this case. The additional point I want to make is that to drag Northern Ireland back into the centre stage is very divisive. It is extremely regrettable in the sense that there was an acceptance of the protocol and the withdrawal agreement. I do not want to put words into anyone's mouth but irrespective of people's stances on Brexit, people have accepted the *de facto* reality of the protocol and of the withdrawal agreement and were getting on with it in terms of using the mechanisms of the withdrawal agreement to deal with issues. As such, the Government is unequivocal on this and is very clear-minded in our response to the British initiative.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Anyone who has even a passing interest in British Governments, but particularly those of a Tory variety, will understand that this is not a new departure. Sadly, it is not a new departure for Boris Johnson and his administration to walk away from prior commitments, including those held within international treaties. In this instance, the protocol is a settled matter and the withdrawal agreement is a settled matter. It is connected to but

very much distinct from the negotiations that will, as the Taoiseach said, go on between Britain and the European institutions. I am a bit concerned, first, at the slowness of the Taoiseach's response. The response and that call to Downing Street should have been much quicker. I am also concerned he is perhaps indulging in wishful thinking of the sort that might suggest that Boris Johnson and his government are not capable of really walking away from the commitments they have made.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I will say again that in the Taoiseach's conversation with him, he needs to dispense with diplomatic niceties and to set out the position very clearly to him. The Taoiseach might also remind him that the North voted to remain.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Now, not alone are they proposing to walk away from binding international commitments but yet again they are turning their faces away from the democratic decision of people on our island. These stakes are very high for all of us and we cannot afford to have hesitancy or any lack of forcefulness and rigour in dealing with Boris Johnson and his administration.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy; her time is up. The Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is wrong in her analysis when she speaks of lateness and all of that kind of stuff. She should not seek to try to divide the House on the very fundamental matter of our commitment to adhering to international agreements. I am as resolute as the Deputy or any other Member, as is the Government, in terms of international treaties. What we do not do, though, is react in a knee-jerk manner to any particular move in the middle of negotiations. We are clear about the withdrawal agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol. If the UK Government is not, then that is an issue they have to come to terms with. They agreed this. The point is that we are not going to become embroiled in their particular problems or difficulties, whatever they may be, about aspects of the protocol.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That does not make any sense.

The Taoiseach: It makes a lot of sense. One does not just jump into something.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, no-----

The Taoiseach: I have a lot of experience of negotiations-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I recall the Taoiseach steered the ship-----

The Taoiseach: One must allow things to evolve. The British Government has taken this decision unilaterally and it is very serious. The stakes are very high. They are very high for people out there and for jobs, the economy and employment. That is why I believe the action taken by the British Government is very serious. It undermines trust, which as I said at the outset of my contribution, represents the foundation stone upon which negotiations are conducted.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Negotiations can only be conducted on the basis of trust and we cannot have international parties to an agreement unilaterally undermining that agreement.

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An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up.

The Taoiseach: That will be communicated-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is what has happened.

The Taoiseach: -----to the UK Prime Minister. In addition, Ireland will be in partnership with the European Union in our response to all of this.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Tóibín on behalf of the Regional Group of Independents.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I received a message from a doctor in the past couple of days. He stated:

I have luckily had no patients who have died of coronavirus. I have had at least three though who have had delayed cancer diagnoses due to the shutdown of services and the delay in services. These will almost certainly die. I have others who are desperate to be seen by specialists but are hitting a brick wall in trying. The shutdown of the health services is killing people.

That is a startling statement for any doctor to make and it is not an isolated situation.

Around the country many people who are currently cancer symptomatic are facing a brick wall when it comes to reduced and closed services. The consequences of this will be enormous for them. Likewise, the cancellation of cancer screening has seen thousands of abnormalities, precancerous cells and cancers missed this year already. The numbers for cancer screening carried out in this State this year are startling when compared to those for last year. We have a bizarre and confused situation, which demonstrates the priorities of the Government whereby a person can get his or her hair cut and be in the physical space of a barber or go to a beautician and be in their physical space but people cannot attend BreastCheck at the moment. People cannot get a face-to-face consultation with mental health services staff in the majority of counties.

One of the most frustrating aspects of this pandemic has been the refusal of the Government to research the human cost in mortality and morbidity of the shutdown of the health service. I have asked on many occasions. The Taoiseach brought the party leaders together with the heads of NPHE and the HSE only last week and I appreciated the opportunity to be there. However I asked this question again, and again it went unanswered. There is no effort by the Government to understand the actual cost in mortality and morbidity to people throughout the country due to the shutdown and closure of health services.

The truth of the matter is that without that information the health service resource allocation cannot be made on the basis of evidence. Without that information, resource allocation is being made blindly by this Government. I ask that the Government carry out that research and open up critical healthcare services for people in real need across the country.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It has been a core consequence of Covid-19 that normal non-Covid health services have been impacted very severely where activity levels are concerned, particularly in respect of diagnostics and procedures in acute hospitals. The Government is acutely aware of that. The forthcoming winter initiative plan will very much focus on that issue as well as dealing with the impact of Covid throughout the next six months but, critically, it will focus on the resumption of services.

On cancer screening programmes, a number of those services have resumed albeit not at the same levels that obtained prior to the onset of Covid-19. Various conditions and restrictions have been applied to the hospital setting as well to protect healthcare professionals and patients from Covid-19 when patients are going in for various procedures. That has slowed the throughput of patients to a significant degree. Waiting lists have, therefore, climbed since Covid emerged and we are very well aware of that. This came on top of waiting lists that had already been quite significant. Part of the winter initiative is to endeavour to procure capacity separate from Covid to enable more diagnostics and procedures to be done, particularly in regard to cancer, heart disease and areas where we can prevent the onset of serious illness and intervene early to improve patient outcomes from such conditions, along with additional beds and greater throughput in hospitals. Another element is reducing pressures on trauma centres and accident and emergency centres through having more community diagnostic centres, particularly with regard to respiratory issues. All of this is designed to reduce the pressures on the acute hospital system to enable more procedures to be done in the acute services consistent with the health protection required in a Covid environment.

The Deputy made a valid point on undertaking more comprehensive research on the impact of Covid on a range of conditions or services. Fundamentally, what is required right now is to make sure that over the next six to nine months, the plan is robust enough to manage Covid and enable the resumption of services to as normal a level as possible within the context of the restrictions of Covid-19.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will give the Taoiseach another example if I can. The National Suicide Research Foundation collects data on self-harm presentation from emergency departments throughout the country. These important data were suspended in the vast majority of these hospitals until the end of June. Even today, self-harm data are still not being collected in all of the emergency departments throughout the country. Face-to-face consultations for serious mental health issues are radically reduced. I understand that as many as 70% of those face-to-face consultations are not happening at present. In the main, these have been replaced by telephone calls. Telephone calls are no substitute for people who are in serious mental health situations. I have heard commentators say the health service is facing breaking point this year due to Covid. The truth of the matter is the health service is at breaking point every year anyway in this particular State. The difference of the situation is we have advance notice of this exceptional circumstance. This gives the Taoiseach an opportunity to prepare properly.

I ask the Taoiseach not to leave 100,000 women in a queue for BreastCheck. Do not set up a hierarchy of illness. Do not pit one patient against another in their pursuit of treatments. Will the Taoiseach provide the necessary resources now to make sure people get the life-saving treatment they need in the coming months?

The Taoiseach: I fully empathise with the Deputy's presentation. We are with him on the need to respond to these issues. This is why the HSE has developed a draft plan, which contains proposals for health service delivery in the Covid-19 pandemic for the winter and through to 2021, to address the backlog of non-Covid care as a result of the pandemic itself. It is built on a number of pillars, including building capacity, testing and tracing, contact tracing, public health, cancer services, targeting waiting lists and workforce planning because it will require the recruitment of additional personnel. Resources will be provided to enable this to happen. Already, unprecedented resources have been allocated to the health service and will continue to be allocated to the health service given the emergency we are in and the enormous unprecedented challenges that have been presented to the health services by Covid-19.

The Deputy's points on mental health are well made but there have been restrictions in mental health services because of Covid. Again, part of the planning is designed to try to enhance and improve, within the constraints of Covid, mental health services and the overall population health needs of the public, particularly those with chronic enduring illnesses and our senior citizens. Particular attention in the winter initiative plan will be focused on these.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: There is a timber crisis in the country, which is threatening the entire forestry sector, the haulage sector that relies heavily on it, the sawmills that process it and the end users of timber, such as people in the construction industry. Unless the Government acts quickly, Ireland will soon run out of essential construction products, such as pallets and timber for the construction industry and our supply chains, forcing timber production lines to shut. Managing directors of top sawmills in Ireland say that only for the pandemic and the shut-down in Ireland they would have run out of timber by now. We are facing a nightmare scenario whereby stocks have decreased and shut down and lay-offs might be only weeks away. These people have been given notice that there is the potential for lay-offs in the very near future.

The reason for the crisis is that the permit system for planting and harvesting trees and making forestry roads has been overwhelmed because almost 2,000 applications and 400 approved permits are being appealed by a handful of so-called environmentalists, some of whom are supported by the Green Party, which is supporting the Government. The forestry appeals committee has been inundated with objections to most licences, intended to prevent the planting of conifers and block the felling of commercial forests. This is a ridiculous situation and it is extremely unfair to farmers who have planted their land thinking they would be able to sell their thinnings and clear-fell their timber when the time would be right.

Coillte, which supplies an enormous amount of timber to sawmills in Ireland, normally has auctions of timber to keep supplies sustained. Coillte has cancelled at least half a dozen of these already this year and no contracts are secured for next year. All the required permits and paperwork are stuck in this self-made man-made queue. This is a major disaster and the promises that Governments, present and past, have made on planting thousands of acres of land every year will be absolute nonsense unless the Taoiseach urgently deals with the crisis of objectors.

It is reported widely that more than 1 million cu. m of timber, which is one third of the sawmills' annual consumption, is tied up in appeals. The timber needed by the economy right now is still in the ground and it is in a two-year queue cycle. We need the Government to amend the Agriculture Appeals Act quickly to give the forestry appeals committee enough resources and the authority to clear this backlog. Hardware merchants throughout the country who rely on sawmills for much of their timber are struggling to bring in timber from overseas, which is escalating costs. Bringing in timber from abroad is ridiculous, as prices have reached record peaks in the US driven by the pandemic crisis, which has resulted in a DIY boom. European producers prefer to service very large lucrative markets in other parts of the world such as China, putting Ireland at the end of the line as to where they wish to provide timber. Instead, we are looking to Russia and Scandinavian countries to try to meet the demand. So much for the Green Party trying to do things right. Where is the environmental sense in us not being able to use our farmers' trees but instead having to go to Russia to bring here the timber we need for our construction industry?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very serious issue. It is no exaggeration to say that of course the forestry sector is in crisis. It is in crisis because the planning system as it exists has been overwhelmed by a very high volume of appeals to decisions taken by the

forestry appeals committee. The response has to be through resources and legislation. The Government published legislation to deal with this by streamlining the appeals process to make it fit for purpose, environmentally sustainable and administratively efficient to deal with the backlog and the system in future. It is no exaggeration to say that thousands of jobs are at risk if this is not dealt with firmly and resolutely by the Oireachtas and the Government will bring forward this legislation. We published it in July and it went out to consultation. There were approximately 8,000 submissions. During the consultation period, the volume of objections or appeals went up dramatically, perhaps in anticipation of the legislation that was about to come in. This has exacerbated the situation somewhat further. The rate of appeals on Coillte's licences increased from 30% to 80% in August and it is likely to be 100% in September. These are not just appeals on commercial felling. Some of Coillte Nature's new non-profit tree planting proposals, such as the Dublin mountains transformation, have also been appealed. Huge amounts of trees in the ground cannot be felled and it is very serious. We have to deal with it and we will deal with it. There is a significant backlog. Forestry is a significant employer with 12,000 people directly employed in rural and regional areas. The industry will be short of timber by November if the legislation is not passed and a new system is not brought in. The Government is committed to introducing the legislation.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The forestry sector is on its knees because of objectors. We have seen the harm that has been done in this country by objectors, who have cost us many projects that would have created employment. We have seen them denying us housing for people and seen the harm this has brought. I ask the Taoiseach and his new Ministers, whom I really wish well, and the Taoiseach knows that, to not let down the forestry farmers, the haulage contractors, the mills and everyone else in this regard. I ask the Taoiseach to do something to get rid of the horrible scourge of serial objectors for once and for all, ideally by putting in place a charge of €2,000 for every horrible objection and every horrible observation that would be put on any type of permit or licence sought, whether it is to plant ground, to make a forestry road or to get a clear-fell licence. It is only through proactive work such as this that the Government will stop this type of messing in a very important sector of our society, which the Government on one hand is trying to promote and, on the other, is not doing enough to help. I ask this of the Taoiseach in the most genuine way on behalf of farmers, haulage people and people involved in the production of timber.

The Taoiseach: I would not use that language to describe people who object to anything in the country-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Well, I would.

The Taoiseach: People are entitled to object. That is why we have a planning process. I accept there is a crisis and that we need a more streamlined, fit-for-purpose system. That is what is proposed in the amendment to the Agriculture Appeals-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Serial objectors.

The Taoiseach: That is why there are amendments to the Agriculture Appeals Act and why those amendments are required. The amendments will bring the forestry licensing process into line with the planning process under the Planning and Development Act 2000. The amendments we have already published - and we will take on board the consultation that arose from that publication - provide for a more efficient and effective operation of the forestry appeals process. The additional staff, including forestry inspectorate staff and others who are important

in assessing applications and appeals, have already been recruited. It is a two-pronged approach involving additional resources, administrative staff, forestry inspectors, ecologists and legislation to streamline the process itself. There is always a balance in life, and that balance means we have to protect the industry, jobs in the industry and those who planted in good faith when various schemes were announced years ago and who are entitled to have their decision to engage in this programme realised. That is a fair and balanced approach to the matter.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Baineann mo cheist le hathrú aeráide, go háirithe an cinneadh a rinne an Chúirt Uachtarach ar an lá deireanach de mhí Iúil. Dúradh sa bhreithiúnas sin go raibh an plean, the mitigation plan, mídhleathach, go háirithe ó thaobh na ndualgas a bhí ar an Rialtas plean a leagan amach ag comhlíonadh na ndualgas a bhí air faoin reachtaíocht 2015. Significantly, on 9 May last year, we declared a climate emergency. We did so for very good reason: because the word “challenges” does not capture what we face with climate change. The Taoiseach himself has recognised this in the programme for Government, which refers to the importance of transformational change. The year we declared the emergency, the Climate Change Advisory Council, a body I will come back to because of its lack of gender representation, told us in blunt terms that we would fail as a country and a Government to meet our obligations, notwithstanding the catastrophe we face in 2020 and 2030. Then, on 31 July of this year, the Chief Justice, Mr. Justice Clarke, delivered a unanimous seven-judge Supreme Court judgment in the climate case taken by Friends of the Irish Environment, and I pay tribute to that organisation. They were not objectors; they were very concerned citizens and residents of this country. In that judgment, the Supreme Court quashed the Government’s national mitigation plan. Mr. Justice Clarke outlined that section 4 of the 2015 Act required the mitigation plan to be specific and that the purpose of requiring the plan to be specific was to allow any interested member of the public to know enough about how the Government intends to meet the national transition objective by 2050 so as to inform the views of the reasonable and interested member of the public as to whether that policy was considered effective and appropriate. The Government has made the argument repeatedly, including in court, and I agree with it, that this is a living document. The court accepted that, but the Chief Justice went on to say, notwithstanding that it is a living document, “it does seem to me to be reasonable to characterise significant parts of the policies as being excessively vague or aspirational”. The court went on to quash the plan. We have therefore had no mitigation plan since 31 July, when the Supreme Court quashed it. What has the Taoiseach done about this? I ask him not to tell me he will come back with an action plan or a climate plan within the next 100 days. He may do that, and I would welcome that, but that is not his obligation following this judgment. His obligation is the mitigation plan.

I will come back to gender equality and the Climate Change Advisory Council.

The Taoiseach: Admhaím go bhfuil an cinneadh sin a dhein an Chúirt Uachtarach dearfach tábhachtach. Caithfidh sa Rialtas cloí leis an gcinneadh sin agus ceachtanna a fhoghlaim. Mar is eol don Teachta, is í an gheallúint is tabhachtaí ag an Rialtas nua ná Bille cuimsitheach láidir ó thaobh cúrsaí aeráide de a chur i bhfeidhm. The impact of that Supreme Court judgment is being assessed by the Government. Lessons have to be learned from the entire judgment itself and what the Chief Justice had to say and it is being taken very seriously by Government. The new Government made it clear that one of the key pillars of its programme for Government was climate change more generally and, particularly, the publication of a climate Bill within 100 days. That is important. Work must also commence on a mitigation plan, and I note that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, will address a range of these issues. We will also take on board any submissions Deputy Connolly has to make, particularly in respect of gender equality as it

applies to the Climate Change Advisory Council. Essentially, the issue of the absence of specifics is one that has to be addressed in any new plans or legislation. Obviously, when a judgment of such significance is articulated by the court and decided upon by the Supreme Court, it falls on Government to give that the deepest analysis and assessment, and we will do that, not only in the context of the national mitigation plan but also more widely in terms of climate legislation. Very significant commitments on climate have been made in the programme for Government, and we are determined we will match those commitments with specifics and clear timelines.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not know if the Taoiseach realises the significance of the judgment. The mitigation plan has been declared invalid by the highest court in the land. This is beyond a matter learning lessons; it is a matter of acknowledging that the plan was utterly defective and telling us a timescale for the new plan. Under the 2015 Act there is a particular process of consultation. I therefore ask the Taoiseach to tell me what steps have been taken, when the national mitigation plan will be published and the date for its enactment.

As for the Climate Change Advisory Council, there are two female members out of 11. On the adaptation committee there are two female members out of ten. That is totally unacceptable.

I have looked at the programme for Government - I have it here in front of me - and the aspects of it that pertain to this question. I could not disagree with the Government's language. It is wonderful language: "transformative action", "facing the challenges", "learning from Covid", "not going back". I could not agree with the Government more on the language used, but the message going out daily is quite contrary to that. Because of Covid, the Government is telling us not to go on public transport. It is actively advising us not to do so. In relation to Galway, the Government has utterly failed to respond to 24,000 people begging it to do, at the most basic level, a feasibility study on light rail to fit in with its national plan. I am conscious of time.

The Taoiseach: I understand the profound nature of the judgment. Of course I do. The Government has only been in office for two or three months. We will deal with these issues. Of course Covid has changed the norm. The Deputy stated the Government is saying not to go on public transport. Public health is saying that and it is advising us. There was a view in this House that we adhered to the broad thrust of public health advice. We hope we will get through Covid and that Covid will pass. Public transport will have a key role in how society is organised in the future. The Government is committed to public transport and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is particularly committed to it. He is committed to light rail. He was in Galway recently - I think last week - engaging with people.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Will the Taoiseach commit to doing a feasibility study?

The Taoiseach: I do not see the Minister, Deputy Ryan, having any difficulty in committing to a feasibility study. He wants to accelerate light rail proposals and initiatives across the country. I will talk to him about the Galway situation. The Deputy said he has refused.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Government has failed to act repeatedly.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy made a comment and perhaps I could get clarification. She said he had refused a feasibility study.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I said it had been refused. If I put it badly, I apologise.

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The Taoiseach: The Deputy should-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I beg the Taoiseach's pardon. He asked me to clarify. I raised the issue repeatedly with the previous Minister with responsibility for transport.

The Taoiseach: That was the previous Minister. Deputy Ryan is the current Minister.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am aware of that.

The Taoiseach: We should not be making such declarations. We should give the Minister the benefit of the doubt.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The study has been refused repeatedly.

The Taoiseach: From my conversations with the Minister, he is an enthusiast of light rail.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Great.

The Taoiseach: He is an enthusiast of public transport.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Except taxis.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: And a feasibility study.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: On the gender issue, it is a point well made. This kind of Bill will create opportunities in respect of agencies and councils and so on.

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

Constitutional Amendments

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach his plans to hold referendums in 2020 and 2021. [18559/20]

The Taoiseach: Under the programme for Government, the Government is committed to holding constitutional referenda on the following matters: extending the franchise at presidential elections to Irish citizens living outside the State; housing; and Article 41.2 of the Constitution, concerning women in the home.

In addition, the programme for Government also commits to refer the issue of environment, including water, and its place in the Constitution, to a relevant joint Oireachtas committee for consideration.

A citizen's assembly on gender equality was approved by Dáil Éireann on 9 July and Seanad Éireann on 11 July 2019. Ms Catherine Day was appointed chair of the assembly and the inaugural meeting was held on 25 January 2020. It operates independently of the Government and it will report directly to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Before any referendum would be scheduled, the relevant legislation would have to be passed and, in light of Covid-19, all public health requirements taken into consideration.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank the Taoiseach. We are aware of what the Taoiseach has committed to and what is on the schedule. We are also aware of the Covid situation.

I will focus on the referendum on housing. The Taoiseach has listed what he intends to do and what is proposed in the programme for Government but I want to get more detail on projections and timelines for where the Government is going on the referendum on housing. We know of the increase in homeless figures and that the ban on evictions is gone. Rent will be a big issue coming down the line as rent debt crystallises for many people across the State. Will the Taoiseach provide details on what his thinking here is regarding timelines for the referendum? It is particularly important.

The Sunday Business Post reported in April that there would be a referendum to cap land prices. This is something the Labour Party has advocated for decades. Interestingly, the framework document from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael stated that “through bold action, we will tackle land costs”. Has that been scrapped? Deputy Barry Cowen, who was one of the negotiators, in fairness to him, was quoted as saying that a referendum to curtail the price of land for housing would have to be held as soon as possible. This was given the electorate’s clear desire for that. There is no mention of that in the programme for Government. Why did it disappear? We all talk about the Kenny report. Why did that commitment from Fianna Fáil from the framework document disappear from the programme for Government? Will the Taoiseach outline in detail what he is proposing as regards a referendum on the right to housing? What is the Government’s position in relation to a referendum or changes in relation to land prices, land costs and the implementation of the Kenny report? I think this has gotten to a position, politically, where a majority - particularly in opposition - want to see this happen. Deputy Martin, before he became Taoiseach, went a long distance towards supporting that but his thinking on it seems to have changed and been sullied since he entered Government.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I would like the Taoiseach to clarify the nature of the referendum on housing. Will the Taoiseach clarify that it is a referendum on the right to housing? That matter was clouded and fudged by the Government. It is fair to say that the record of this Government and the previous Government that the Taoiseach was part of through confidence and supply has been nothing short of disastrous. It has left an entire generation locked out of home ownership and many people struggling with exorbitant, outrageous levels of rent. There has been no plan for really affordable accommodation and that remains the case, despite the huffing and puffing of the new Minister.

I wish to ask the Taoiseach about the proposed referendum on voting rights in presidential elections. This matter was voted on in 2013, that is, seven years ago, at the Constitutional Convention. It was 78% in favour of the extension of that right to vote. Yet we still have no date for the referendum. Will the Taoiseach set out a timetable for when this proposition will be brought forward, the legislation published and the date for the referendum?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need a referendum on the right to housing. I submitted a Bill to that effect, looking to change Article 43 of the Constitution to delimit the rights of private property in order to vindicate the right to affordable, dignified and appropriate housing for all in the last couple of weeks. The Taoiseach should support that Bill and fast-track the move towards a referendum.

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The scandal of land hoarding and sitting on empty buildings was an outrage prior to Covid but now it is absolutely unjustifiable. I will give an example of why this is important. I met a woman who I would say was in her 80s on South Great George's Street. This was during the height of the lockdown. She pulled me aside and said she wanted me to walk up Aungier Street and look at a block on that street to see the disgrace of a line of buildings sitting empty for a decade at least that could be used to house people in the south inner city where there is desperate overcrowding and many people on housing lists. I met a social worker who works in that area on the street on the way in today and he told me there has been a Covid-19 outbreak there today. He pointed out that his community centre, where social distancing was possible, will close down because property developers want to develop the site. The problem is evident in that little microcosm. Private property ownership by landlords, developers or speculators is preventing the development of sites that could be used for housing in an area where there is chronic overcrowding in the social housing sector and where there is a lack of social housing. That property should just be taken by the State to provide the housing people need in the area. Instead, it is sitting there taunting people who are now suffering Covid-19 outbreaks. What are they supposed to do if they are in overcrowded housing where two or three generations - as is happening all over the place - are living cheek by jowl? How do they socially distance or self-isolate where there is Covid-19? We need aggressive action and the Constitution needs to be amended to say that private property rights cannot trump the need for immediate action to take property, refurbish it and provide housing for people who need it so they do not have to live in overcrowded, dangerous and unhealthy conditions.

The Taoiseach: Immediate action is needed in housing to get more people housed, to get more houses built and, particularly, to get homelessness numbers down. Covid-19 is having an impact and we should be clear that it will have an impact on the timing of referendums. It has also had an impact in the early part of this year on house completions nationally because of the lockdown and so on. That said, in the July stimulus programme, for example, we provided additional resources to get 2,500 voids repaired to get them back into operation for people on the waiting lists. That is an example of the type of proactive and quick measures that are designed to get things moving in housing. We believe we need an affordable housing scheme to enable people who have a genuine aspiration to buy a house to be in a position to do so, and that is being worked on in detail by the Minister. He is working actively on the homeless issue and is in constant contact with all of the non-Government agencies and organisations that work so hard and diligently on the homeless issue. That work will continue.

The Government is pursuing a constitutional referendum on housing but greater detail and consideration are needed for such a proposal before it can be put to the electorate and specific timelines outlined but the programme for Government commits to holding a referendum on housing.

On land prices, a number of measures can be taken, short of a constitutional referendum in the first instance, to penalise land hoarding and to make it-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: I brought in the legislation.

The Taoiseach: Yes, but the Deputy did not bring in any proposals for a referendum on housing. By the way, we are committed to holding a referendum.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Bill is here.

The Taoiseach: There are Bills everywhere. There is an ongoing debate on whether we can get things done through legislation and various taxation measures to reduce the incentive to hoard land, to create a punitive environment for the hoarding of land and to reduce the acceleration of land prices. That is the objective of Government. The programme for Government is the outcome of negotiations between three political parties, which is clear in its commitments. We are committed to dealing with the land cost issue and the Land Development Agency legislation is under consideration by the Government with a view to publication later in the year.

I also want to respond to the issue of a referendum on presidential voting rights for those living outside the State. The Government recently restored the Thirty-Ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Elections) Bill to the Order Paper. The date for holding a referendum will be decided once that legislation is approved by the Oireachtas. As I said earlier, the public health implications of Covid-19 may impact on the timelines for such a referendum. The Deputy is correct that the fifth report of the Convention on the Constitution supports an extension of the right to vote at presidential elections to citizens resident outside of the State, including citizens resident in Northern Ireland, and it recommended that a referendum be held to amend the Constitution to provide for that extended franchise. The programme for Government agrees with that. As the Deputy will be aware, there was the publication of an options paper in 2017, which was comprehensive and set out a broad range of options for the extension of voting rights, international comparisons, the estimated costs involved, related resource issues and many of the legal policy, administrative and logistic challenges associated with extending voting rights to Irish citizens resident outside of the State.

A referendum commission was established by order of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government in September 2019 to inform the electorate about the subject matter of the Bill, subject to it passing through both Houses of the Oireachtas. The Deputy will be familiar with the Bill. It provides for the replacement of Articles 12.2.2° and 12.3.3° of the Constitution as well as for the insertion of a new Article 12A in the Constitution. Those amendments would extend the right to vote for the office of President to all citizens, not solely to those who are ordinarily resident in the State, as is currently the case, for elections held on or after January 2025, which is the beginning of the year in which the next scheduled election for the office of President falls due.

Cabinet Committees

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland will next meet. [18560/20]

The Taoiseach: The Cabinet committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland was formally established by Government decision on 6 July and the first meeting will be scheduled to take place over the course of the autumn. Brexit matters have, of course, remained firmly on the agenda of Cabinet. The Government has taken a number of decisions recently on Brexit, including to intensify work across government to ensure that we are ready for the end of the transition period. The Cabinet committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland will oversee implementation of relevant programme for Government commitments and ongoing developments and negotiations. In addition to myself, its membership comprises the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Ministers for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Foreign Affairs and Trade, Justice and Equality, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Finance.

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Other Ministers or Ministers of State will participate as required.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank the Taoiseach.

Britain does not renounce treaties. Indeed, to do so would damage our integrity as well as international relations.

I hope that is the first and last time I ever have to quote the former UK Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher. We are in a difficult situation, given what the British Government has stated. I was interested in the Taoiseach's tweet yesterday:

Any negotiation process can only proceed on the basis of trust. When one party to a negotiation decides that they can change what's already agreed and incorporated into law, it really undermines trust. This is a critical time in the Brexit process and the stakes are very high.

I agree with the Taoiseach and I support him because, as a country, we have to pull together. There is a critical issue here. The country has to take this in a certain direction because we are being critically impacted. I listened carefully to the Taoiseach's comments in response to the leader of Sinn Féin earlier but this is a time, from an international point of view, that the Taoiseach needs to stand up and call this out for what it is. This is a critical juncture but I do not trust Boris Johnson. I know the Taoiseach cannot say that but he more or less has to say so in diplomatic language because this is unprecedented.

Never before has a government, that of our closest neighbour, treated an Irish Government - the Taoiseach's comments reflect this as well - the way that the British Government has treated Ireland in the last 48 hours, by letting this news seep out, then doing what it did in the House of Commons yesterday and continuing today. It needs to be called out as part of this process and the Taoiseach should do that quickly and publicly. I state that because what will work with Boris Johnson is what will have the biggest impact on him domestically. We need to call this action out for what it is. This is not trustworthy. This is not the standard of behaviour that we expect from a sovereign country, our closest neighbour. This is not the appropriate way to treat anybody, let alone one's nearest neighbours. This is especially the case given what was agreed regarding the Northern Ireland protocol. Dare I say it, but even the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, which may not like the agreement, came out and stated that we have to work within what was agreed.

The Taoiseach is speaking to the Prime Minister this afternoon. Given the type of character he is, however, I think he will only react to one thing and that is being called out quite publicly. The Taoiseach needs to say that and we will support him. This is a seminal moment for the Taoiseach personally. We have been through much in this country since he became Taoiseach but this is possibly the most important moment, in some ways. The Taoiseach needs to call out this action. I ask him to do that. The only pressure that works on this Prime Minister, given his behaviour, is pressure that will impact him domestically. The Taoiseach will be doing the whole world, and definitely the whole of Europe, a favour.

The Taoiseach might, therefore, outline his thinking regarding this issue. Has the Taoiseach spoken to Michel Barnier this week regarding this matter? The Taoiseach might also outline what other diplomatic channels he is using. We do not need to know the full details, just that the exhaustive list of diplomatic channels is being used. Furthermore, if the British Government pursues this line and if it intends to behave with this brinkmanship, what actions is the Taoise-

ach pushing to put forward in the coming days, subsequent to his telephone call?

My real request to the Taoiseach, however, is for him to call out this behaviour during that call and to tell him straight up that he is going to do Europe and the world a favour by publicly calling out that the British Prime Minister is behaving in a way that is reprehensible. He is not going to honour international treaties and he is breaking a tradition of the nation and of the British Government that has gone on for so long; about which they have made such grandiose claims and for which behaviour they have claimed such respect. Hitting him domestically is the only way the Taoiseach will be able to get him into the line of where we believe he has to go, which is to honour the commitments that he made as part of this agreement.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Kelly. We will now have two brief supplementary questions from Deputies McDonald and Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This is not, in fact, a new departure for a British Government. Departing from agreements struck and made is pretty common practice but what makes this different is the public way in which it has been presented. The Secretary of State came to the House of Commons and said that the British Government would breach international law. It is not so much that the British state has never breached international law - for goodness sake we know its track record in this country - but that it is doing so openly and brazenly in clear sight and with eyes wide open. That does need to be called out.

It must also be stated, however, that news of this broke on Sunday. The Secretary of State met Michelle O'Neill and the First Minister on Monday and said there was nothing to worry about. He then went onto the floor of the House of Commons on Tuesday and stated that the British Government was going to breach international law. It is now Wednesday, we await this legislation and the Taoiseach has still not had a conversation with the British Prime Minister. It is just staggering that the Taoiseach's first instinct was not to lift the phone and go looking for Boris Johnson.

I rang and tried to make contact on Monday, but I am not the Head of Government. The Taoiseach is and that is his job, his role and his responsibility, and he has not given an explanation as to why he has dragged his feet on this issue. To be clear, if the Tories believe they can behave in this manner, if they believe that Dublin will be soft or that the criticism will be couched in diplomatic language for fear of giving offence, then that is simply egging them on. They will take that as a green light to continue in this manner. I do not have to tell the Taoiseach this because he knows it. Word of this legislation has caused absolute shock across the island, but particularly north of the Border, where people are fearful for their livelihoods, their jobs and their rights. Critically and above and beyond all else, they are fearful for the Good Friday Agreement and all the other agreements we have entered into. This is because if Boris Johnson feels emboldened to walk away from the Irish protocol, then make no mistake, if he gets away with that, he will feel emboldened to walk away from the whole lot. That is the fact and the unpleasant truth.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Imperial arrogance is the stock in trade of the British Tory establishment. Johnson's announcement of his intention to breach international law is very much in line with that rotten and arrogant tradition but it is also a direct snub and insult to the Taoiseach and to the people of this country. It is a reckless and dangerous assertion by Boris Johnson. It endangers peace and stability in this country and once again summons up the prospect of hard borders and all the conflict that can ensue. The Taoiseach needs to be very clear

and very tough with Mr. Johnson in stating that he is not accepting this and that his recklessness is not going to lead to hard borders.

I believe this is further evidence of the need to start talking openly about the need to end partition, for a Border poll and about the unsustainability of partition. There has never been a better time to make that case, when there is such a rotten Prime Minister as Boris Johnson, who embodies the worst of British imperial arrogance.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. We need to give the Taoiseach time to reply.

The Taoiseach: I have been very clear in this regard. This is a unilateral action. It fundamentally undermines trust and trust is the foundation stone upon which agreements are made and negotiations conducted. I could not be any clearer than that. I think Deputy Kelly is right. The British Government, via legislation, today is unilaterally seeking to undermine or alter an international agreement. Regarding the conduct of international relations, that is unprecedented in the middle of negotiations. The type of comment made by the Secretary of State in the House of Commons yesterday, to the effect that he was openly declaring that he was going to break the law or to bring in legislation to breach the law, was something to behold in itself.

We are, however, in the middle of very serious negotiations. People can speculate as to the timing and motivation for this action. I do not, however, agree with Deputy McDonald's assertions. We were not prepared to jump in. If the United Kingdom Government has issues with the protocol, then the proper forum to discuss that is in the joint committee and in the negotiations process itself. We do not have a problem with the protocol. Ireland does not have a problem with the withdrawal treaty or the protocol. I will, therefore, exercise judgment concerning how I intervene, when I intervene and the manner of my intervention. Sometimes it is not all about lifting the phone. What is at stake is adherence to an international treaty that Ireland has agreed to, is satisfied with and is getting on with. If the British Government has an issue or problem, the only place to resolve it is within the agreement, through the joint and specialised committee. It is not for Ireland to get embroiled in whatever issues the UK has or to become a party to whatever machinations are ongoing in terms of these negotiations or where they will end. I will say no more than that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is that the Taoiseach's answer?

The Taoiseach: It is a straightforward answer. I have significant experience of negotiations.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That response makes no sense.

The Taoiseach: It makes a lot of sense.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The UK is publishing the legislation today.

The Taoiseach: They are, that is their decision and they have done it unilaterally.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is taking a very laissez-faire approach.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should let the Taoiseach respond.

The Taoiseach: We will work with the European Union. I spoke last night to the President of the European Commission who is viewing this very seriously. The stakes are high. This is about the manner in which the UK is going to leave the EU. That will have a profound impact

for ordinary people on the streets of Ireland, the UK and Europe. The stakes cannot get any higher. Brexit is bad and a no-deal Brexit will be much worse.

Today we launched a Brexit readiness plan which seriously takes on board the prospect of a no-deal Brexit and the alternative of a limited free trade agreement which is now the optimal outcome. Those are the two options. The action of the British Government is unacceptable, undermines trust and raises the question as to how one continues to conduct negotiations with that type of action.

I will again be in touch with President von der Leyen today. We have been in touch on a regular basis with the negotiating task force which is of a similar view on the unprecedented nature of this and the manner in which this has happened and they are clearly not satisfied. Up to now, progress has been very limited. In the three overall areas, namely, the level playing pitch, governance of any subsequent agreement and fisheries, progress has been limited, not to mention aviation, transport and so on. At a late juncture in the negotiations, this unilateral action in which the UK Government has engaged causes real issues for the European negotiating team of which we are a part. We will work with the European Union in our response to the UK.

Cabinet Committees

3. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Europe last met; and when it is next expected to meet. [18561/20]

The Taoiseach: The Cabinet committee on Europe was established by the Government on 6 July 2020 to oversee implementation of programme for Government commitments in relation to the European Union and related issues. It met on 16 July 2020, in advance of the special meeting of the European Council held in Brussels from 17 to 21 July, when it discussed negotiations on the multi-annual financial framework, the seven-year budget for the EU and on the next generation EU recovery package. It will continue to meet as appropriate, including to discuss issues on the agenda of the European Council. The date of its next meeting has not yet been fixed.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Cabinet committee on Europe is obviously important and should be meeting pretty regularly, possibly at short notice, given current dynamics. It has been a difficult few weeks for Ireland on the European stage, culminating in the events that led to our previous discussion. All of us in this House need to work together to fight for the best interests of our country. We have lost a commissioner and I wish my former MEP colleague, Mairéad McGuinness, the very best in her new role. I am sure she will do very well in an important brief.

Can the Taoiseach confirm that the Government backs the European deposit insurance scheme that was announced in 2015 and part of the proposals to complete banking union? A deal was done on a €750 billion Covid-19 recovery plan as part of the EU budget that was agreed in July. We do not have much detail about the plan or what the Government is doing. Will the Taoiseach provide some of that detail? We do not know, for instance, how much of a contribution Ireland has made. What were our contributions? Is it known yet what we can expect to receive? This will be critical money. What can we expect to receive? What are the Government's projections in that regard and for what will we use that funding?

We are expected to receive €1.3 billion in grants to help with Covid recovery along with

access to approximately €1.4 billion in loans. Does that remain the case?

The Taoiseach: What were the amounts the Deputy mentioned?

Deputy Alan Kelly: Are the figures still around €1.3 billion in grants and €1.4 billion in loans? We have not much information or clarity in that area. Have we any details about conditions attaching to such money? It would be helpful to know that, particularly the conditions that might apply to loans.

I understand that under the recovery and resilience facility, of which approximately €853 million is available to Ireland, member states must submit draft plans along with a national budget in October. Where are we on that? What stage is that at and how is it complementing budget preparation? Are they being done in tandem because the timelines are similar? Will the Taoiseach give us detail about that?

The Taoiseach: What did the Deputy say about timelines?

Deputy Alan Kelly: The timelines are similar.

The Taoiseach: To which timelines is the Deputy referring?

Deputy Alan Kelly: The timelines for applications to the recovery and resilience facility and the announcement of the budget are the same. Are we preparing our submission in tandem with the budget? Where do they cross over? Will the Taoiseach give detail about that?

The potential funding from that facility will cross over a range of areas. Who is in charge of making the submission? Was it discussed at the Cabinet committee on Europe or where has it been discussed? Where is it being drilled through in terms of Cabinet committees? The Taoiseach might confirm if it has been discussed at all because I have a suspicion it may not have been. The Taoiseach might discuss that and detail how we could potentially use the money, what projects are being proposed etc. Quite a lot of detail is required and not much of it is in the public domain, albeit the Dáil has not been sitting. We need to fill in the gaps.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to raise two issues with the Taoiseach that I believe need to be top of the agendas of the committee on Europe and the Government. The first relates to the cost of insurance in Ireland compared to its European neighbours. The Taoiseach will know that, for the past two years, my colleague, an Teachta Pearse Doherty, has challenged the insurance industry for its rip-off practices. It is fair to say that he has been a thorn in its side. The report published today by the Central Bank is absolutely damning in its assessment of differential pricing. It verifies all of the criticisms that Deputy Doherty has levelled at the industry and the challenges put by him to the industry. What is the Taoiseach going to do about this? Is he prepared to step up and end the insurance rip-off and the strategy of dual pricing?

I also raise the Council of Europe Lanzarote Convention on preventing child abuse. Armenia has now completed the process of ratifying the agreement which means that Ireland is the only member state of the Council of Europe yet to ratify it. The Taoiseach knows this is a vital convention and leads the way internationally in outlining key measures to protect children against many forms of abuse. This State and former Governments of which the Taoiseach was a member do not have a good record of protecting children. I must mention those who were abused as children at Creagh Lane school in Limerick who will be outside the Dáil seeking justice already granted to them by the European Court of Human Rights and the Irish courts. The

Taoiseach will recall that he correctly took a very firm stand against the previous Government in terms of its delay in enabling victims to access the State redress scheme established for the survivors of abuse in national schools. Today, the Creagh Lane men are calling on him to take direct responsibility to ensure that their claims are accepted by the scheme and that they are offered compensation. I invite the Taoiseach to respond to those men very directly today and confirm that he will back them up and ensure that they are recognised and receive the compensation they are rightfully due.

The Taoiseach: The Cabinet EU committee will primarily deal with the EU Council issues and EU issues more generally. There is a separate Brexit and Northern Ireland committee. We met before the latest EU Council meeting, which was successful. From the Irish perspective, we took a very honest broker approach, believing it was important that the EU worked in a collective fashion to borrow money to assist Europe's recovery and particular member states who will be in greater difficulty than others because of their fiscal and economic capacity and environment.

There was a fairly strong and robust debate on that initiative around the amount that would be allocated in grants and loans and the division between the two. Eventually, a compromise was arrived at - €390 billion in grants and €360 billion in loans. Ireland was always clear that we were going to be a net contributor. The Union published material in advance that suggested that between now and 2058, we would have to repay billions of euro. That has since been revisited. Rather than providing speculative figures today, I will come back to the Deputy with detailed figures as best as we can get them on repayments over that length of time.

There are various estimates as to whether the figure will be €1.3 billion or €1.5 billion for Ireland. Ireland could do better in those areas where we do not get a direct proportionate allocation but there are various competitions for funds. Over recent years, we did well in the Horizon 2020 fund or the research funds where we competed with colleges, SMEs and businesses. As the Minister at the time, I was involved in setting up Enterprise Ireland to have a lead Irish person to co-ordinate everybody to go after funding under research and it worked. Our levels of funding went up. There are quite a number of other funds that we should be competing more practically for, over and above what we might get in the form of grants.

In respect of loans, we are entitled to borrow from this fund, but the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform have been in touch with the NTMA and others. We are borrowing at very low rates at the moment. That is a decision that will be made technically and we will take technical advice on the optimal route to borrow. Nonetheless, there will be a facility there for us. We have to now prepare a plan for the recovery and resilience fund, and we are doing that. The Cabinet economic committee will assess that.

The Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform are centre stage in the submission that will be made to Brussels. It will have to be in line with the key themes that have been published, including the green and digital strands of the recovery plan that has been published at a European level. The responses of member states have to reflect the published objectives. That dovetails quite neatly with the programme for Government's commitment on the environment and climate change. I do not have any doubts about our capacity to have a robust plan to submit to the Commission to get the maximum funding to which we would be entitled.

A formula was devised at the Council, which was revised following the negotiations and discussions. Significant funding will be front-loaded in respect of criteria relating to the pre-

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Covid position of the various economies. The agreement was amended so that consideration will be given to the impact of Covid from 2022 onwards on unemployment levels and the economies of all member states. That was agreed to try to give a greater equilibrium in the allocation of resources to member states across the board. I can get the Deputy more detailed documentation on that and will forward it to her.

I want to take this opportunity to wish the new Commissioner, Ms Mairead McGuinness MEP, every success. She has a very important portfolio. Throughout this, I have had the best of relations with the President of the Commission and they have not been harmed in any way. We have had, and will continue to have, good, constructive engagement on a range of issues. The portfolio that Ms Mairead McGuinness MEP has received reflects the continuing good relationship between Ireland and the Commission, contrary to what people were speculating on. I also want to pay tribute to the former Commissioner, Phil Hogan, who gave distinguished service to the country in his roles as agriculture and trade Commissioner.

On the insurance issue, I believe Europe has a stronger role to play in liberalising the industry and creating greater competition so that consumers can benefit from such competition. The Government will establish a special sub-committee of the economic committee to deal specifically with the insurance issue, which will bring in different Departments and make sure there is a cross-cutting departmental approach to tackling the costs of insurance to reduce the negative impact on businesses, enterprises and people more generally in their daily lives.

I will check out the process of ratification of the Lanzarote Convention.

In respect of the survivors of primary school sexual abuse, the Department of Education and Skills is currently undergoing a comprehensive review, which the Minister and I are awaiting. I raised this issue at a very high profile level and fought for those affected for quite some time. I got results for some, including raising the profile of the issue. The Iarfhlaith O'Neill report yielded results for some, but not all, victims. The Deputy mentioned a remaining issue in respect of the Creagh Lane survivors. I will contain to pursue the issue. We await the outcome of the review the Department of Education and Skills is currently carrying out following the outcome of Iarfhlaith O'Neill's report.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

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 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - to discuss the lack of autism spectrum disorder places in Dublin north west; (2) Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Dessie Ellis, Paul Donnelly, Denise Mitchell, Paul Ward and Sean Crowe - to discuss the need for extra Garda resources to tackle the sale, distribution of fireworks in the lead up to Halloween; (3) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss the provision of additional school buses and a review of school transport policy; (4) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss the need for remedial works by the Office of Public Works in Clifden following recent flood events; (5) Deputies Ged Nash and Imelda Munster - to discuss the on-going industrial dispute at the RHI Magnesita plant, Drogheda; (6) Deputy David Stanton - to

discuss upgrading the R624 access road to Cobh and the Great Island in County Cork; (7) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss the crisis facing businesses and traders in Dublin city; (8) Deputy Carol Nolan - the need to urgently address repeat flooding events along the River Shannon; (9) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss the need for school bus transport provision in County Meath; (10) Deputy Joe Flaherty - to discuss the threat to the future of the Irish forestry sector; (11) Deputy Willie O'Dea - to discuss the delay in the State scheme to provide redress to survivors of abuse in primary schools; (12) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss a lack of ambulances and paramedics in the south east; (13) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss the ring-fencing of the proceeds of crime for distribution to front-line community services; (14) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the approach if the withdrawal agreement is undermined, given concerns for the agricultural sector; (15) Deputies Réada Cronin and Holly Cairns - to discuss the issue of access by partners of expectant mothers for hospital visits and births; (16) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss a permanent building for the Dún Laoghaire Educate Together school; (17) Deputy Sean Sherlock - the need for the Fota Road on the Great Island of Cobh, County Cork, to be upgraded; (18) Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne - to discuss the issue around the school bus transport scheme and the 15 students, so far, that I am aware of in County Clare who have had their bus seat removed or not allocated; (19) Deputies Matt Carthy and Sorca Clarke - to discuss the European Commission's REACH committee's recent adoption of a regulation which would ban the use of lead gunshot in Ireland; (20) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss concerns over hygiene and infection control standards at CUH geriatric unit; (21) Deputies Cathal Crowe, James O'Connor, Joe Carey, Kieran O'Donnell and Darren O'Rourke - to discuss the Government's plan for the aviation sector; (22) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss the system for allocation of funding for the new third level laptop scheme; (23) Deputy Gino Kenny - to discuss the commencement of the medical cannabis access programme; (24) Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - to discuss access to a water supply in Achill; (25) Deputy Brid Smith - the impact and consequences of the Covid-19 restrictions on youth services; (26) Deputy Michael Moynihan - to discuss the expected timeframe for adult day services to reopen fully for users in County Cork; (27) Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - to discuss action to remedy Kerry road and infrastructure damage due to recent floods; (28) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss school bus services in Kerry; (29) Deputy Paul Murphy - to address the issue of the downgrading of the paediatric emergency department at Tallaght Hospital; (30) Deputies Mick Barry, Thomas Gould, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and Louise O'Reilly - to discuss developments in the industrial dispute in Debenhams; (31) Deputy Alan Farrell - to discuss eligibility for employees working under the employment wage subsidy scheme for the short time working scheme; (32) Deputy Alan Dillon - to discuss the reopening of sporting events for spectators while living alongside Covid-19; (33) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss access to public liability insurance for the leisure industry, community groups and community facilities; and (34) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - the urgent need to address the accommodation crisis at Greystones community college, County Wicklow.

The matters raised by Deputies Paul McAuliffe; Réada Cronin and Holly Cairns; Ged Nash and Imelda Munster; and Cathal Crowe, James O'Connor, Joe Carey, Kieran O'Donnell and Darren O'Rourke have been selected for discussion.

Sitting suspended at 1.30 p.m. and resumed at 2.30 p.m.

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Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Autism Support Services

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will clarify for Deputy Nash that he has four minutes to speak or two minutes if he is sharing time, and one minute each afterwards for final reply if he is sharing. The first Topical Issue matter is in the name of Deputy McAuliffe.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. In the immediate aftermath of the election, the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, said that there was an urgent need to provide the country with a functioning government. In outlining the many reasons why that was needed, he spoke very passionately about how parents of children with a disability must fight to secure a place each September for their children in primary and secondary school. Many parents of children with special needs are facing considerable difficulties in securing these places for their children and often, when they do get on the list, they have been waiting for many years.

I recently met the ASD Education for Finglas group and heard the harrowing stories of parents who were left in the dark, who had to scramble around contacting different schools and who often resorted to begging school principals. In my constituency of Dublin North-West, there is a severe lack of autism spectrum disorder, ASD, places both at primary and secondary school. At primary level there was one specialised class in the entire Dublin 11 area, which includes 19 primary schools, yet there are only three ASD units in that area. At second level the situation is even worse. There are seven second level schools in the area and only one has an ASD unit. Many parents are forced to send their children to education providers outside the area, which deprives children of growing up in the community where they have so many other resources. As I know the Minister of State believes, we need to incentivise more schools to provide ASD units and I understand that often, particularly in a DEIS area, this can make schools fearful about the resources that they have. Will the Department produce a five-year forecast of the current and future needs of special needs education places in the catchment area for each school and communicate that to the schools?

Under section 37A of the Education Act 1988, the Minister of State can direct a school to provide additional provision where all reasonable efforts have failed. I appreciate that we have to exhaust that process first. The legislation has been used to good effect in the recent past in south Dublin and I praise the Minister of State and the Department for that work. Many people in my constituency are asking whether, if it was appropriate to take that action on the south side of the city, similar action can be now taken on the north side. I urge the Minister of State to assist these parents in any way possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I take this opportunity, first, to congratulate the Leas-Cheann Comhairle on her appointment.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue as it gives me an opportunity to outline the current position regarding provision for children with special needs including autism. Enabling children with special educational needs, including autism, to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a real priority for the Government and for me as Minister of State with responsibility for special education. Currently we know that almost 20% of the total education budget,

€1.9 billion, is invested in supporting children with special needs. As a result, the number of special education teachers, special needs assistants and special class and school places are at unprecedented levels. Provision in our 124 special schools has increased from 6,848 placements in 2011 to 7,872 this year. Nationally, 167 new special classes opened in the 2019-20 school year, which means that there are 1,618 special classes in place compared to 548 in 2011.

Where new special education places are opened, there is a menu of supports provided to schools by the Department, including additional teachers, special needs assistants and professional development. Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country where increases in population and other issues have led to a shortage of school places for children with special educational needs. The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has overall responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. It has well-established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents. The NCSE seeks to ensure that schools in an area can between them cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements. Normally, special class and special school places are established with the full co-operation of the schools in areas where they are required.

However, as the Deputy has quite correctly pointed out, there are some parts of the country where the NCSE has faced challenges in getting schools and their patrons to provide new special class or indeed special school places. This can cause much anguish for parents and families involved. As the Minister of State responsible, as the Deputy has pointed out, I have power under section 37A of the Education Act to direct a school to provide additional provision where all reasonable efforts have failed. The legislation contains a procedure through which the capacity of schools in an area can be tested and through which ultimately, a ministerial direction can be made requiring a school to make additional special education provision available. While I am prepared to use the legislation when necessary to ensure that children can access a suitable education, my preference is for schools to engage with this challenge on a voluntary basis because this is the right thing to do for the children in their community.

The Deputy may be aware that the legislation was used for the very first time in 2019 in the Dublin 15 area. Significant progress has been made in that area on foot of action taken under section 37A. A new special school was established there and six schools also agreed to open special classes, thereby meeting the need for additional places in the area. The experience of Dublin 15 shows that real and practical challenges can be addressed by working together to provide additional special class and special school places.

The Deputy may also be aware that my Department and the NCSE is also continuing its engagement with schools, patron bodies, parents and others across south Dublin to bring the required additional special class and special school placements on stream and this work is ongoing.

As for Dublin North-West, the NCSE has advised that there are currently nine primary and three post-primary ASD classes established in the area. St. Paul's special school in Beaumont also caters for students with ASD and in addition, the NCSE has established three new primary ASD classes, as well as two new post-primary ASD classes for the coming school year.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister of State. At the heart of her reply, as well as the experience of any parents who sit before us at a clinic explaining their real urgency and frustration, is the issue of transparency. Many of those parents do not feel part of the process

but feel they are subject to the process. Many do not believe there is transparency about how a school or ASD unit is established, or how a school avails of that process. We also really need to take into account the needs of the schools. Many of the schools I am talking about are in a DEIS area and have significant challenges, often with low enrolment numbers, with parents who may have an addiction issue, as well as members of minority communities. We have to do all we can to support those schools to opt in and to provide an ASD unit. I urge the Minister of State and her officials to do two things. The first is to help us exhaust the process of all reasonable efforts within the legislation and within her Department for the Dublin 11 area. If the Minister of State is saying at this point that she does not believe there is a need, then that is a separate argument that we can have. If there is a need, we must exhaust all reasonable efforts and, hopefully, provide the places during that period. If we cannot provide them, I will come back to the Minister of State to urge her to direct the schools in the area to provide those ASD places.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Deputy. I reassure him that the legislative process that is under way is fully transparent. It is published on the departmental website where the Deputy can look at it at any stage. I do not disagree with him. I am aware that one particular child in Dublin North-West is looking for a place and that the NCSE is engaging regularly with the child's parents. While it is not ideal, there is an interim measure of a home tuition scheme. It involves approximately 20 hours per week for a child over the age of three and ten hours per week for a child under the age of three, but that is only an interim measure. As the first dedicated Minister of State with responsibility for special education, I am very mindful of a child not having a school place, which is a fundamental right for every child in this country. There has to be equal opportunity, regardless of whether a child has special needs, and I am determined to set out the way I will achieve that.

The Deputy mentioned forecasting. We are working on a forecasting model in the Department, which I hope will tackle this perennial problem. It did not just happen this year; it happened in other years also. Extenuating circumstances can arise during the year where a child may suddenly need a place. A new professional report can suggest a change in the type of placement required. Sometimes the parents decide that the child should remain in early years education or parents may opt for a mainstream class instead of a special class or special school. What pops up, therefore, is an additional place that a child needs. It is not as straightforward as some would like to believe. I would have been of the same view until I came into this Department but I am determined to assist in any way I can.

Maternity Services

Deputy Réada Cronin: This is such a serious issue for expectant parents that it requires us to choose the terms we use very carefully, but the only word that comes to mind to describe the position is "bonkers". It is straight up bonkers that an expectant father can go for a pint in a dry pub with a €9 meal and will soon be able to go for a pint without a meal in a wet pub, but he cannot accompany his partner in the delivery room for the once-in-a-lifetime experience of bringing a new baby into the world. It is straight up bonkers that the Government has decided it is more important for an expectant father to be able to wet his baby's head than to see his baby's head at the time of birth. The child is not born in an instant. A child comes into the world over a series of hours and, in that series of hours, the mother experiences incredible labour pains for which she needs comfort and support.

I have heard from women who have received terrible news while attending maternity appointments. One can imagine how isolating and upsetting it is not to have the comfort and support of one's partner at such times. I spoke to many parents over the past few weeks and bravo to them because they have certainly brought this issue front and centre.

During a delivery a baby is born and so too a mam and a dad. The expectant father is every bit as much a parent to the child as the delivering mother. He must, therefore, be able to attend the birth of his child following which the mam, dad and baby become a family. By attending, I do not mean just being present. I mean in the sense of attending to his partner and their new baby.

The parents I have spoken to know that in prioritising access to pubs over access to the delivery room, the Government is presiding over a farce. I do not believe we should be waiting for an expectant parent to challenge us on the basis of equality.

Deputy Holly Cairns: New mothers and their partners are understandably very angry about the ongoing visiting restrictions in maternity hospitals. Some maternity hospitals in Dublin have eased restrictions, yet elsewhere the opposite is the case. Women are alone until they are in active labour. I spoke to a woman this morning who endured 23 hours of labour without support from a loved one.

I know that public health is a priority, as it should be, but it is difficult for people to understand why someone is allowed to attend a wedding with 49 other people but, in some instances, people cannot attend a prenatal scan with their partner or be with their partner for most of the labour and after the birth of their baby.

Why is there a disparity in the restrictions among hospitals? There seems to be a geographic lottery that is confusing and frustrating for people. The Covid-19 restrictions in maternity hospitals were introduced six months ago. Since then, many other restrictions in general society have been eased, so why not these? They clearly need to be revised as a matter of urgency. Inconsistent practices in maternity hospitals add to the general confusion among the public. We need coherent guidelines that are supported by clear rationale and shared evidence.

To give the Minister of State some idea of the kinds of cases that have caused this level of confusion and outrage, I spoke to a woman yesterday who had an emergency caesarean section. She went through the entire labour, birth and five days in hospital alone, and has had no follow-up care. Her husband met their baby when she was discharged. It so happens that he had surgery before this and still has follow-up care, including calls during lockdown and an in-person check in May. When he was in hospital his wife was called to bring him in snacks and pyjamas.

Being alone during labour is hard enough when everything goes well but it is even more awful when there are complications. The stories I am hearing about people receiving bad news and having to call their partner who is sitting outside in the car are heartbreaking. No one should have to be alone at this time, unless it is absolutely necessary.

We cannot wait. Will the Minister of State please take action on this issue immediately? We are seeing restrictions across society being revised and revisited, with strong lobby groups involved, but these women do not have that. Will the Minister of State revise the current restrictions in maternity wards immediately?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputies

Cronin and Cairns for raising what I agree is a very important issue. I am a mother of three and I fully understand that the current position in maternity hospitals is a serious concern, which I acknowledge is presenting difficulties for expectant mothers and fathers.

It is regrettable that in order to protect women, babies, staff and our maternity service as a whole, it has been necessary to reduce footfall in maternity hospitals, as both Deputies said. This has been achieved in part through the introduction of visitor restrictions which, unfortunately, have included limitations on access of partners to maternity wards, theatres and appointments. However, the fact that there have been no Covid-19 maternal deaths in this country and that we have had a low incidence of the disease in pregnant women suggests the current approach is working, even if it is very difficult. It is worth remembering also that some of the most vulnerable members of society are cared for in our maternity hospitals, including fragile infants at the very extremes of prematurity. We must do all we can to protect these babies.

Like most healthcare services, maternity hospitals rely on highly specialised personnel to deliver care to women and infants. Should an outbreak of Covid-19 occur in a maternity hospital, it will be devastating for the service in question and would severely impact its ability to provide safe, quality care to mothers and their babies.

To date, our maternity hospitals have performed very well and they have continued to keep women, babies and staff safe while delivering quality care in very challenging circumstances. However, we cannot become complacent. The virus is still transmitting in the community and we must be on high alert. Everybody present will be aware that 307 cases of the virus were reported yesterday.

As services resume, for example, in gynaecology, the number of people in hospitals will rise, thereby increasing the vulnerability of our hospitals to an outbreak. As I said, an outbreak of Covid-19 among staff or patients would have a severe negative impact and reduce our ability to provide maternity services.

All of our maternity services are challenged by the pandemic but those challenges vary considerably between units. There are also significant variations in caseloads, complexity and infrastructure across the system. For this reason, we cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, we need local flexibility that provides for different circumstances in different maternity wards. Decisions on any restrictions are, therefore, made, implemented and reviewed at hospital level.

I assure the House that the decisions to restrict visitors in maternity hospitals has not been taken lightly. Front-line staff and hospital management are acutely aware of the very important support provided by partners at the time of birth and, indeed, during clinic visits. I have been assured that maternity hospitals wish to facilitate this support as far as possible and in that context visitor restrictions have been minimised as much as possible and are reviewed frequently.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I thank the Minister of State for her response. I still believe a solution must be found. There is no shortage of personal protective equipment, PPE. At the start of this pandemic, we were all very anxious and there was a shortage of PPE. Naturally, it had to be kept for our healthcare workers but there is no shortage now so a solution can be found. Labour can go on for 24 hours, or more in some awful cases. The birthing partner — it might not be the father but could be the mother or best friend — should be able to go in for half an hour and leave, or stay in for an hour at the birth. With the PPE, a solution can be found.

The World Health Organization has said no woman should be labouring on her own. A hospital is a controlled environment. We really have to sort this out and find a solution. The Minister of State is a mother, as am I, and will therefore realise that a woman is never more vulnerable than when lying on a birthing bed in her nightie. She wants support. Deputy Cullinane is writing to the hospitals today to ask them to re-examine this matter. We have to find a solution.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I completely understand what the Minister of State is saying about the necessity of reducing the footfall but, respectfully, that is not what we are asking about. We understand that and so do all the mothers who have been in touch with us. Trust me, that is really not the point. If, as the Minister of State says, there are different circumstances in different hospitals, people need to accept and understand why. Across society, we have seen revisions in so many sectors and an easing of restrictions. Has the maternity policy been revised? We need the reasons for what is happening to be transparent. So much has been re-opened in every other part of society, yet women are still alone when giving birth. If what the Minister of State describes is necessary, we need to know why. Will there be a review of the maternity wards to determine whether the restrictions can be eased? Can it be carried out immediately before any more women have to go through this?

Deputy Mary Butler: We cannot forget that the virus is still with us. As I said, there were 307 cases yesterday. We must remain vigilant. Failing to do so will increase the exposure of our hospitals to an outbreak and, ultimately, increase the risk to service users and staff alike. Should an outbreak occur in one of our maternity hospitals, it would negatively impact our ability to provide safe, quality care to mothers and babies. It is important that we do everything in our power to protect mothers, babies and staff. Our maternity hospitals have been successful so far in doing so and the fact that there has been no Covid-related maternal death in this country and that we have a low Covid incidence among pregnant women are a testament to this.

I accept the Deputies' statements that there should not be a one-size-fits-all approach and I understand that no two pregnancies are the same but the visitor restrictions have helped to protect the maternity service. I fully acknowledge the wonderful support partners provide during labour. Front-line staff are aware of that and are therefore ensuring restrictions are minimised as far as possible. I assure both Deputies that the restrictions are reviewed frequently and will be lifted as soon as hospitals believe it is safe to do so. I will raise the Deputies' concerns with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and also raise the fact that they have sought a review of the maternity ward restrictions.

Before I came here to answer the question, I looked at the list of 19 maternity hospitals. In University Hospital Galway, partners are permitted to be with mothers in the labour ward or in theatre if there is a caesarean section. In Mayo University Hospital, partners are permitted to attend with mothers in labour. It varies. In University Hospital Waterford, the birthing partner can attend as soon as the mother is in established labour. Deputy Cronin said labour can take over 23 hours so I can understand where she is coming from. I will relay the Deputies' concerns to the Minister. The restrictions on visits are put in place purely to protect the mother and the baby.

Industrial Disputes

Deputy Ged Nash: Workers who are members of Unite the Union and SIPTU have been on strike action at Premier Periclase in Drogheda for almost a month now. This dispute has

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already gone on for longer than is necessary. I lay the blame for the fact that no settlement has been reached firmly at the door of an intransigent management and an operation that appears to be hell-bent on busting trade union activity and presence at the plant.

The context is that workers initially received a democratic mandate for strike action at the plant in July following a sudden decision, taken outside the agreed framework, to shut down sections of the plant temporarily. Trade unions then agreed to defer action to allow for a resolution of the issues at play under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. Respect for our industrial relations institutions should be a cornerstone of workplace democracy but management instead gave the two fingers to our institutions and the workers and failed to engage meaningfully in any real negotiations. No worker ever wants to be on strike but the workers at Premier Periclase simply have no choice. They have to defend their hard-won rights and I stand with them.

This dispute became entrenched with a letter issued by local management to individual workers on 21 August. This letter is an insult to those workers who have given loyal service to the plant over many decades. It was threatening in the extreme and stated management would not negotiate with workers on strike action and would not deal with the workers' established unions of choice. Management plans to eviscerate workers' terms and conditions unilaterally. The high-handed and arrogant missive was designed to tear up a collective agreement that has been in place since 1998 and that has served the company well.

This week, the Government and my party rightly slammed the British Government for renegeing on a solemn deal made with the European Union, including Ireland. An agreement freely made is an agreement. The Minister of State's reply will, of course, inevitably tell me these issues need to be resolved through the industrial relations institutions of the State in the context of the WRC and by having both sides of industry come together in that spirit. Would the Minister of State call on the company, in the spirit of respecting agreements that are made, to honour the one it made with its workers in 1998 and show them the respect that they deserve and to which their loyalty entitles them?

Deputy Imelda Munster: The dispute in Premier Periclase is not about extra money. The workers are not looking for extra money. The company's proposal is to lay off workers and put them on reduced hours while transferring work to non-union labour and retaining contractors on site. When the proposals were first put to the workers, management continuously refused point blank to engage with them. The workers had no option, therefore, but to serve notice of strike action. The workers then suspended the notice of strike action to allow for talks to take place at the WRC. Management once again refused to engage in any meaningful way in talks at the WRC and hence the talks collapsed. Workers then had no option but to reissue a notice of strike action. That strike commenced on Monday, 17 August. Four days into the strike action, the company issued a letter, by taxi, to the homes of the workers. With regard to the long-standing collective agreement that had been in place, the company said it would no longer operate as a closed shop, that employees would no longer have their union dues deducted through payroll by the company, that the collective agreement with SIPTU and Unite the Union would no longer form part of workers' terms and conditions of employment and that the collective agreement is no longer valid. Management took a decision unilaterally to render the long-standing collective agreement null and void. That should not happen in this State because workers' rights have been long and hard fought for in this State.

Talks resumed last week at the WRC. Once again, the intransigence of management at

Premier Periclase was such that its representatives refused to sit around the table and engage with the unions. As a result, there is still a stand-off, the result being the nullification of the long-standing collective agreement and an attempt at union-busting. Will the Minister of State engage with management to encourage it to take part in the industrial relations process?

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Damien English): I thank both Deputies Nash and Munster for raising this matter and giving me an opportunity to respond on behalf of my Department and its Minister, Deputy Humphreys.

I understand the dispute relates to issues, including a collective agreement, among others that have developed over the past couple of months. I emphasise that Ireland's system of industrial relations is essentially voluntary in nature and responsibility for the resolution of industrial disputes between employers and workers rests, in the first instance, with the employer, the workers and the representatives.

I understand that in this case some level of engagement with the State-sponsored industrial relation mechanisms, that is, the WRC, has taken place as outlined by both of the previous Deputies and from our own information. I reiterate that the WRC is available to any interested parties that require it and urge all sides to involve themselves in that. As part of its functions, the WRC provides information relating to employment entitlements, obligations, equality and industrial relations matters. Any discussions entered into voluntarily by the workers and employers with one of the State's industrial bodies, the WRC or the Labour Court are confidential to the parties and I, as Minister of State, have no role in or knowledge of these discussions.

It has been a consistent policy of successive Governments to promote collective bargaining through the laws of this country and through the development of an institutional framework supportive of a voluntary system of industrial relations premised on freedom of contract and freedom of association. An extensive range of statutory provisions have been designed to back up the voluntary bargaining process. Freedom of association and the right to organise and bargain collectively are also guaranteed in a number of international instruments, which the State has ratified and is, therefore, bound to uphold under international law.

Since 1946, the Labour Court has provided an industrial relations service whereby disputes in which parties have been unable to resolve issues, themselves or with the assistance of the WRC, can be temporarily referred to the Labour Court for an opinion in the form of a recommendation of the court, which is not binding on the parties. The vast majority of industrial relations recommendations are accepted voluntarily by the parties.

The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act, which came into effect on 1 August 2015, provides a clear and balanced mechanism by which the fairness of the employment conditions of workers in their totality can be assessed in employments where collective bargaining cannot take place, and brings clarity or certainty for employers in terms of managing their workplaces in this respect. It also provides strong protection for workers who invoke the provisions of the industrial relations Acts, 2001 and 2004, or who have acted as a witness or a comparator for the purposes of those Acts. It ensures that where an employer is engaged in collective bargaining with an internal accepted body as opposed to a trade union then that body must satisfy the Labour Court as to its independence of the employer.

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Legislation ensures the retention of Ireland's voluntary system of industrial relations. However, it also ensures that where an employer chooses not to engage in collective bargaining, either with a trade union or an internal accepted body, and where the number of employees on whose behalf the matter is being pursued is significant, an effective framework exists that allows a trade union to have the remuneration and terms and conditions of its members in that employment assessed against relevant comparatives and determined by the Labour Court if necessary.

Both Deputies have asked me to comment on the management. I will be clear on this. We generally ask in these cases that both sides engage as they have been doing already but to re-engage, if necessary, with the mechanisms that are in place and that have served the State well.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is not beyond the bounds of normal industrial relations practice for a Minister or any other Member to call on a company to respect and honour an agreement. We asked the British Government this week to respect and honour an agreement they made with Ireland and the EU and I expect that this House would unite in requesting Premier Periclaire to honour an agreement it made with its workers in 1998.

I am glad, in many respects, that the Minister of State mentioned the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act, 2015, which I authored and which introduces some important protections and measures to promote collective bargaining in the context of what is a difficult constitutional environment. Sadly, however, the programme for Government that was authored by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party is virtually a workers' rights-free document. If employers think they can hollow out the pay and terms and conditions and bust trade union activity in factories and workplaces throughout this country, and that is a route to economic recovery, they are sadly mistaken.

Does the Minister of State feel that it is time to finally and ultimately grasp that collective bargaining nettle in this country and that, whether the initiative will come from the EU or from Ireland, we finally address this long-running sore in our economy and society to provide people with full trade union and collective bargaining rights, even if that means addressing it through a constitutional amendment?

Deputy Imelda Munster: Given what we outlined about the company's clear attempts at union busting and to erode any long-standing collective agreement, I would have thought the Minister of State's first gut instinct would be to say we must protect workers' rights in this State and that he would certainly write to the company to ask it to engage with the State apparatus that is in place to resolve these disputes, that is, the WRC. That is what I would do were I a Minister. I would initially be concerned and say that if this company can get away with it then other companies will see that and it will be a race to the bottom for workers' rights. The Minister of State did not share that concern at all. While that is not surprising, it is extremely disappointing.

Workers took a pay cut of 5% in 2016 when the company said it was in trouble. The company is no longer in trouble and hence in January of this year it gave a 20% pay increase to all of its CEOs, of which there are many. The workers want to engage with the WRC and they want the management to sit down and engage with talks. They want a resolution but they cannot be expected to get back to work where the terms and conditions are undefined. This is a workers' rights issue. The Minister of State should have it within him to stand up for workers' rights.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Imelda Munster: It will take nothing out of him. Will he write to the company in the interest of workers' rights and out of respect for the WRC, the State apparatus, the long and hard-fought battle for workers rights' and the long-standing collective agreement in place? Will he write to the company and ask it to engage with the WRC around the table with the workers?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy please respect the Chair? I know it is difficult but we have another Topical Issue debate to get to. I ask for her co-operation.

Deputy Damien English: I reiterate that Ireland's system of industrial relations is voluntary in nature and responsibility for the resolution of industrial relations issues lies ultimately with employers, workers and their respective representatives as appropriate. I could not be any clearer and I said twice in my opening contribution that I expect all sides to engage with the industrial relations process. That is what I have asked for.

I believe we are fortunate in Ireland in terms of the industrial relations systems we have developed and to which we are committed. In my previous address in the House a few weeks ago in this area, I acknowledged Deputy Nash and the great work he did on the 2015 Act. We have committed in the programme for Government to review changes of our collective bargaining and to strengthen that position. I recognise the Deputy was a former Minister of State who has strengthened the system in this area and I compliment him on that.

It has been the consistent policy of successive Governments to support the development of an institutional framework supportive of a voluntary system of industrial relations. There has been a consensus among the social partners that the terms and conditions of employment of workers are best determined through the process of voluntary bargaining between employers and workers and between employers' associations and trade unions or staff associations. This approach has served us well over the years and has resolved a large number of high-profile disputes.

In general, our laws do not try to impose a solution on parties to a trade dispute but rather are designed to support the parties in resolving their differences. The State has, by and large, confined its role to underpinning the voluntarism through the provision of a framework and institutions through which good industrial relations can and have prospered, on most occasions. As I said in my opening contribution, the vast majority of industrial relations recommendations are accepted voluntarily by the parties where employer and employee representatives come together and enter into voluntary agreements to resolve their differences. It is a win-win situation with buy-in from both sides. While I have no direct role in these matters, I stand by the professionalism of the industrial relations machinery of the State that are always available to facilitate solutions where both parties are prepared to work with those institutions.

There has been some engagement in this case, although I am not privy to the detail of that. I ask that this engagement should continue to try to get a resolution to this issue. I encourage all sides to make every effort to reach a resolution by agreement between companies and workers with the help of the industrial relations machinery of the State. I commend the work they do.

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Aviation Policy

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have five speakers on the final Topical Issue debate to whom I will allocate one minute each and, therefore, I ask for the co-operation of all Deputies. The normal time for a debate is four minutes. Deputies will have a minute each with half a minute for a supplementary question. I call Deputy Crowe.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The aviation sector supports upwards of 140,000 jobs. Some 40,000 of these are directly employed in the sector. Shannon Airport has been disproportionately hit and staff there have been exposed to temporary lay offs and pay cuts more so than their counterparts in Dublin and Cork airports. Shannon Airport is experiencing a sharp decline in passenger numbers and desperately needs a financial adrenaline shot to ensure it survives the economic uncertainty brought on by Covid-19 and comes out the other side in a healthy state. The aviation task force reported to the Government on 7 July and there is an urgent need to adopt its recommendations and provide a stimulus package for Shannon Airport. We need a high-profile, highly capable individual to replace Rose Hynes as chair of Shannon Group. I look forward to the Department leading a review of the management structures at the airport. The Covid crisis presents an opportunity to redesign aviation policy. I encourage the Minister of State to look at the proposals put forward by the chambers of commerce in the region.

I would like to hear the Minister of State's views on the proposed rapid testing at the point of departure and arrivals. It is the only way to scientifically guarantee that passengers coming into Ireland and departing are Covid free.

Deputy James O'Connor: We need a two-pronged approach to address the situation facing our airports. We need to get clarity on international travel on and off the island, and we need to put a stimulus package in place to sustain the aviation industry over time. We need to recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic will be with us for the long term and we need to plan accordingly. Too many livelihoods are at stake.

A recent article in *The Irish Times* highlighted how the aviation sector got us out of the last recession due to its major economic contribution to society, through airports such as the one in Cork which we are here to discuss today, and the aircraft leasing business. If we do not act now, we will not survive this recession. The passenger numbers in Cork fell by over 95% during the lockdown compared with the same period in the previous year. Air traffic is not expected to recover until 2024. It is urgent for the Government to act now to ensure a proper recovery plan is put in place for the aviation sector.

Deputy Joe Carey: Shannon Airport is a key strategic asset for the mid-west, the western region and all of Ireland. Some 40% of the FDI companies in the State are concentrated in the Shannon catchment area. These companies depend on international connectivity. Our entire tourism sector right along the western seaboard depends on inbound connectivity. Some 140,000 people in the country work in the aviation sector, many of them in Shannon which has 80 aviation-related companies.

We need to adopt an EU travel policy to bring us in line with other EU states so that we can get the aviation industry up and running again.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Minister of State for taking this debate. I want to deal with this issue by addressing the two prongs relating to the aviation sector. I understand

we will see a new reopening roadmap for the aviation sector next week. I ask the Minister of State to confirm that will be the case. It is critical for us to align with the EU proposals in terms of reopening. It is about testing. It is about adding to the green list countries with lower infection rates than we have. The airlines will not survive without an expansion of this reopening of air travel.

Shannon Airport needs support through Aer Lingus restoring the Shannon to Heathrow service, along with the transatlantic services to John F. Kennedy Airport and Boston. We need State supports for companies like Aer Lingus. It is a major worry with Ryanair talking about needing the green routes to be relaxed and reopened in line with EU policy. I ask the Minister of State to give a commitment that there will be a change in the reopening in terms of the green route policy and ensuring that supports will be provided for the Aer Lingus Shannon to Heathrow service and its transatlantic services out of Shannon.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I agree with the points the previous Deputies made. I focus my comments on two groups of workers directly affected by the failed foreign travel policy the Government is pursuing. Representatives of the travel agency industry held a protest outside Leinster House. The travel agencies remained open throughout the pandemic despite a 95% reduction in business. They have reported negative revenues in excess of 100% because they are paying out on bookings from last year. The responses from the Government have been completely unsatisfactory. We need to look after this sector.

Aer Lingus workers are being threatened with lay-offs and the Minister of State has probably received hundreds of phone calls. Is she satisfied and is the Minister satisfied that Aer Lingus operated the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, appropriately? There are severe criticisms of it.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildgarde Naughton): I thank all the Deputies for raising this important issue. I am acutely aware that, as an island nation, Ireland is particularly dependent on air connectivity both socially and economically, and aviation plays a critical role in our economy. However, due to coronavirus, global civil aviation is currently experiencing its most challenging crisis, more severe than what happened after the attacks on 11 September 2001 or the global financial crash, with many analysts predicting that it will take several years for the sector to return to 2019 levels. Irish aviation stakeholders are fully exposed to the resulting dramatic downturn in activity and it is clear that should Covid-19's impact on aviation be prolonged, this will affect their long-term financial health. I have met all key aviation stakeholders and officials have ongoing engagement with airports and airlines.

I am particularly concerned by a recent announcement by Ryanair of the possible closure of its bases at Shannon and Cork, and also media reports that Aer Lingus might relocate aircraft from its base at Shannon. These are commercial decisions of the companies concerned and it should be noted that route schedules for the winter season at Shannon and Cork have not yet been finalised.

In order to assist businesses and further protect employment, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of generalised supports for companies of all sizes, including those in the aviation sector, which includes a wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, a waiver of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. Liquidity funding is also available through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, pandemic stabilisation and recovery fund. The exist-

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ing support mechanisms available for the aviation sector will be reviewed in the context of the Government's plans for international travel.

In line with priorities for regional development, the Government is also maintaining subvention for air services to the regions. Approximately €2.5 million in Exchequer funding is being provided for capital investment in the areas of safety and security for Donegal, Ireland West and Kerry airports. A new regional airports programme for 2020 to 2024 is being prepared, incorporating a number of support schemes for our regional airports.

Shannon Airport has been provided with an emergency grant of over €6 million to complete its hold baggage screening project, a safety and security requirement under EU regulations.

Legislation has been introduced to provide a State guarantee for refund credit notes issued to consumers of Irish licensed travel agents and tour operators who have had to cancel holiday bookings. This guarantee ensures that where a credit note is accepted by a consumer, its monetary value is secured until it is used in the future.

These supports notwithstanding, our airlines and other aviation stakeholders have had to make a number of difficult decisions in order to best ensure their long-term commercial viability. These decisions have focused on areas such as redundancies, laying off staff and the potential closure of operational bases, all in response to the significant reduction in their operations. Industry has also introduced shorter working schemes, which have reduced both hours worked and levels of pay received by their staff.

The aviation recovery task force set out recommendations for consideration by Ministers and the Government on what needs to be done to assist the Irish aviation sector to recover from the Covid-19 crisis. The task force report contains a number of recommendations on how to support Irish aviation, which has been badly affected by the almost complete shutdown of international air travel. The recommendations include measures to sustain the industry for as long as travel restrictions are in place and also measures to help stimulate a return to growth, when the time is right.

The Government has already implemented several recommendations, including the publication of safe air travel protocols. We have progressed a European slot rule waiver for airlines in consultation with the European Commission. The wage subsidy scheme was extended to April 2021. The other recommendations, including further targeted financial supports to help reinstate connectivity, are being examined by Government. Work is required to develop these recommendations into effective interventions and that work is under way. This will feed into the Government's further plans to aid the broader economic recovery, including in the aviation sector. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I just wanted to get my reply in.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I know. I am very conscious of that but replies can be read into the record. We have to apportion time.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister of State for the positive elements of her reply. In my follow-up statement I will address the issue of Aer Lingus and Ryanair. Their commitments to Shannon are quite questionable. I ask that the Government intervene and address some of the things these airlines have sought through the aviation task force in its recommendations. Aer Lingus is operating pseudoflights out of Shannon. One can book three flights a day but they will be cancelled and one might have to wait four or five months to get a refund. There is something immoral about that. Aer Lingus is either committed to flying out of Shan-

non and to having its aircraft there or it is not. I want the Government to intervene so that this will be solidly nailed down for the months ahead. I thank the Minister of State for her support and positive indications.

Deputy James O'Connor: The final point I want to make relates to the task force report provided to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. This report stated very clearly that the State is required to intervene with our airports if we are to ensure they will be able to survive this pandemic. People are extremely worried about their livelihoods. They were perfectly fine until this pandemic came upon us. The Government must step in and provide a comprehensive plan as to how it is going to rescue this sector. It would be unacceptable for connectivity on this island, for our economy and for our society if a major failure in this sector were to be allowed. I strongly encourage the Minister of State to do something about this urgently.

Deputy Joe Carey: We need to restart aviation. What is the Minister of State's view on pretesting people for Covid before they enter the State? Has consideration been given to introducing such a policy? Other European states are doing just that. We should also introduce a system of rapid testing at our airports. Has the Minister of State given consideration to that? We need a roadmap to get aviation started again. I look forward to its publication next week.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have a couple of questions for the Minister of State. When will the roadmap for the reopening of the air travel sector be published? Does she expect it to align with the European Commission model? This is something for which the airline industry and those of us in the Shannon-Limerick region have been calling. As has been mentioned previously, pilots, cabin crew, the staff at Shannon Airport and travel agents have been greatly impacted by this particular decision. Does the Minister of State believe the Government will provide State supports for airlines such as Aer Lingus and Ryanair?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Those workers will be very disappointed with the Minister of State's response. There is no clarity as to their future prospects. I will repeat my question; is the Minister of State satisfied that Aer Lingus operated the temporary wage subsidy scheme appropriately? What supports will be provided for travel agents? Of the €335 million the State made from the sale of its stake in Aer Lingus, €245 million is still available. Will the Government use that money to take a stake in Aer Lingus? Has that been considered? Will it be used to support the sector?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I will be brief and try to keep to the time allotted. I have engaged with travel agents and have written to the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform regarding supports for them. With regard to Aer Lingus workers, the Deputies can be assured that protecting jobs and employment is a key priority for the Government.

To answer some of the Deputies' other queries, the Government is acting on public health advice and has adopted a very cautious approach to international travel. It is currently finalising a new medium-term roadmap for living with Covid which will include its approach to international travel. The Cabinet sub-committee on Covid is meeting tomorrow. It is envisaged that plans for international air travel will be considered. We need to explore whether the introduction of Covid testing in the context of international travel can provide an alternative to the restrictions and allow for the reopening of international travel. The Government will discuss that medium-term plan at the Cabinet meeting next Tuesday and it will be published shortly thereafter.

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The Deputies can be assured that a great amount of work is happening across Government, led by the Taoiseach's office. Different Government Departments are feeding into this work. My own Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is feeding in with regard to international travel. I have already highlighted the importance of connectivity, including regional connectivity, for our island and the importance of protecting jobs while, at the same time, ensuring that public health is safeguarded.

I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. I know it is a real concern for all of them and for the workers in their constituencies. We are here to try to protect jobs and to ensure connectivity, while remaining highly aware of the need to protect our citizens and public health.

Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 4) Regulations 2020: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann resolves that the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 4) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 326 of 2020) be and are hereby annulled.”

An bhfuil an tAire réidh?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ar an gcéad dul síos, I want to say that we in the Rural Independent Group have supported each and every measure we have been asked to take, as have the people throughout Ireland. They have put their shoulder to the wheel and accepted anything that was put to them in the hope of defeating and destroying the virus and of flattening the curve. We succeeded in that. As parliamentarians, we did the same thing every time we were asked but we have now gone too far. A lot of nonsense has grown into it.

I appeal for common sense and logic this afternoon. I ask the Government to remove the needless administrative burdens being placed on good businesses up and down the country. We are asking for fair play and common sense. We ask that businesses be allowed to trade safely without unnecessary and illogical administrative burdens that will do nothing to limit the spread of Covid-19. We simply ask that, under section 5(5) of the Health Act 1947, the Government annul and repeal SI 326 of 2020, which relates to the hospitality industry and sporting events and which came into effect just last week, on 3 September.

Over recent days, we have heard from an industry that is bewildered at the regulations which have been signed into law. These have been introduced without any consultation with the industry and without any debate in this House. In most cases they are, quite simply, unworkable. They are decimating the hospitality and tourism industries, in which 100,000 jobs have already been lost this year. There is a risk of a further 100,000 job losses in the coming weeks if regulations are not changed. During the last Topical Issue debate, we heard five Deputies pleading with the Government with regard to the aviation industry.

The regulations included in SI 326 of 2020 have resulted in hotels effectively working under

lockdown conditions. There are blatant contradictions contained within the regulations. For instance, a hotel can hold a wedding reception for up to 50 people but may only host a party of six for any other important family event such as a christening, a birthday or, sadly, a bereavement. This is decimating their businesses. It is bizarre, illogical, devastating to the industry and dangerous for the very spirit of our community way of life. The hotel industry has proven itself able to host weddings of 50 people without incident so where is the logic in saying that hotels cannot host a funeral party, christening, communion celebration or birthday party for up to 50 people? There is no logic in it.

The Irish Hotels Federation is pleading with the Government to amend these regulations. Over recent days, the Government has gone to great lengths to downplay the severity of these regulations. It has actually attempted to deny what is included within them. With regard to bistro pubs, contrary to what the Minister has said on “Morning Ireland”, the Taoiseach and others have said that regulation 13(1)(c) requires “a record of the substantial meal or meals ordered [...] by each member of a party of persons and each sole person permitted [...] access to the premises”. It is clear. I have the statutory instrument here in front of me. The Minister cannot deny what is printed in black and white. Such records must be kept on file for a period of 28 days. It is there in black and white. This is what is required, despite the Government’s best efforts to say otherwise. There is no logical reason that keeping a record of what everyone on a premises orders should be required. It is nonsense. These people are busy enough doing their own things without this messing, as I call it.

This is even less relevant now that the Government has announced that our traditional pubs will be reopened on 21 September. It is like saying “live, horse, and you will get grass”. It is very dangerous ground. The publicans have had two false dawns. They have been so quiet despite getting kicked up and down the road. This morning I heard someone from NPHEAT saying he was concerned. I know full well that were NPHEAT to tell the Minister and the Taoiseach that it does not want the pubs to open, the Government would not open them. That would be another breach of trust about which I am very concerned. We will have a situation in law whereby wet pubs can welcome their customers back at long last subject to certain regulations. I emphasise they are happy to work within the regulations, but bistro pubs will have to serve a substantial meal to each customer, take a record of the meal ordered by every customer who enters the premises and keep that for 28 days. Kindergarten children would not come up with this, let alone national school children. In Naíonra Chaisleáin Nua or a playschool they would not come up with this kind of poppycock. It is patent nonsense. This is absolutely a case of losing focus. It is imposing yet another burden on an industry that is struggling to hold on after operating at reduced or no capacity for a prolonged period of time. Keeping records of what every person who enters their premises has ordered for a period of 28 days will in no way help to fight against Covid-19. Limiting funeral gatherings to six people but allowing 50 at a wedding is utterly nonsensical. It only serves to confuse and frustrate the public who cannot see the logic of it and takes the focus away from the important steps of hand and respiratory hygiene that we had to fight against Covid. The washing of hands, respiratory hygiene and keeping clean has all been lost now.

The Government and all of its medical experts have never gone into the territory of telling people to take vitamins. There are good vitamins which people can get in health food shops to make them strong and help them fight these coronaviruses. There is something very sinister about this. The Government never went near it. No one would touch that.

During a meeting of the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response two weeks ago, I asked

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about the €9 meal. The Minister was there later on that day, or he was in a different room. NPHEt advised me that it did not seek the requirements for the €9 meal. Who did? How can the Government take this one step further by requiring pubs to record what the substantial meal was and keeping that for a 28-day period? It is farcical, bizarre and unwarranted. I tell the Minister that this is GUBU territory. I hope that he remembers GUBU; I certainly do.

These regulations also include restrictions on sporting events which is a crying shame. These are even more bizarre. We can have 15 people attend outdoor training but no more than six people in a gym, in a rince scoile, or anywhere we want to have the arts or anything else. It is devastating. When it comes to matches though, our games which are the very essence of our being Irish, our GAA and all of the different games including soccer and all the sports one can name, then only those whose presence is necessary are allowed to attend. This includes the players, management etc. but no spectators except parents of underage kids who are playing and only one of them, at that. At a time when NPHEt has asked us to focus on outdoor gatherings rather than indoor ones, it makes no sense that stadiums across the country, such as the famed Semple Stadium in County Tipperary and others my colleagues will mention, as well as local GAA pitches capable of hosting thousands and in some case tens of thousands, cannot have any spectators at our national games. It is truly uafásach, it is bizarre. These games are part of our culture and we will soon have a position where in law supporters can go to a pub to watch the match if it is streamed online but cannot stand in the GAA ground to watch it. It is utterly nonsensical. There is simply no logic here and all that this is doing is undermining the efforts being made by everybody to fight against Covid-19.

We all understand the need to be cautious and to have some restrictions on large gatherings but they must be founded in logic and common sense. The restrictions contained in this statutory instrument are simply not logical. They are devastating to life, particularly in rural Ireland where GAA games are the essence of our communities. We are today calling on the Government to admit that it got this wrong. The man that never made a mistake never made anything. The Government should revoke the statutory instrument and should refocus on supporting and fully reopening an industry in a safe but logical manner. Let us stop the nonsense and refocus on the important things that matter, that is, the fight to keep everyone safe and stop working against an entire industry and an entire way of life. That is what the Government is doing; it is going against the people. Let us sit down with the industry, the sporting organisations, all of the different arts people, the musicians and everybody else in a safe manner and stop penalising an entire industry for the failures of others because that is what this is.

Just yesterday Dr. David Nabarro, a special envoy from the Director General of the WHO, said that we need to learn to live with this. Of course we do. We need to move on and save our economy and our mental health. If we are learning to live with it, we have to do so in a way that respects the important aspects of our lives, our culture, our heritage, our games and the very essence of our community and family celebrations. These things are part of the fabric of society. They are what is important in life and what has been shut down and away from people up to now. We cannot accept that the whole country can learn to live with it while throwing these important aspects of our lives and our values to one side. They are a part of who we are and they have to be respected. I appeal to the Minister to do that. I call on Members of Sinn Féin and the Labour Party, who said this legislation was daft, bonkers and railed against it all weekend, as did Members from the Minister's own party including Deputy MacSharry, to come in here-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not want to interrupt the Deputy but his group has ten minutes with five minutes each.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Yes. I am almost finished. I am calling on those Members to pony up, not go out and tell their constituents one thing and then come in here and vote differently. I am calling on them to come in here and walk through the lobbies with us this evening. Let us revoke these measures and have a debate on new measures that will help-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: -----consult the industry and find a new way to live with the virus that respects the very essence of who we are and what makes our country the country that it is.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: At the outset I thank Deputy Mattie McGrath and Councillor Máirín McGrath and the people in the Deputy's office for helping to prepare this important motion to come before the House this evening.

It is important that the Minister and the Members who supported the legislation last week and the statutory instrument that has been introduced, look seriously at what they did. The critics of what we are doing this evening should not try to paint us into a box and say that we are doing something that would be prejudicial to public health. To a person, the most important thing for each one of us, including the Minister and everyone else in this House, is people's health. That is the most important thing. It is more important than anything else. It is more important than the economy, money, jobs or anything else. Health is more important than anything. Having said that, common sense also has to prevail. When pubs were allowed to open, nobody would tell me when I asked in the House why it was better for a person's public health that they have a drink in one hand and something to eat in the other. There was no logic in what the Minister did. He should have allowed every pub to open at the same time but what is done is done.

Our motion is about more than just publicans. I am very glad that publicans from County Kerry came up to Dublin today. Indeed, publicans came up here from around the country, although today a lot of people came from County Kerry. They came from north, south, east and west County Kerry. They were very welcome to come here but it is sad to see them coming. These are people whose livelihoods have been torn apart. Their doors have been closed since last March. They came here out of genuine frustration and out of distrust for the Government due to the way it has treated them already. The Government has given them false hope and false starts that never came to pass. That was a very unfair and nasty thing to do. There seems to be an anti-publican trait in this Government and the previous Government. In particular, it seems to be doing all it can to run down the whole pub culture and all of that and that is wrong. There is no need to do that. We should be proud of our tradition of public houses.

Our motion today is about a lot more than just dealing with that issue. I ask the Minister where is the common sense in a situation where it is prejudicial to people's health for a family that has had a bereavement to go to a hotel and have a meal together? It may be family and friends and only six of them can do that. Where is the common sense in that? People can organise a wedding and it can be held in a proper, safe way. It may be in a very large venue. We have venues in Kerry that can cater for 1,000 people at a wedding. Surely where there could be 1,000 we can have 200 or 300 in a very safe fashion. *Pro rata*, if we have a hotel that could hold 300 people or 400 people, surely be to God it could have 150 people in a safe way. Common sense has to prevail. Our economy has to be allowed to continue while, most importantly, protecting and minding our older people and people with low immune systems. This is of paramount importance. Nobody is saying here today that we do not care about health or social distancing.

We are not saying that, not for one second. What we are saying is the Government seems to be away with the fairies on this one.

We voted how we did last week, but the most horrible thing we saw was where people who supported the Government, voted for the Bill and spoke in favour of it and then went home and kept saying on their local radio stations that it was a step too far and the Government was out of line. For God's sake, they are the people who voted for it. Now they will be given a chance. Thanks to Deputy Mattie McGrath and my colleagues, they will be given another opportunity. They will be able to look into their hearts and souls and decide whether they did the right or wrong thing. I know what they did but all of us are responsible for our own actions. I ask the Minister to look at the powers the Government has given itself, realise it has made a mistake, realise it is doing wrong by the people who want to work and allow them to continue. Let us face into the winter with a little bit of hope and optimism and a little bit of thinking outside the box.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I call on Dáil Éireann to annul the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 4) Regulations 2020, SI No. 326 of 2020 because of the restrictions on events in private dwellings and hotels. Throughout the country, the hotel industry showed resilience and the reopening was phenomenal. What the hotels did for staycation holiday makers was unbelievable. How does the Government reward them? It does so with more restrictions. Everyone had their staycations and the media looked at it and showed people throughout the country having staycations and massive crowds. The hoteliers and businesses looked after them. Now the Government has brought forward these restrictions.

It is an overreach of the Government and it is too much. I call on the backbenchers to put their money where their mouths are. Will they support this annulment for the hotels in Donegal and the pubs in Clare, Limerick and Kerry? Will they support this for the IFA, Macra na Feirme and organisations that can have only six at a meeting? There is not one bit of common sense in what has been brought forward. Look at this House. There are 159 Deputies who can all turn up to the building today. We restrict who comes in and out of the Chamber but they can all go to their offices in this building. That is more than 50 people. We are using common sense and we bring masks. We keep our health to the fore. Why can we not give this responsibility to the people of Ireland? The majority of people in Ireland take responsibility for their health and their families, children and surroundings. They are not kindergarten children. We have a minority of people who lack respect for other people. Last week, amendments were tabled that could have changed things. The Bill could have been worded differently to deal with these people but the Government came in with restrictions that make no sense whatsoever.

Someone in my house has an underlying condition. It was diagnosed in February. I have been coming to the House and taking all the precautions I can here and while travelling up and down, watching where I am staying and keeping within an environment to make sure I keep my family safe. The Bill means the Minister is trying to tell me what to do and where to do it. The Covid restrictions have shown that once people travel beyond the limits of any city, there is no infrastructure for them to work from home. No public houses were allowed to open. All of the restrictions were put in place and people honoured them. There are places that have not opened since the lockdown. Anyone in a place where there was footfall had infrastructure and could get a taxi to places. Whatever they had to do, they were able to get there. Once people go beyond the limit of a city, they are considered rural because of the lack of infrastructure. People in the cities are now trying to get out of them and get space because they are overpopulated. We can see from the airports what they are trying to do. They are trying to get 10 million more people into Dublin while Shannon Airport is being closed. Where are they going for their staycations?

They are going down to Kerry, Cork, Galway and Limerick. That is what they are doing but everything is invested in Dublin. Common sense tells us to open up places and put in the restrictions so they are there for everybody. Personal responsibility lies with everyone and the people who go outside those restrictions can be dealt with through the law.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Temporary regulations were brought in for the sole purpose of limiting the spread of Covid-19 to save lives, protect health, get our hospitals, schools and colleges open and allow the economy to function. That is what they are for. The Government opposes the motion to annul these regulations but I welcome the opportunity to discuss them and I thank the Deputies for tabling it. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the plans for opening the pubs and bars in the context of a roadmap which will be published next week.

The regulations in question, the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 4) Regulations 2020 are an important part of our efforts to suppress the virus. That is what these regulations are for. As Deputies are all too well aware, the virus is on an upward trajectory in Ireland. An important measure used to track the spread of the virus is the total number of cases in the previous two weeks. In early July, the total number of cases in the previous two weeks in Ireland was three per 100,000 population. Two weeks ago, it had increased from three to 28 and today it is at 35, which is a vast increase in the number of cases. Our total number of confirmed cases has just gone above 30,000 and among those, tragically, as we all know, are 1,778 women and men who have died. We are not at the levels we saw back in April and May but we are on an upward trajectory and this trajectory is causing a great deal of concern. Many countries in Europe face similar problems. Earlier, I spoke with my counterpart in Denmark where on Monday new measures were introduced as that country faces a rise in cases.

If the first chapter of this fight against Covid was flattening the curve, I would say we are now in the second chapter, which is to suppress the virus so we can open our society and economy. We are always seeking ways to strike the right balance in how we do this while we live in a world where Covid is present. I recognise, as does the Government, that pubs and bars can form part of the social fabric in many communities. I absolutely accept this. For many, they offer an important social outlet and the delay in reopening the pubs, which nobody wanted, has implications for those who rely on them for their livelihoods, including the publicans and the many men and women who work in the sector.

Yesterday, as the House will know, the Government decided that all pubs and bars will be able to reopen on 21 September without the requirement to serve substantial meals. We need to be very clear that this is subject to the epidemiological situation at the time and the application of any potential localised measures. As part of the implementation of the necessary protective measures, and because we know that when these pubs open they will do everything they can to operate in a safe manner for their staff and customers, Fáilte Ireland's guidelines for reopening pubs are being updated. Until then, the regulations provide that a service or business that is selling or supplying alcohol for consumption on the premises may not open to the public other than where the alcohol is ordered at the same time as a substantial meal is ordered, during the meal or after the meal has ended, and consumed during the meal or after the meal has ended. In other words, if one is in a place that serves alcohol, one needs to have a substantial meal. That is the deal and it is based on solid public health evidence of what has happened abroad. When restaurants opened they did not see clusters of cases, but when pubs opened without food being served they did see a rise in the number of clusters of cases. That is what has underlain this

measure from day one. This requirement has been in place since the end of June. The recent regulations, to which Deputies have referred and which were the subject of much debate last week, simply enforce that requirement. That is all they do.

It is important to say that the vast majority of premises selling alcohol for consumption on the premises operate in compliance with the regulations. The hospitality sector, however, including restaurateurs and publicans, has asked in that small number of cases in which there is non-compliance for a way to enforce the regulations. Members of An Garda Síochána have made the same point, that up until now there has been very little they can do. I put it to the Deputies that in the first instance this is not in line with public health measures and, second, it is grossly unfair on the vast majority of publicans who are operating within the guidelines. We therefore introduced a regulation providing that in such circumstances the pub in question could be asked to produce proof of sale of the meals. This can be done very simply in the form of till receipts, which every restaurant and pub already keeps for six or seven years for its VAT returns. Put simply, a small number of pubs where alcohol is being sold are operating as pubs and essentially pretending they serve food, that is, pretending that substantial meals are served. We know this. We have heard publicans and restaurateurs talk about it. There might be a scattering of empty pizza boxes. All this regulation means is that a garda can walk into a premises and if the publican says he or she has sold substantial meals, the garda can ask to take a look at the till receipts. That is it. That is all the regulation does.

These public health measures were designed to suppress the virus and keep people safe. The regulation contains data protection provisions that stipulate the purposes for which the data collected may be used. It refers to data being collected that may be used by three specific parties. The first is a specified person who is in charge of the premises for the purposes of complying with the regulations or of providing information to the HSE for contact tracing, which is critical. The second is the HSE, again for the purposes of contract tracing. The third is An Garda Síochána, in order that it can monitor compliance with the regulations or enforce in a small number of cases in which that may be required. These are all essential parts of our measures to combat Covid-19 and, therefore, essential parts of the regulations. The Data Protection Commissioner has said the stated aim of the Government in procuring compliance with the regulations through inspections by An Garda Síochána in the context of the pandemic is sufficient justification for the level of interference that arises.

The motion proposed by the Deputies includes the annulment of many other health regulations, including those relating to events and gatherings. If these were to be annulled, the provisions limiting the size of gatherings indoors and outdoors for social, recreational, exercise, cultural, entertainment or community reasons would also be annulled. This would be hugely damaging to our efforts to suppress the virus, keep people safe and, ultimately, reduce the virus in the community to a point where the schools can open up, the hospitals can stay open, the restaurants can open and the pubs can open. The regulations also specify that a person should not organise a social or recreational event in a private dwelling unless the number attending does not exceed those residing in the private dwelling plus an additional six from no more than three households. Again, should the regulations be annulled, these provisions would also be annulled. Finally, the regulations also do not permit the public to access nightclubs, discotheques, casinos or private members' clubs. Should the regulations be annulled, as is proposed, these provisions would be annulled. I can tell the Deputies with absolute certainty that the evidence internationally is that if these regulations were to be annulled, the number of cases of Covid in this country would rise very high very quickly, and we know from what is happening here and

what has happened in places such as Florida that after the cases go up, the hospitalisations go up. The cases move from younger people to older people, and then we see the fatalities rise. That is what happens. That is what we are all working so hard to avoid.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: A lot of fake news.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: As I said, we are looking at an increase in the number of cases at the moment, and that is a concern. Many other countries are seeing such a resurgence. In order to deal with the resurgence we need to ensure we strike a balance between necessary restrictions for the protection of people's health and allowing people to live their lives and communities to gather and socialise. That is why restaurants and pubs serving food could reopen, subject to the substantial meal requirement, and why pubs which do not serve food will be able to reopen in two weeks' time. Again, this is subject to the trajectory of the virus.

The Government, through the regulations, continues to support our community - and I know that everyone in this House feels the same way - and to reinforce solidarity and togetherness by providing appropriate monitoring and enforcement. It is for this reason the Government opposes the motion.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm labhairt ar an rún seo. Ní raibh aon ghá leis an rún seo in aon chor ach rinne an Rialtas botún seafóideach agus, dá bharr sin, tá orainn an rún seo a chur os comhair an Rialtais inniu. De bharr an bhotúin a rinne an Rialtas, tá postanna i mbaol agus tá sé ag cur éileamh seafóideach ar thithe tábhairne agus ar bhialanna ar fud an Stáit. The motion, while important, should not have been necessary. It seeks to rescind the statutory instrument introduced last week in the name of the Minister for Health. Like so many other self-inflicted wounds and communication disasters by this Government, all the statutory instrument has done is to take away time and energy from our ability to focus on actual problems that need urgent attention. There are grave and growing problems we should be talking about today, for example, rent increases, the lack of affordable accommodation, the paralysis in health and the forestry sector, flooding within the regions, including along the Shannon, and the difficulties in the agricultural sector with the onset of Brexit, but instead we are trying to talk sense into a Government that speaks nonsense on this issue.

The statutory instrument was an answer to a question nobody asked. It was another totally unnecessary measure. As Pat Leahy of *The Irish Times* put it, the criminal enforcement Bill which was debated here last week was nothing more than performative politics. The exact same could be said of the instrument we are seeking to have annulled today. The instrument looks and sounds like a meaningful gesture but in reality is nothing short of absurd. The reaction from the sectors and industries most impacted has been scathing. Hotels in my constituency remain at a loss to understand the rationale behind the capacity and guest limits that have now been established. There is no clear sense that the Government understands the day-to-day operational realities that many hotels face.

These hotels are major local employers but the Government has not listened to them or asked for their experience. Has the Minister said at any time that perhaps those who have spent a lifetime working in the sector know something? The answer is "No", of course. Instead, the Government has doubled down. Like the description of the Bourbon dynasty, the Government parties have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. They actively persist in clearly wrong-headed policies because they do not have the humility, or perhaps the capacity, to admit a mistake that may yet end up causing job losses and closures in Laois-Offaly and constituencies

beyond. Many are now considering if there is a vendetta against pubs, hotels and restaurants. At one time we would have put such remarks down to an excess of imagination but now it is not so easy to dismiss these concerns. The official Government line is that it wants to see hotels, restaurants and pubs fully operational and open but this week we have seen even more so-called guidance down to the kind of decorative umbrellas pubs should not use on cocktail drinks. This kind of nonsense highlights the patronising stance the Government has, perhaps unwittingly, adopted towards the sector.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to support this motion to nullify and rescind the statutory instrument or blank cheque that was given to the Minister for Health last week. I thank the Kerry publicans who came up here today to fight their case, including the O'Callaghan brothers of the Fáilte Hotel in Killarney, Pat the Tatler Jack and the other publicans who left Kerry early this morning and will not be back until late this evening to make a case and try to bring common sense into the industry, which should have been there all year. The Minister brought in a Bill last week to deal with a small number of pubs, which he believed were not serving food with the drink they served. Six days later, he comes out and says he will open all wet pubs. What kind of lunacy are they at? Are they gone stone mad?

I am glad the Fianna Fáil backbenchers, such as Deputy MacSharry, and Ministers of State, such as Deputy Rabbitte, will get a chance to vote with us because they said they were sold a pup last week. I am glad Sinn Féin will get a chance, because they voted with the Government, as they also did to reduce our speaking time. Sinn Féin said Government actions last week were nuts, just hours after voting for it. Deputy Kelly said it was bonkers and he will have a chance this evening or tomorrow, whenever the vote is, to vote against the Bill that was brought in last week.

The Government today say they will open all pubs on 21 September. I do not believe it. I am sure no pub would be left open were it not for the savage pressure put on the Government last weekend when people realised what it was after doing. It is hard to make sense of this Government. When there were fewer than ten cases a day, it would not allow the pubs to open. Now there are 320 cases a day and it can open the pubs no bother. It is hard to make sense out of that.

The carry-on by the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach is disgraceful. The Tánaiste tweeted that he could not understand why pubs were closed. He closed them last March and he kept them closed in June. As Tánaiste, he did not allow them to open on 20 July, 10 August or 13 September as he promised but he is saying he will open them on 21 September. I do not believe him. He said the Bill was to follow up on a small number of rogue pubs and he told us that NPHEAT advised the Government that pubs serving drink should have to serve food. NPHEAT denies this. Did the Government think this up or was it Fáilte Ireland? I want to know and the publicans of Ireland want to know. I asked before how the virus would know whether you were having a meal with your pint or whether you were not having it at all.

As for the Taoiseach, it was wrong of him to come out last Friday night and categorically deny that he wanted to know what people were eating for 28 days. The Minister for Health should not shake his head because that is what the Government parties looked for and those were the regulations they sent out to the pubs and restaurants. The Taoiseach came out on Friday night and contradicted that. It is misleading to go on like that. It is trying to mislead honest people who are trying to survive. Deputies and Ministers are saying one thing and voting the other way in this Chamber.

The people of Ireland have lost confidence in the Government. Can the Ceann Comhairle picture a man and his son on the roof of a car in Beaufort last weekend trying to watch a match from the roadside? Two more men were on the one ladder trying to see the same match. The Taoiseach promised before the holidays that he would work with the GAA to see how more people could be let into sports fields and pitches to watch games. This is the result. This Government has done more U-turns than any other in the history of the State. We are on the fourth Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in 2020. We have lost our trade portfolio at the most critical time in our history even though MEPs and officials should have special exemptions to travel back and forth from Europe similar to the Ministers for Health or Foreign Affairs and Trade. There should be some special way of dealing with all of that.

An eminent barrister, Constance Cassidy, SC, claimed that the measures put in place last week were “ill-judged, ill-considered, ill-formulated and ill-understood, even by the very Ministers responsible for [their] introduction”. I feel she is referring to the Minister for Health because he was asked last Friday morning and he said he knew little about it. He went on the run then from five other radio stations that could not find him at all. This is what we have to put up with and I ask the Deputies who voted with the Government last week to vote against it this week.

Deputy David Cullinane: Sinn Féin has consistently set out a common sense approach to tackling the pandemic. This is in stark contrast to the approach of the Government at times, which includes ideas many people see as bonkers, mixed messaging and missed targets in respect of testing and tracing. We proposed an amendment to the motion, which was ruled out of order. This amendment called for the removal of the substantial meal requirement and meal recording regulations, which would allow the remaining closed pubs to reopen as gastropubs have done. It never made sense to me and it does not make sense to many people that one has to have a substantial meal. We are going to see the pubs open. They should be open as quickly as possible to give all pubs an opportunity to open safely within the rules and guidelines but on the same basis as those which have been open for some time. When there are mixed messages and solutions on the table that do not make sense, people start to lose confidence in the authority of the Government and the messages it delivers. We want to see an end to the substantial meal requirement and that was in our amendment. We want to see all of the pubs open and we also want to see more social outlets for people as we grapple with this virus and learn to live with it.

Unless we have proper treatment and solutions to this pandemic, we will have to live with this virus for some time to come. That means people have to be able to live with the virus. Living does not mean going to work, school or college alone. Living with the virus has to mean that people have social opportunities. Humans have to interact. We have to do so within the guidelines and in a safe manner that keeps pressures off our acute hospitals and front-line staff but we have to provide those outlets. That is why I want to see the pubs open in a safe way across the State, whether it is in the capital city or in any part of rural Ireland.

The Minister should be in direct discussions with sporting and cultural organisations, businesses and trade unions to look at ways in which we can increase attendances at matches. As has been said already, it does not make sense to the public that we cannot have gatherings in stadiums the size of Croke Park, Páirc Uí Chaíomh and other GAA, soccer and rugby stadiums across this State that hold huge numbers of people and can accommodate more people. We have it in the North where there are different regulations and rules and more people can be accommodated outdoors and yet we do not have those guidelines here.

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The Minister tells us he will publish his plan next week on how we will live with the virus. The problem I have with the Minister for Health is that he is constantly promising us plans. He has promised us a plan on how to support our acute hospitals and to deal with the winter season that is coming at us and we still have not seen it. He promised us a plan on cancer services and we discussed that last night. Rather than setting out-----

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: That is not true.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister said there was a pathway to opening up screening services and rather than setting out that pathway, he gave us a restatement of what has happened in recent times, rather than giving us real information on how those services will be opened in the time ahead. The Minister is also saying the Government will come forward with a plan on how to live with this virus but where is the discussion with other parties? Where is the debate on these issues leading into such decisions? If we are all in this together then we have ideas and views as well, as does everyone in this Chamber. The problem is that the Minister for Health and the Government have become part of the problem in respect of how he and other Ministers have badly communicated many of the measures the Government has put in place. The Minister, for example, proposed criminalising people for having friends over.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: No, I did not.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister proposed allowing the Garda to have more powers to enter peoples' homes.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Deputy is saying things that are false.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister's presentation of those arguments and issues was contradicted by the Taoiseach and other Government Ministers minutes and days later. That is a fact.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is not.

Deputy David Cullinane: There was fearmongering about having second lockdowns, when the Minister had to be contradicted again by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and other front-line Ministers. The Minister was also contradicted by the acting Chief Medical Officer. The Minister also did an interview in which he compared children who are going to school and the dangers and risks associated with that with children on trampolines. Such comments, imagery and mixed messaging, as well as the requirement to have to keep records of what people eat in restaurants and bars, were badly communicated. When there is bad communication, as well as mixed messages, bonkers ideas and Ministers contradicting each other, which happened with the Minister for Health and another Minister when the Minister for Health was trying to explain the most recent guidelines, that does not inspire confidence.

The Minister needs to get back to basics. For me, this is simple and it is being made very complicated by a Government that, for whatever reason, is simply unable to communicate on basic issues. The way in which we protect ourselves and combat this virus is to get back to the simple things of making sure that people do what we know they will do, namely, handwashing, cough etiquette, the wearing of masks as best we can - especially indoors - and all those measures we want individuals to carry out.

We also need a Rolls-Royce testing and tracing regime. The anecdotal evidence, despite the

figures we are being presented with, suggests that there are problems and that the turnaround time is not what it should be. We are still not up to the numbers promised to us by the HSE and previous Ministers on this issue in recent times. We are told there is capacity for 100,000 tests per week and yet we are still nowhere near doing that. A testing and tracing regime has to be proactive. It has to be used to ruthlessly pursue the virus and hunt it down, which the Government did not do in meat plants. Rather than pointing the finger of blame at people who had nothing to do with these rising cases, the Government should take responsibility for the mistakes it made in meat plants.

The Government should stop with the absolute nonsense involved in some of the regulations it has brought in and the responses that make no sense whatsoever to people. The Government should allow people to be able to live with this virus and communicate with them as best it can. I can tell the Minister about what has happened in recent times because of that miscommunication, silly decision-making, not listening to the Opposition or stakeholders, not going out and communicating with or talking to people who are affected by this, whether it is hotels, bars, the GAA, the FAI or other sporting or cultural organisations and young people. Young people need to live and not just go to school or college. We have to provide people with the opportunities to live and that means theatres, drama and so on and that has to be done within the guidelines. We are hearing today and yesterday from the Government that we could be opening up pubs in two weeks' time but within hours of that there were newspaper reports in which a Government spokesperson said that may not happen because of the rise in the cases. How many more false dawns will we have with the pubs? It will be an absolute disaster if they are faced with another false dawn because the Government is not getting it right with testing and tracing or with its communication.

If we want people to buy in - and people want to buy in - we will have to do the right thing. By the way, annulling all of the restrictions is not the way forward. I do not want to see packed nightclubs or 50,000 people in a stadium. I do not want to see us taking decisions that would be irresponsible but I want to see responsible measures taken by us in this House that will give people an opportunity to keep themselves and their families safe, protect the front-line health services and be able to go and watch a match, go into a pub to socialise and to be able to live their lives within the rules. That needs to happen quickly and if it does not, the authority of the Government will be further undermined.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am glad to speak on this issue because across the country, thousands of people are doing their best to try to protect society and everybody around them. In general, people have bought into this because of the danger they have seen and the number of people in hospital and who have unfortunately lost their lives because of this Covid-19 virus. At the same time, however, they hear all these mixed messages coming from Government. One of the things we seem to be falling down on all the time, which is clearly the case in the Minister's Department, is that when laws are brought in, they are then transposed into regulations and those regulations seem to have stuff in them that was never mentioned when there was a debate on the legislation or when there was any talk of it before. We had that scenario last week and we had it on other occasions. There is an opportunity there and I know that the pre-legislative scrutiny which would normally take place here in the Legislature for all aspects of what we do throughout the Oireachtas is not possible under the circumstances we are in. Post-legislative scrutiny should be happening in a more detailed way and we should consider some kind of pre-regulation scrutiny. Before regulations are introduced, there should be some forum in which they could be publicly debated and discussed in order that everybody can hear the pros and cons

of the arguments. That would be beneficial not only from the point of view of Members of the Oireachtas and political people, but also from a societal perspective. The key thing we need to do is to get people to buy into all this legislation so there is a unity of purpose about defeating the coronavirus and moving forward.

Unfortunately, the Department of Health and the Minister have been seen to be quite chaotic in that regard and, for many people, incompetent. That is the word that I hear more often than anything else from the public. People do not want that incompetency to be replaced by recklessness, however. We have to be careful of that too. People are genuinely buying into what needs to happen, because they are afraid of what this virus can do to them and to people in their communities. They want to be part of the solution but we have to bring everyone with us and we must work much harder to do that. It makes no common sense, for example, to say that it is possible for 30 people to be on a field to play football, but it is not possible to have 50 or 60 people, mostly standing about 10 m apart, watching them. It makes no sense, especially when those people end up going into a public house somewhere and watching the game on a big screen. That is what is happening all over the country. It defies logic. What needs to happen is for someone to devise solutions which are logical, which work for people and which people will buy into. That needs to happen everywhere.

The situation regarding the pubs has also been messed around for a long time. We have this problem with the pubs because it was done wrongly in the first place. Stating that some pubs can open to serve food but others cannot in a town that might have six pubs, with two of them open and the others looking on, just causes chaos. It means that the two pubs in a town that might be open have more chance of being overcrowded. The Minister's responsibility is to deliver what works for people. I am glad to have this opportunity to put that to him. The reality is that what he has done to date has not worked for the majority of people and there is now an opportunity to change that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The greatest threat to the response to Covid-19 is a lack of public confidence. I welcome this motion from the Rural Independent Group, not that I support the notion that we have no regulations at all, but because it clearly points out and puts on the record of this House that a dent has been made in public confidence. The Government is responsible for that undermining of public confidence in the measures in place. People are aghast at what they consider to be double standards and, in some cases, doublespeak.

Back in June, our deputy leader in this House, Deputy Doherty, asked the Tánaiste whether NPHEH had been asked to prepare regulations that would allow pubs that do not serve food to operate on the same basis as pubs that do. The Tánaiste acknowledged at that stage that the question had not even been asked. This week, those regulations were published and we are now told that pubs that do not serve food will open on 21 September. People are naturally asking why this took so long.

We have had confusion from the outset concerning international travel. The Government advice is, essentially, to not go on international travel. Yet, every morning, one of the first emails I get is from Ryanair, offering me many different destinations to which I could travel at the drop of a hat. I get a similar email later from Aer Lingus. There is clearly confusion somewhere if the airlines are operating on the basis that it is business as usual. This in the context where, in some cases, ordinary, hard-working people, who had holidays booked a year ago, had no recourse. They were told they could travel because the flights were operating. If they did go, however, they would have been vilified and cast as irresponsible, while if they did not go,

they would lose their hard-earned money. That is simply not fair.

An attempt has been made on the part of some Government representatives to vilify young people. Threats of members of the Garda raiding people's homes in respect of the Covid-19 restrictions really dented public confidence. The Minister's comparisons of the situation with Covid-19 to car crashes and trampolines also did enormous damage. We are telling a grandad, who has adhered to all the regulations and self-isolated in lonely circumstances for several weeks, that he cannot stand now on the side of a football pitch and watch his grandchild play a championship match, while that same child is getting on a packed bus every day to go to school.

The Minister will understand that it is issues like that which are creating mistrust and unnerving the public regarding the restrictions. The lunatic proposals last week that restaurants and pubs would be expected to keep an itemised record of what every customer ate for 28 days went even further in that regard. All the while, the meat factories continue to operate behind closed doors, with almost no transparency concerning how they operate. It is almost impossible to get answers. I am not sure if the Minister has the answers, because he certainly has not responded with them to my queries.

We need, therefore, to have a rethink and a refocus. We know we need to get this right and we need to win the battle against Covid-19. Our communities have shown that they will respond to clearly understood and sensible restrictions. They will not respond, however, to doublespeak and double standards. Now is our time and our opportunity to ensure we get this right, and I call on the Minister to ensure that we do just that.

Deputy Pa Daly: I had two meetings today. One was with vintners who had come up from Kerry, old friends from Tralee, such as Pat Creagh, whose pub has been closed for the last six months and Aidan O'Connor from the Greyhound Bar, as well as some new friends from Killarney, who had been there earlier. The other meeting I had was in the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. Speaking with vintners and the head of the Vintners Federation of Ireland in recent weeks, they accepted that there was a need for some regulation of their industry, on the basis that there was going to be a sunset clause and, when new regulations were brought in, that they would be allowed to open some time this month. Now, they have a date. They are not completely happy but they are satisfied that they will be able to reopen.

The regulations have been contradictory for months, and not only concerning pubs. I can go to an under-12s game, where there can be 50 people, but no spectators will be allowed at the Kerry county championship game this weekend between St. Brendan's and East Kerry. There have been plenty of contradictions, therefore. Pre-legislative scrutiny was waived when the regulations were brought in and regulations and legislation have been introduced at short notice. The Government has been flying kites regarding whether the Garda will be entering people's homes for communion parties, for example.

In future, as was said by Dr. David Kenny in the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response today, we should have a chance to analyse these regulations. It might be possible to use the New Zealand model to scrutinise proposed regulations. Regulations are disallowed in New Zealand and cease to have effect unless positively affirmed within ten sitting days. Some people clearly had not read the legislation and regulations which went through last week and still believed we were voting on legislation which would allow members of the Garda to enter homes. That was not the case.

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This motion could lead to no regulations at all. I cannot agree with that, but the regulations to date, according to Dr. Kenny's submission, have created confusion among "members of the public; erode[d] public trust in communication about the law; and [have been] an abuse of State power, implying a legal threat that does not exist". That type of regulation cannot continue to exist.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I note that no Minister is *in situ* at present.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State with special responsibility for public health, Deputy Feighan, is here.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I note the presence of the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and I am very sorry that the senior Minister has taken it upon himself to leave during a discussion on such an important motion. There is no doubting that the regulations are overkill but I worry that the motion before us now, if it succeeds, would result in annulling all the regulations, and that could also be overkill. While we agree with the spirit of what is being debated, if there is an attempt to annul the regulations completely, it is important that we recognise that such an absence, if there is a confirmed case of Covid-19 in a public house for instance, could result in nullifying any attempt to carry out contact tracing. There are problems with the motion, notwithstanding the rightful anger that is being expressed at the Government's handling of the imposition of these regulations.

I welcome the fact that pubs will reopen on 21 September. Those of us in this House who are reasonable and rational have been lobbying Ministers for the past number of months and reflecting the views of the VFI and other representative bodies but, most important, intergenerational families who have run good public houses for donkey's years and found themselves left out in the cold, looking askance at the contradictory statements made by the Minister and the Government on the imposition of regulations on other sectors. Those publicans were left to wonder would they ever be let back in from the cold.

I am glad that pubs will reopen on 21 September. I am hopeful that will be adhered to and that the Government will be bound by that date because it is vitally important that we get pubs reopened not only to purvey alcohol but to allow for the impact they have on their communities by delivering intergenerational solidarity, serving the fundamental human need to get out of the house and coalesce with other members of a community, to meet, talk, chat, bitch and moan, if I am not using unparliamentary language when I say that. People need to bicker and to be allowed get on with their lives in a safe way that allows for normal life to continue insofar as we can call the circumstances in which we live at present "normal".

The Minister needs to stop acting like an independent observer from Stokes Kennedy Crowley. He needs to start to feel what it is like to live in this country at present. There have been contradictions. The people are told one week that they can go to a GAA game, a sport that they have been following for years, and the next minute they are not allowed to watch the sport that is in the very blood that courses through their veins. The Minister needs to start having more empathy and not to be dispassionate. He needs to get out and start meeting real people because I fear that he is being cocooned, to use that unfortunate phrase. I feel that he has not gone out and met the people because, if he did so, he would probably sense the anger and frustration of the people living in this country who want to abide by the regulations and obey the rules but also want some degree of normality to be restored to their lives to allow them to be able to do the things they always did. They do not want to be told that they can do something one minute

only for it to be stopped in its tracks the next.

We need to have a degree of humanity, sympathy and emotional intelligence about how we conduct our affairs in this Parliament. We look to the Government to provide that. We have given to this Government all of the support that could reasonably be given by any Opposition in the times in which we live but common sense has now broken down. It needs to be restored and we are asking the Minister to please take note of the fact that we are reflecting the views of ordinary people in the arguments we are making.

It is not common sense to take an occupational therapist who is working in the HSE and put them to work contact tracing. That person is a front-line worker and we do not know how many of them have been redeployed to contact trace. How many people in this State need occupational therapy as we speak? It is not common sense to put an assistant psychologist who could be working with a family feeling the psychosocial effects of Covid-19 into contact tracing or testing. A skewed public policy is in place at present where good front-line workers are being taken from key and essential jobs and being put into areas in which they should not be deployed. There needs to be a root-and-branch review of how Covid is being dealt with and whether scarce resources are being deployed in the most effective way.

I ask the Minister and the Government to start taking on the beef barons and doing a deep dive to look at what is happening in the meat industry. I fear that the barons are in the ears of influential people and have an overbearing influence on this society that affects migrant and Irish workers who live in our communities and feel the brunt of the culture that exists within that industry. It needs to be reviewed and taken on. We want a sense of decency. If there is decency and common sense, we will support it, but we have not witnessed decency or common sense these past few weeks.

Deputy Holly Cairns: While I agree with some of the sentiments raised by the members of the Rural Independent Group, I would like to know why they did not raise this as a general motion. This motion will not solve the problem they seek to address. They are trying to alter measures that are based on a statutory instrument, not on last week's Bill. The regulations they are seeking to overturn are not connected with last week's legislation which they have referenced. That Bill still has not been passed into law and is only due before the Seanad tomorrow. The regulation that is the subject of this debate was issued by the Minister under the powers he was given by the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020, which was passed unanimously by the Dáil in the aftermath of the general election.

It is important to note that all the other previous regulations relating to Covid-19, with the exception of face masks, have now expired. SI 326 is now the only one with any kind of binding rules on gatherings, events and assemblies. Striking down this regulation would only create further uncertainty and legal ambiguity. I do not believe this is what the majority of pub owners want.

The measures on keeping records are a result of a statutory instrument. Unfortunately, statutory instruments are never debated in the Dáil. It is an area where Ministers have considerable privilege without sufficient oversight. There is a need for more transparency in the introduction of regulations. Indeed, the Minister imposed the regulation without proper engagement with the industry, which generated unnecessary confusion and resentment.

The Government's regulation is an administrative burden on small business. The Minister, along with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, said this is a simple matter of keeping receipts. However, there is good reason that publicans and others believe this is not true. The regulations require publicans to record the meal ordered "by each member of a party of persons". Many publicans believe that keeping a receipt is not enough and that they have to be able to say which person in a party ordered which meal. If that is not the case, why does the regulation say otherwise? Perhaps this confusion could have been avoided if hospitality representative groups or Fáilte Ireland had been consulted before the Minister signed the regulations into law.

One aspect of the motion I welcome is the reference to the rural hospitality sector, which has been hit extremely hard by the pandemic. Pubs, hotels and restaurants are major employers in rural Ireland. In many of the towns and villages across west Cork, these are the largest providers of jobs. The closure of just one of these businesses has a massive knock-on effect on towns, villages, and rural areas. While hotels and restaurants have had to operate at reduced capacity during the summer, pubs that do not have the capacity to offer food have had to remain closed since March. This has not only massively impacted the owners but also the hundreds of people who work in these businesses. People who have worked in this sector all their lives have had to be laid off. The workforce in this sector predominantly comprises young people and women who have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19. Every closure has a knock-on effect and that needs to be considered. We need to do what we can to keep these businesses open, retain the jobs they provide and the communities they help create.

The pandemic unemployment payment is a crucial support but provides insufficient income over the long term. It does not even cover the overhead costs of a closed business. Public health has to be a priority but there is scope within that approach to allow all pubs to reopen once they can comply to guidelines. This will have a disproportionately positive impact on rural areas.

The urban sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, in his book, *The Great Good Place*, describes how people in a healthy society need a balance of three different spaces, namely, home life, workplace and inclusively sociable places. This final category, or third space, is essential to community and public life. In Ireland, the great good place has been the local pub. It is often one of the few places in rural areas where people get to meet their neighbours, share stories and also look after each other.

My own local, Minihan's, like so many rural pubs, is that space where people get to meet after a hard day at work and where people will be missed and checked up on. It is one of the remaining social spaces in a rural area. The Boston Bar run by my former colleague on Cork County Council, Danny Collins, the brother of Deputy Michael Collins, is another example. Many of its customers have told me that it is an important social outlet for some patrons and that Danny and others look after them and their welfare. Sometimes, pubs are a lot more than a business.

The importance of these pubs, and many more across west Cork and beyond, cannot be overemphasised. As post offices, banks and more and more local shops close, the remaining local pubs play an incredibly significant social and economic role.

For years now, rural licences have been bought up in order to open more venues in urban areas. Now there is a new focus from others on a weakened pub trade. A consultant for a convenience store chain proclaimed that the rural pub was dead and described it as "a doomed trade". This insensitive and inaccurate statement represents an attempt to have licences bought

up for use by commercial chains and shops. This transfers the regulation and social aspect of consuming alcohol in a pub to a model based on drinking at home, without any form of modulation. Cheap alcohol is recognised as a cause of irresponsible drinking, binge drinking, drinking alone and, unfortunately, domestic violence and abuse.

It is important to note that the vast majority of local pubs operate responsibly and help to regulate consumption in their premises. It is worrying that there is a commercial sector that is trying to take advantage of the situation to buy up rural licences and promote worrying trends in our already complicated relationship with alcohol.

On “Prime Time” recently, geriatrician Professor Rónán Collins outlined the need for a pragmatic approach to living with Covid-19. That is the sentiment we all need to aspire to. Covid-19 will be a reality of life for some time to come. Therefore, we need to learn how to live with it. There is a balance to be struck between public health and a functioning society and economy. Can we use this discussion to review our approach to pubs, the hospitality industry and the cultural and recreational sector?

The Government needs to hit the reset button with NPHET. We need a new suite of clear, evidence-based guidelines to ensure we can live safely with Covid-19 and be able to go for a pint.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett is sharing time with Deputy Paul Murphy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the Rural Independent Group for putting forward this motion. It seeks to achieve exactly what our amendment to the Bill last week sought to do, namely, remove the emergency power being given to the Minister to make regulations which have not been properly debated or scrutinised in this House penal offences. It is a very wide-ranging and draconian power which we do not believe the Minister should have.

This is not just about regulations in pubs. It is about whether we should give powers to a Minister and, in particular, a Government which has, frankly, made a mess of communicating public health guidelines and is losing the faith of the public in terms of the rationale, consistency, purpose and effectiveness of their public health strategy. It is also about an Opposition that is, for the most part, also inconsistent and, frankly, confusing in the position it is taking.

Last Thursday, we proposed an amendment to the Government’s legislation. I scratched my head the next day when I saw Deputies from Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and the Social Democrats who voted with the Government jumping up and down decrying the very powers they had given the Minister as bonkers when they voted to give him these powers. It is quite extraordinary and it is still not clear to me which way they will vote on the motion. What is at stake are very important civil liberties issues.

People who have been listening to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response should listen to what the Free Legal Advice Centres, FLAC, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, and the Law Society have said about their concerns about the inability of the Government to communicate its public health messages and the blurring of the lines between what is a legal offence and what are public health guidelines and concerns. The ICCL opposed the criminal sanctions with regard to movement in the early phases of the pandemic and was worried about the significant criminal sanctions attached to ongoing regulations and the right to protest, the lack of clarity around policing of those protests, the obligations on organisers, the hooding of

detainees and the unnecessary and inappropriate pub regulations and their proportionality. One can go down through the list. There is a real problem.

Members of the public have shown themselves to be ahead of the Government when it comes to adhering to public health guidelines when they understand the rationale behind them. The idea that it is okay to open the pubs, but that we may not be able to have a sister over to a house and to do so might be made a criminal offence does not make sense to people.

When the State puts people into overcrowded housing conditions, direct provision centres and so on it is not committing an offence whereas having more than six people in one's house might be. It makes no sense. We do not believe that Minister should have powers to, essentially, make things penal offences on a whim. We should explain the rationale behind regulations, educate the public and bring them with us and listen to them to determine what is necessary in order to effectively combat this virus, rather than giving draconian powers to the Minister for Health.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will vote to annul the regulations. We have consistently opposed the granting of additional powers to the State and the creation of criminal offences in an attempt to deal with Covid-19. There are two reasons for that. First, we do not trust that these measures will not be used against protesters and as a general incursion on civil liberties. The regulations do not make any distinction to allow for peaceful protest. They treat protests outdoors in the same manner as a barbecue or something else. We know that these measures have already been used against protesters. They were cited, for example, against the Debenhams protesters. We know from historical international experience that what starts out as very limited incursions on civil liberties is expanded, generalised and kept in place. Examples of this include the US PATRIOT Act and the Public Order Act in Britain. Second, we do not think criminalising things works to achieve public buy-in and support. For those reasons, I will vote to annul the regulations.

The main point I want to make is to encourage people to engage in social distancing and to use masks, not because some behaviours are being criminalised, which should not be going on, but as an act of collective solidarity and of people looking out for each other. It is a thing we need to do if we are to avoid an explosion in case numbers and a second wave.

What is happening is an insidious attempt to undermine social distancing and mask wearing. The latest example of this, which is an echo of what is going on in the US encouraged by President Trump, is a video from Ben Gilroy which was posted the night before last. The video claims, incredibly, that the figures show that only 100 people, as opposed to almost 2,000 people, died from coronavirus. It is complete and utter nonsense and people should look into it to understand how it is nonsense. It states that only 100 people who had no underlying conditions died of Covid-19, but another 1,670 or 1,680 people who had underlying conditions died of Covid-19 as well.

That is not a shock, conspiracy or hidden information; it is precisely what the medical experts predicted, namely, that coronavirus would particularly affect those with underlying conditions. To be clear, one in three of the population has an underlying condition. The majority of those aged over 50 have underlying conditions. In reality, what these people - it is the far right that is at the core of this anti-mask conspiracy stuff - are saying is that people with underlying conditions do not matter. We should engage in social distancing and wear masks and we should take the proper precautions to protect older people, those with underlying conditions and work-

ers because they absolutely do matter. People rightly think the Government advice is inconsistent. The reason it is inconsistent is because it attempts to mediate between the public health, which is what should be primary, but runs it then through a filter of private profit. The reason we have a second wave now is because the Government did not do what was necessary for public health within the meat plants because of the power of the meat factory owners. We need to insist that public health should come first and dismiss those who argue that we should not wear masks and engage in social distancing. We should do this and be pushing for a strategy from the Government to eliminate community transmission entirely based on mass and rapid testing, together with social distancing and mask wearing.

Those who say masks should not be worn are taking an anti-worker position. It is putting front-line workers, including shop workers and transport workers, in danger. The act of solidarity if people can wear masks is to do so.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I congratulate the new Aire Stáit, my county colleague, Deputy Frank Feighan, on his appointment and I wish him the very best of luck in his new role.

The wording of the statutory instrument before us is, at best, ham-fisted in the approach that has been taken with it. The Government should withdraw it forthwith, redraft it and bring it back before the House because it is important that we have the support of the public and of communities across the country. There is no support for this particular draft of the statutory instrument. However, the reason we had to bring forward legislation last week and this particular statutory instrument was drafted is a small handful of people are trying not just to circumvent the liquor laws in this country as set out to combat Covid-19 but to circumvent the laws to threaten the lives of people in their own communities where these premises operate. Because of a small handful of proprietors we are left in a situation where, unfortunately, we have to bring forward draconian legislation. This statutory instrument needs to be withdrawn forthwith and redrafted.

There has been an approach by this Government in respect of pubs, which in its most benign definition could be described as being hostile. I will give four examples. First, a blind eye has been turned to the issue of house parties. On 19 March I raised that specific issue in the House. I cautioned that there was a serious risk of infection associated with house parties and that it would become a significant problem unless the Garda had the tools to ensure that they could be shut down. I raised that specifically with the then Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris. He assured the House that his officials were satisfied that the Garda had the powers within the legislation that was being provided to it to curb the issue of house parties. That is in black and white on the record. We now find that not only did the force not have the tools to curb house parties, it did not have the tools to curb breaches of the legislation in public houses or in restaurants. According to the latest figures for outbreaks of Covid-19, five are associated with pubs and five with restaurants. Some 1,904 are associated with private homes, some of which, sadly, are associated with house parties. While we are bringing in draconian legislation for public houses, why are we not addressing the issue of house parties which has been a consistent problem for a number of months?

The second reason pubs are being discriminated against is the temporary wage subsidy scheme, which ceased on 31 August. I understand the argument made by the Minister for Finance that we were moving away from that scheme to the employment wage subsidy, which will support employees to the tune of €203 a week. That was based on businesses having an income. Public houses are closed and have no income. The temporary wage subsidy scheme should

never have ceased for businesses that were not trading. Now employees of pubs throughout the country, who were in receipt of €412 a week up until now, are only going to receive €203 from now on because publicans do not have the resources to pay them. Why were they discriminated against?

My third example is the restart grant. Businesses that had reopened could apply for the grant. If they had a rates bill of less than €2,000 in 2019, they could draw down a minimum payment of €2,000, which was a welcome development. It incrementally increased whereby if a business had a rates bill of €3,000, it could get a €3,000 grant. Publicans could not apply for a grant because they were not restarting. They were waiting to open up their premises. Now they can apply for the restart plus grant but there is a cap on that. A person who had a rates bill of less than €2,000 and applied for the restart grant can now apply for an additional grant of €4,000, giving to a total grant of €6,000. A publican can only get €4,000; her or she cannot access the initial payment. The same applies to the incremental increases. Publicans are being discriminated against because they were not trading. There should have been a clause to allow them to get the second bite at it, the same as every other business.

My fourth example relates to the trading online voucher scheme. This 90% grant for businesses to start trading online or to enhance their online trading presence, is not available to the hospitality sector. As the Minister of State knows well, many businesses, particularly restaurants, in our county and many others are using online facilities where a table can be booked online through the use of an app, and the same will be happening in pubs. Pubs, however, are not eligible for the trading online voucher scheme to develop an app whereas every other business is.

These are four prime examples of schemes that have been brought in, which have not taken into account the businesses that have remained shut because of a Government decision and they are being discriminated against. I ask the Minister of State not only to withdraw
5 o'clock the statutory instrument to have it redrafted but also to examine the four other examples where public houses and businesses that are forced to be closed at the moment are being blatantly discriminated against, and overturn those four decisions.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am sharing time with Deputy Connolly.

I had mixed thoughts about the motion when I was considering it earlier, what I would say in my contribution and whether I would support it. Like most Members, I believe the fight that we face against Covid-19 is vitally important.

It is very important that everybody is singing from the same hymn sheet and that we go on with it.

The risk of withdrawing this statutory instrument in its entirety might be greater than the argument in favour of retaining it but the Government needs to hear what is being said and take on board the concerns. I doubt if it will do that because the unique approach to being in government in this House is to simply ignore everything, batter on and do whatever one wants, as we have seen across the board. The reality, however, is that there is confusion and a breakdown in communicating the message. The cohesion that existed for a number of months at the beginning of the crisis was because the Government was on message and the people could understand that message. I believe the people were way ahead of the Government and the political class and bought into it right away. They recognised the risks that were involved, buckled down and

made sure that the measures taken were a success by their own actions. What we have seen with the introduction of this legislation by way of statutory instrument is a breakdown in that cohesion. As this goes on for some time it will become more difficult to sustain that, which is fair enough.

Some aspects of this statutory instrument do not many sense. Previous speakers said that people cannot go to a football match but they can go to a pub and watch a football match on the television while having dinner. That is mind-boggling. People know that does not make sense, but that is what has been put in the statutory instrument. How could it be safer to go into a pub-restaurant, have a dinner and watch a football match on the television than go to an open air ground to watch a game?

We also have the anomaly with underage games, which hundreds of people attend, including parents who drop their children to the ground, but when I look in there is nobody there. That kind of stuff does not make sense and the reality is that people are not buying into it.

It is very telling that this debate is happening in the House because it is highlighting the wrongness and anomalies that the Government is fostering. The Government is creating and sustaining this argument but it is losing it in terms of public safety and health, and that is very worrying.

I support the argument made by Deputy Paul Murphy on mask wearing. It is vitally important because it protects our workers across the board, in particular health workers. We have to counteract the arguments of the far right, who are fostering this. Indeed, the Government's own measures are being used to allow them to protest but it is stopping the Debenhams workers protesting using the same arguments. It does not make any sense and that has to change.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I wish the Minister was in the room because I do not like giving out about somebody behind his or her back and I certainly intend to give out about him in respect of his contribution. The first thing he should have told us was that these regulations run out next Monday and what he intends to do on Monday when they run out. He then went on to tell us that it would be greatly damaging to the effort in protecting people from the virus if we abandoned these regulations. I am afraid that what is greatly damaging to our ability to deal with this virus is the complete shambles that is the Government's approach. I do not believe in fake news in respect of this virus. I believe it is extremely dangerous. However, the way that information is being given to us is disingenuous, to put it mildly. I have said repeatedly that I gave my backing to draconian legislation from the beginning because I realised the seriousness of the threat we were facing and because there were good measures in the legislation, on the basis that there would be full and frank disclosure. That has never happened.

The message also was that we were all in this together. We are certainly not all in this together. The meat factories were never in this with us. I refer to the nursing homes, direct provision centres and people aged over 70, who were singled out in a most despicable way as if it was an order, but it was not really an order. We set back equality between the age groups so far it is very difficult to even think about it.

In addition, there is no engagement at all with the Dáil. Last week, I voted against the legislation after thinking about it, reading about it and so on. There was no mention that there would be regulations the very next day obliging the gardaí to keep a record. That was not articulated to us. We found that out on the airwaves. We heard from the likes of Deputy MacSharry, who I

find myself in agreement with, although certainly not with his use of language when he decried it, but I agree with him in principle. However, the Deputy had an opportunity to discuss that the day before, as a backbencher, through the new arrangements that give them more time and that time was not used to make these views known. More important, however, the Minister did not make us aware of it. These regulations were also introduced through a media campaign where it was made known that we would let the gardaí go into our homes if there were more than a certain number of people in them. That was then disowned by the various Ministers who came in, and none of them knew where it came from. We have a totally irresponsible media if they put it about that the gardaí were going to go into people's homes. Either this Government did something drastically wrong with its message or it sent out that message to fly a kite and then changed its mind.

I have the report from the Policing Authority, which I have referred to repeatedly. It is the sixth report from the authority, which greatly praises the Garda but highlights its concerns, as mentioned earlier, in respect of spit hoods and not recording the ethnicity of the people involved when incidents occur. Importantly, however, it refers to the failure by the top echelons of the Garda to give the information on the existing powers gardaí have and the disaggregation of those powers to direct a person to comply with a regulation, arrest for failure to comply with a direction, and three more powers. The authority stated that it is of concern that it has failed to get the information it has repeatedly asked for.

We are now in a position where we have these regulations that run out on Monday and a media campaign that tells us that wet pubs and dry pubs should never have been distinguished one from the other and that all pubs should have opened with appropriate restrictions. We are being told now that if there is 2 m between people, they can stay longer. If there is only 1 m distancing in the pub, they will have to leave at a particular time. If they go outside for a smoke, they will have to sit, and so on. This is absurd. It is really showing a lack of leadership and giving a completely mixed message to the public. As my colleague, Deputy Pringle, and others said, the people are way ahead of us.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The House has heard a range of views regarding the operation of the regulations. Deputy Sherlock reflected the views of ordinary people. Many Deputies have reflected such views. Those views are not always consistent but they certainly reflect the views of ordinary people across the country. I am sure the Deputies will agree that the health and safety of our people is paramount. All the measures taken thus far, and any measures we seek to implement in the future, are designed with one thing in mind, namely, to ensure the health and safety of our people.

The hospitality sector in rural areas was raised. Deputy Cairns referred to towns and villages in rural areas. The local pub has been significant as it is where we share our stories and socialise. She outlined perfectly that we have had a complicated relationship with alcohol, which is an issue we also should highlight.

The Government takes a broad view of what health and safety means. At the start of the pandemic, people made sacrifices and stayed at home. They came together by staying apart. As we deal with this current phase, the Government seeks to balance restrictions with relaxations. The Government recognises that people's health is bound up in their ability to participate in society. Their safety can be facilitated by allowing people back to work, providing that people can gather but all the while emphasising the key public health messages. That is why the Government introduced regulations on events and gatherings and on how premises serving alcohol

within should serve a substantial meal. The requirements to keep records of meals served and the contact details of those served are designed to facilitate enforcement and contract tracing, respectively. Contract tracing is vital in curbing the spread of the virus and keeping people safe. Enforcement is important. In this regard, the Government supports the vast majority of operators who comply with the regulations in the first place.

Deputy Naughten more or less said a small handful of proprietors have not been acting in the spirit of the regulations. Yesterday, therefore, the Government made its decision on balance and it was contingent on the trajectory of the virus remaining stable.

Deputy Boyd Barrett said he had a concern about communication. I will take that on board. It is quite obvious that there are different opinions in Government parties but there are also differences of opinion within the Opposition. I am not saying that is good or bad but it should be acknowledged that the matter is complicated. Deputy Boyd Barrett said people are protesting. That is their right.

Deputy Paul Murphy opposed the imposition of additional powers but, as with Deputy Pringle, he called on people to engage in social distancing. Masks are important. This cannot be emphasised enough. It is great to see people in Dublin and around the country beginning to wear masks.

Deputy Paul Murphy also referred to the Ben Gilroy video. I have not seen it. The Deputy said it is more or less pure nonsense. We are very concerned. We all should be concerned about fake news. On this occasion, it is fake news and cannot be backed up by fact.

The Government continues to-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government issues a fair bit of fake news itself.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, one speaker.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Since the Government has been cobbled together, it has been a fake.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The Government continues to seek to preserve our well-being by adopting a flexible and informed approach to restrictions and relaxations and by maintaining key protective measures that will enable individuals and their families to participate more fully in society.

I thank Deputy Naughten, who I believe has left the Chamber, for wishing me well in my role as Minister of State. He talked about the temporary wage subsidy scheme and rates bills regarding the restart grants. He stated an issue arises regarding the online trading vouchers in that they are not available to the hospitality sector. I will raise that with the Minister. The development of an app to help the hospitality sector is a quite good idea. Maybe trading vouchers could be used online in this regard. I am not sure why it was not included but I will raise it with the Minister also.

Deputy Pringle said people cannot go to football matches and that the issue is causing concern around the country. I hope it will be addressed sooner rather than later. All the sports organisations are trying to be proactive and to work with the Government and various stakeholders to ensure people can attend sports events.

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Deputy Connolly talked about the seriousness of the situation and outlined her concerns about the meat factories and way in which people in direct provision and the over-70s were treated. I take the point on board. The Deputy also referred to wet pubs and dry pubs. I had never heard of a wet pub or a dry pub.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Get out the wellies.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: There is an effort to clarify the situation. I believe it has been clarified in the past few days.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The wet one is in the Shannon.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Many Deputies have referred to pubs and bars. Many of us have made big sacrifices over recent months, not least business owners. I have met many publicans, business owners and customers and I realise the matter raised is an issue but, again, the health and safety of the public is paramount. I hope we can arrive at some solution. Pubs and bars are an integral part of our communities. The Government recognises their place in the community but at the same time it recognises that we must continue to protect the people and maintain an informed and flexible approach. That is what we are trying to do. The Deputies' views this afternoon are important in informing the flexible approach. I thank each one of the Deputies who expressed their views. I agree with some of them and do not agree with others but that is why we are here today. It is important to debate these measures but we must recognise that this is not about increasing the regulatory burden on publicans, restaurant owners and other businesses but about trying to ensure our economy and society can open safely and securely. The virus is still among us and the trajectory is of concern. We must recognise this, use information wisely and plot a clear course that ensures we keep people safe.

We must agree that the health and safety of the people are paramount. I thank each Deputy who expressed views here this afternoon.

Deputy Michael Collins: I wish the Minister of State the best in his position. This has been my first opportunity to congratulate him and wish him well.

On Thursday last, 110 Deputies in this Dáil fell over themselves to vote in favour of the Criminal Justice (Enforcement Powers) (Covid-19) Bill 2020, giving further powers to the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and others. The Deputies, from Sinn Féin, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party, the Green Party, the Social Democrats and the so-called Independents in the Regional Group, all turned their back on the hard-working people of this country. The Garda representative groups - the Garda Representative Association and the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors - cast doubt on the Bill. Astonishingly, within hours, exactly what the Rural Independent Group feared would be an abuse of powers was blatantly jammed down our throats when the Minister for Health seized on his new powers by signing a statutory instrument forcing something to take place without any debate. The statutory instrument was to have a significant impact on how we conduct our daily lives. In this regard, consider the stance of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil Deputies, as well as the Labour Party Deputies, although I do not know what they believe this evening. The Labour Party Deputies were criticising the measure last Friday and talking about contradictions. Deputy Alan Kelly was calling the instrument bonkers last weekend but this evening it looks like there is a different story. Many Deputies returned to their constituencies on Thursday night and got it in the neck from constituents who have had enough. Constituents told them in no uncertain terms where

they stood. I have heard Deputy after Deputy speak out of both sides of their mouths today. Their parties came out last week in criticism of the measure and today they are partly criticising it and partly backing it. We will know in a minute whether they are misleading their constituents. They are trying to cod their constituents but they will not do that.

The statutory instrument that came into effect last week limits the numbers of people attending indoor and outdoor events. With certain exceptions, businesses and services on whose premises intoxicating liquor is sold or supplied for consumption must keep a record of the time and date of arrival in the premises of a group or sole customer, and the name and telephone number of the lead person in the group. These businesses and services must also keep a record of the substantial meals ordered. A respected senior counsel, Ms Constance Cassidy, said the publicans or restaurateurs must, under section 13, make a full record of a substantial meal or all substantial meals ordered by each member of a party or persons and that those records must be retained by a publican for 28 days. She said that if they do not retain them and thus commit an offence, they can be fined €2,500 or imprisoned for six months. The Social Democrats, Sinn Féin and the Regional Group should note what Ms Cassidy said. She said that it seems to her that the provision involves the use of a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Why did 110 Deputies not see what others saw? Why were they so blinded that they supported such a brutal law? Where is the general data protection regulation, GDPR, now? It is something that is being used to hide behind everything nowadays. For 28 days, our personal information is to lie in every public house and every restaurant, without a worry in the world. We in the Rural Independent Group were the only ones to listen to those who elected us and state in the Dáil that we would absolutely not support the measure. Thousands of pubs in this country have now been closed for 179 days - in other words, six months. Fianna Fáil, backed by Fine Gael, singled them out, without any sign of evidence, as if they were to blame for Covid-19. Other businesses, be they hotels, restaurants, food outlets, pubs or cafés, all opened with guidelines. Almost all have adhered to them, even if it has cost them dearly by hiring extra staff. They respect the rules and they are doing all they can to protect their customers. I have visited, supported and spoken to many owners of these businesses in Allihies, Castletownbere, Glengarriff, Schull, Goleen, Ballydehob, Durrus, Skibbereen, Clonakilty, Union Hall, Bandon, Dunmanway, Bantry and Kinsale. Every one of them has bent over backwards to abide by the rules. They feel the finger is being pointed at them by Fine Fáil and Fine Gael and they are not being supported.

For six months, so-called wet pubs were pointed out wrongly by the Government and publicans throughout west Cork and the country faced ruination due to this show of power by a Government completely out of touch with reality. These publicans were promised compensation packages and were coddled because they got nothing short of crumbs from this Government that clearly had a hidden agenda. It is the very same agenda Fine Gael had for four years in the previous Government, that is, close the rural pubs. While these publicans understood 179 days ago why they were closed, they in no way thought this Fianna Fáil-led Government would keep the door slammed throughout the country. They thought the backbenchers in the Government could at least speak out against the out-of-touch powers to stop pointing at one sector as being the cause of Covid-19. These backbenchers failed miserably and ended up aiding and abetting these closures, crying crocodile tears to the publicans, their families and their customers in their constituencies.

It was amazing to see the advice right across Europe and the world was to open pubs with guidelines. Ireland, however, had to do something different and go against all common sense. When the Rural Independent Group forced the Dáil to reconvene, the Government cracked and

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allowed the pubs to open. I am delighted to think we have this power to put the Government running but we should not have had to go to these lengths to have common sense apply.

In the new era in politics, certain politicians want Irish rural pubs shut. These people want café bars out in the streets like one sees in some European countries. They have forgotten, however, the towns and villages in Ireland with some mighty pubs that have safeguarded their customers. Some of these are in west Cork in Kealkill, Coppeen, Balinneen, Enniskeane, Leap, Rosscarbery, Bandon, Lisheen, Ballinspittle, Kilbrittain, Eyries, Courtmacsharry, Adrigole, Baltimore, Drimoleague, Innishannon, Timoleague and Barryroe. All these businesses are on the verge of collapse and did not need more rules and regulations even before they opened their doors, further piling unbelievable pressure on them.

Many publicans are dreading the next number of months as the moratorium on mortgage repayments is coming to an end. The Government is forcing these businesses into mortgage default and we know what happens then - the bullies in the vulture funds step in. It all seems like a big plan and it is one that has not gone unnoticed. Will the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, respectively, to step in and prove this is not a plan? Will they at least work with the banks to continue the moratorium for another six months for these publicans?

The Government ruined these businesses. It should at least stand up and fight for them for once and show it cares for rural businesses rather than crying crocodile tears for them. To all those Deputies who could not wait to support the criminal justice legislation last week without worrying about the consequences to the public, I say that this must end here. I have often seen Members vote one way in the Dáil and shout and roar the other way the next day. They should stand by the people who elect them. Listen to those who are stretched to the limit doing all they can to do things right in this pandemic. They should respect and encourage people if they want to bring people with them and do not want them to turn against them. They have lost the confidence of the people by dithering and dathering. I am pointing this out to the Government and to many of the Opposition parties that are doing nothing but adding to the confusion out there already.

Statutory instruments should never be used by a Government. It dictates to people and kicks the democracy of the State in the teeth. Only in the past two weeks, the Taoiseach signed another statutory instrument piling penalty points on the hardworking fishermen of west Cork and Ireland, much to the fury of the fishermen of Castletownbere, Bantry, Schull, Union Hall, Kinsale and throughout west Cork and Ireland. These fishermen have publicly stated in the *Southern Star* that it is game over now for the fishing industry thanks to the statutory instruments signed by the Fianna Fáil Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, without debate. Astonishingly, Fianna Fáil voted against this measure two years ago in the Dáil. A man in west Cork said to me that when we had no Dáil a few weeks ago, the Taoiseach signed this statutory instrument and the cats were out and the mice did play, much to the cost of the fishing industry in this country. Well done Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. They keep kicking the fisherman. They have no shame in signing this instrument without debate. They are only too delighted to dictate.

We must live with Covid-19 and we can live safely with this curse upon our people. It is time for the Government to wake up. What is wrong that parents who take their children to matches cannot stand in the massive surrounds of the ground safely instead of driving home and back again? Supporters stand on boxes and ladders outside pitches looking in at matches in grounds where they could stand 20 ft or 30 ft apart from each other. There is no common sense

any more and people are more and more frustrated.

Where is Fáilte Ireland in all of this? Why is it dictating to the country? Who made it God almighty in this country? The same applies to NPHET. Fáilte Ireland had many questions to answer in recent months and it should stop dictating to us how to run our country, pubs, towns and villages.

I plead with every Deputy from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Green Party, the Social Democrats, Sinn Féin, Solidarity-People Before Profit, the Labour Party and others to support this motion and listen to their constituents and those who are abusing the power they have. They should not scream one thing today and do another thing tomorrow.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Collins, for concluding what has been a passionate debate. I grew up hearing about the litany of the saints but we got the litany of the publicans here this afternoon.

Question put.

Deputy Michael Collins: Vótáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 10 September 2020.

Sitting suspended at 5.27 p.m. and resumed at 5.50 p.m.

Covid-19 (Health): Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I welcome this opportunity to update the House on Ireland's ongoing response to Covid-19. I start by expressing my deepest sympathies to the family and friends of all those who have lost their lives to Covid-19 in Ireland. It is a loss made harder for many by the limits Covid-19 has put on our lives, with families looking through windows of nursing homes to try to communicate with their loved ones and lifelong friends unable to walk to the graveside to bid farewell.

It has been such a difficult year for so many people in so many ways: for those who have lost their jobs or businesses they spent their entire lives building up, for those most vulnerable to the virus who had to shut themselves off from their families, friends and communities for very long periods, and for those who have lived in fear since this virus arrived on our shores.

Chapter 1 of Covid was flattening the curve. That meant accepting severe restrictions on our civil liberties and economic freedoms to stop transmission of the virus. Thanks to the sacrifices and solidarity of everyone in the country, it worked. As Minister for Health, I acknowledge the extraordinary work of the women and men across our health service and all they have done to date in response to the virus.

We do not want to go there again. Chapter 2 of Ireland dealing with Covid, which we are starting now, is about suppressing the virus to keep our society and our economy open, to protect our civil liberties and our economic freedoms, and to protect the ability of people to go about living their lives.

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We have learned much about this virus since it came here in March. We can find the virus much more quickly, thanks to our testing and tracing capability, including the Covid Tracker app. We can send in local public health teams more quickly and help people isolate more quickly and better. We know more about the kinds of interactions that are spreading the virus. These are the types of interactions that the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, targets when it recommends new measures. What happened in counties Kildare, Laois and Offaly demonstrated that local measures, applied quickly, targeting the ways in which we know the virus spreads and supported by local communities, can work, and thanks to the people in those counties can work very fast.

A new roadmap for chapter 2 will be published on Tuesday. It will apply what we have learned about the virus to help us find the virus quickly, suppress it quickly, and address our priorities of people's health, people's lives, keeping schools and colleges open, resuming our healthcare systems as much as possible, and protecting jobs.

This month marked a major achievement in Ireland as the schools returned. At the same time, we are seeing a high level of compliance with the public health measures. For example, new research shows a 90% compliance with face coverings. Younger people, whom I believe have been very unfairly criticised by some and whom I think are doing an incredible job, show the highest level of compliance at 97%. I applaud their ongoing efforts. If we are to continue with this type of success, people need to be confident in the public health measures; they need to be confident in the recommendations coming from the public health experts; they need to be confident in the measures in the roadmap; and they need to be confident in the measures in place now and which are working now.

I thank the many Deputies for their support of our public health experts and their recommendations. Some weeks ago, I spoke to officials in the World Health Organization, WHO. We were talking about Ireland's response, what we could do better, what we should do more of and what we might change. They said one area in which Ireland stood out was political solidarity. They observed that in some countries Covid was being used as a political football and political systems were tearing themselves apart. They said that Ireland was not unique, but was rare given its level of political solidarity. A message had gone out from our Parliament saying that we back a public-health-led and evidence-based approach. While there will always be differences, politicians were clearly seen to be working together. The WHO view was that this matters a great deal to public confidence.

I fully accept that leadership from Government matters. We must always strive to do what we can. We must always be open to fair criticisms. Leadership from the Oireachtas matters. While I applaud the work of many Deputies, we are not doing as well as we were. The WHO might score us a little less. Earlier in a debate on public health measures, some Deputies decried measures they know are saving lives. I heard some Deputies stand up and say they could not possibly understand why one measure is in place but another is not, while knowing very well why those measures are in place because they had been provided with the public health advice. I ask colleagues to reflect. We are not looking for free passes; there should be no free passes. The more solidarity we can show, the more confidence there will be in the public health measures, the more lives will be saved, the more jobs will be saved and the more people can live their lives, which I know is what we all want.

I wish to move on to the current Covid situation. Around the world the WHO has reported 27 million cases and almost 900,000 deaths. Yesterday Ireland passed 30,000 cases and, tragi-

cally, we have now recorded 1,778 deaths from Covid-19.

In the past two weeks, for every 100,000 people living in Ireland, we have had 35 new cases. In early July, it was just three cases per 100,000 population, representing more than a tenfold increase. While we are not at the levels that we saw back in April and May of this year, we are on an upward trajectory and it is a cause for concern. It is important to point out that the national measures introduced recently are working. The first slowed the upward trajectory and then began to stabilise it.

I acknowledge that they are having a big stabilising effect and that the efforts and sacrifices being made across the country are having their intended effect. This rise is being seen across the EU. Most other member states have experienced an increase in the number of cases in recent weeks. Across the EU, the incidence rate is 55 cases per 100,000 people and 16 member states have a higher incidence rate now than they did two weeks ago, so the rate is rising. In the past fortnight, we in Ireland have been notified of 1,900 new cases and, tragically, one death, which was reported yesterday. The number of cases newly notified to us has been increasing over the past several weeks. The five-day average, which we look at very closely, is now 175 cases per day.

In the past two weeks, more than 50% of new cases identified have been close contacts of a confirmed case. Just under 40% of cases in the last two weeks have been linked with clusters. There were 145 additional new clusters notified in the past week to Saturday, 5 September. There has been an increase in the number of clusters identified around the country with smaller numbers of cases associated, such as those in private households. Some 70% of cases identified in the past two weeks have been in the cohort under 45 years of age. At the moment, there are 50 people with confirmed cases of Covid-19 in hospital, six of whom are in critical care. Our thoughts are very much with them and their families. The current levels are now much lower than the levels we saw earlier this year, for which we should be thankful. It is our hope to keep those numbers low and this is what the measures which have been introduced seek to do.

The National Public Health Emergency Team will meet on Thursday when it will review the current restrictions based on the most up-to-date epidemiological position and will advise Government accordingly.

In the past week, nearly 72,000 tests have been completed. Serial testing continues in nursing homes, direct provision centres and meat processing plants. Significant additional staff have been added in the past four weeks and the HSE is currently transitioning from seconded staff to a full-time staffing model.

The vast majority of Irish people are united in our fight against this virus. I know the House will join me in thanking every person and every sector for their hard work. There is no question but that it can be tiring to continue to live with the impacts of Covid-19. We have been dealing with it for quite some time and will be dealing with it for quite some time to come. Unfortunately, the virus does not get tired. We need to hold firm. The core advice from our public health doctors remains the same: wash your hands, follow coughing and sneezing etiquette, obey social distancing guidelines and reduce discretionary social interactions. Any and all public health measures introduced are intended to save lives and to prevent more people from getting seriously ill. By continuing to suppress community transmission, we will be able to continue reopening vital parts of our economy and society. The Government's new roadmap will inform our decisions and will be a key source of information for every person in Ireland as

we continue to navigate life during this pandemic.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the Minister back. He has been here a few times over recent days. I welcome the opportunity to have this debate. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed a decades-long failure to build a public health system with enough doctors, nurses and beds. It has resulted in an unprecedented interruption to normal healthcare services, affecting community and acute settings. Our health service is now under pressure on several fronts. It is dealing with overworked staff, Covid care, non-Covid care, catching up on delayed care, a vast reduction in capacity and the looming winter flu. Dealing with these crises will require substantial public investment in protecting capacity. We are facing a perfect storm such as we have never faced before and it is very worrying.

At the start of August, I launched Sinn Féin's plan for protecting capacity in the health service. This is a €1.9 billion package which would ensure the redeployment of the maximum number of beds through repurposing existing space and modular units as well as providing for a much-needed expansion in the numbers of doctors, nurses and allied health professionals. Many front-line workers are in a pool under Be On Call For Ireland and have still not been offered any work or a contract. All of this is desperately needed because our healthcare workers are at breaking point. They are burned out. Many are still dealing with the after-effects of having had Covid-19. They have not had a break, coming straight off the disaster of last winter and into a pandemic. They are now facing what may possibly be the worst winter for acute hospitals in the history of the State. A job guarantee is needed for all of those who joined the health service to tackle the pandemic. An expansion in staffing levels is also needed.

So far, there has been no plan from Government for protecting capacity and staff, although the Minister has said he will publish a winter plan. The health system must work for patients and families. We cannot continue to put them and healthcare workers in harm's way through inadequate facilities and understaffing. The health service does not just need a plan for winter, but a plan for change. The *status quo* cannot be maintained and there cannot be more of the same. A new vision and a fresh start for healthcare are needed.

This Government has already broken many promises in respect of what was passed in last year's budget. We in this House collectively passed a Bill a number of weeks ago to expand medical card access for those over 70 and for children under 8 but there has still been no announcement from Government as to when any of that will happen.

I will raise an issue with the Minister and give him a minute of my time to respond. It is an issue which has been brought to my attention regarding those women who are pregnant and who have to go to hospitals for appointments. It is a very serious issue. Women understand that they have to play their part and that, when they go to hospital, they and everybody else have to be protected. In the early days of the pandemic, it made some sense to limit the number of people going into hospitals. A woman who is pregnant can now go to a bar, restaurant or other public place with her partner but is not able to bring that partner in for a very important hospital appointment relating to her pregnancy. That should be looked at.

I am writing to the heads of all of the maternity hospitals to ask that this be reviewed but the Minister has an opportunity to lead on this issue. I ask him to look at this issue, within the public health guidelines and to see what can be done to ensure that a pregnant woman may bring her partner to appointments. We have heard some distressing stories about women who have had complications in their pregnancies who could not have their partners with them when they

got bad news. That is something which could be looked at. That is the type of easing of restrictions that builds public confidence because people can see it makes sense.

I also had the pleasure of meeting residents and workers at the St. Mary's and Caritas centres in Merrion earlier today. I am sure the Minister is aware of this issue. Some of the people I met, including trade union representatives, said that he has not responded to their emails or calls. He should engage with them. While this organisation is run by the Sisters of Charity, it is important that the workers are protected. They need their jobs maintained. There are issues with regard to redundancies. A number of centres are now under threat and as a result we could lose geriatric care beds, care beds and nursing home beds. There is a need for the HSE to step in.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I beg the Deputy's pardon. I thought he was sharing time with five minutes each.

Deputy David Cullinane: I am sorry; I have seven minutes.

I again raise with the Minister the testing and tracing regime. I genuinely believe that we have to do better. I looked at the figures for Scotland and it is doing far more than us. I have consistently called for a Rolls-Royce testing and tracing regime which we would use to hunt down the virus. It would not be reactive, but proactive. We would test as many people as we could in a very targeted way. That is the most effective way to avoid more lockdowns and to put us in a strong position to ease restrictions, where possible, to enable more social interaction, which is important. I said I would give the Minister a minute to respond on the issue of maternity services, those women who are pregnant and their partners. My colleague will then have three minutes. I would be very grateful if he would address that issue.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I do not believe I can reply as we are on statements but I am happy to talk to the Deputy about the issue afterwards. It has already been raised with me and I am very happy to engage with him on it.

Deputy David Cullinane: I will give my remaining time to my colleague.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We are facing into a very difficult winter. In fairness, we are used to difficult winters in this State and to what comes with them - delays, trolleys and overstretched services - but this year is expected to be much worse due to Covid-19. Successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have developed and maintained a two-tier health system which has led to a poorly functioning public health service and a highly profitable, expensive private system. The health service in this State is dysfunctional at the best of times. Healthcare and hospital staff work hard and provide excellent healthcare but the State infrastructure is wholly inadequate to provide the health service we need in this State. In Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, there were 13,750 people on outpatient waiting lists at the end of June. Almost 3,000 of those have been waiting for longer than a year. More than 1,800 of them are waiting on paediatric or paediatric ear, nose and throat, ENT, appointments. These numbers are shocking. We need a plan to ensure people are not left languishing on waiting lists for years, sick, worried and suffering. This has long been the case but given the backlogs caused by Covid, the Government needs to take this seriously and address the shortcomings in our health service.

Covid should have taught the Government the importance of investing in public healthcare. If we had been functioning in a normal way before Covid, the damage would have been much less. Services would have been more robust and better able to cope with the enormous chal-

lenges brought by Covid-19.

The ambulance service is another casualty of short staffing and under-resourcing. On Sunday night, a nursing home in Drogheda called for an ambulance for a seriously ill 95 year-old woman. It took the ambulance three and a half hours to arrive. That is an extraordinary length of time for a seriously ill elderly woman to wait for urgent healthcare. I have since learned that there are currently two paramedics in Drogheda ambulance station on managerial leave. This means they spend their 12-hour shifts sitting in an office in the station and not working. They have been in this position since last July and they want to work. This week, I am told 14 shifts will need to be covered due to staff being on Covid-19 leave, managerial leave or leave for another reason. This echoes the national picture of understaffing in our ambulance service, and that is before we head into the depths of winter. If we do not have a robust contingency plan, we are facing into disaster this winter, with staff having to take time off for Covid-related reasons. Having other fully qualified staff on managerial leave for extended periods, where they are at work but not allowed to do any work, is compounding the problem. It is only a matter of time before patient care is compromised by delays due to understaffing.

These are the same problems we have had for decades in our health system. It does not seem to matter how well we do economically, healthcare in this State is always in crisis. As such, it is high time that the Minister and Government put aside their ideological obsession with helping and funding private healthcare and focus instead on public healthcare services. They are the services that have been fighting Covid and do most of the heavy lifting on the front line-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Imelda Munster: -----where healthcare provision in this country is concerned. They need the State to support them and they need intervention from the Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Kelly is next but I remind the House that the Minister will have ten minutes at the end to respond to many of the issues raised.

Deputy Alan Kelly: My time is very short so I want to get straight to it. I would like the Minister, in his response, to propose some solutions, particularly regarding Covid versus non-Covid care. I am sick and tired of commentary, which I do not want any more. I want to know what the Minister's plan is, what his solutions are and where we are going. I would like him to tell us as much as he can. While I know the demarcations are tight, I do not want any more commentary.

Communications by the Minister and his team also need to improve because the Irish people need this. We do not need any more kite-flying about issues relating to entering people's homes, on-the-spot fines or all of the other mess we had last week about pubs and restaurants. From a communications standpoint, just throwing things out there is not good. It is bad and desperate and it has to stop. The Minister's predecessor, the current Minister with responsibility for higher education, Deputy Harris, is going around like an emeritus Minister for Health. He is not giving the Minister much space. I am sad to say this but in a way I am glad the previous Minister is doing that because at least there is some projection of confidence and consistency.

Earlier, the Minister said we all have to work together and I am 100% with him on that. As such, my criticisms are honest and come from the people who are talking to me. We also need to propose solutions to the Minister, however. The Labour Party produced the Sick Leave and Parental Leave (Covid-19) Bill 2020. These proposals would be the right thing to do at any

time but they are absolutely necessary in a pandemic. We have outbreaks of Covid in meat plants in my home county, as the Minister knows. There will probably be more outbreaks in similar settings and other settings elsewhere in the country. Workers cannot be left in the position that if they do not go to work, they will not get paid and then decide, because they are human beings, to take paracetamol and go into work. The Minister has the capacity to deal with this issue, on which I have proposed a Bill that I have given to the Government. We also need to ensure that people who go home to look after their children do not lose their wages as well. All of those working in childcare also need to be looked after.

When the Minister was in opposition he often spoke about the health Vote. It is not organised along programme lines, meaning that for service areas, we cannot see where funding goes. The Minister had an issue with this, as did I. One cannot see where money is being spent. The Minister should sort this out because I want to see where the money is being spent. The Minister was absolutely aghast at this when he was in opposition so I ask him to please sort it out.

I have a quick-fire series of questions. The Minister may respond to them at the end as I have very little time left. We need the winter plan to be published and it must be comprehensive. I would like the Minister to focus on separating Covid from non-Covid treatment and, in particular, how we will move diagnostics into the community. I want to see how additional intensive care beds will be created and how the Minister will ensure we get the staffing we need considering the issues we will have with bringing in foreign staff. I want to see how we will ensure more supports are available for GPs and how we will start self-referrals for testing, which is absolutely necessary now. I want to see how we will ensure regular screening of healthcare workers takes place at all times given the figures showing the number of health staff becoming infected. I want to see how we will ensure we have more consultants. If there is one issue on which the Minister is out on a limb, it is the delivery of more consultants into the system. How will he do that?

I do not have enough time to go into the confusion about testing in airports. We need to deliver some solutions in this area. On the issue of testing in general, how will we bring in the population testing in use in the rest of the world? How will that fit in to what we are doing?

I ask the Minister to speak a little about where we are going on the capital side. There have been some very good initiatives, hospital prevention measures, etc. One announced in Thurles in my constituency involves scanning the elderly to prevent them ending up in acute care. What is the plan for capital and has there been any impact arising from the utter shambles of the National Children's Hospital?

Those are the types of issues on which I would like some clarity, although I have a whole range of others I would like to raise. Maybe the Minister will be able to respond later.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is unfortunate that the time allowed for these statements is so short. It is very unsatisfactory, as is much of the engagement. The Minister spoke of political solidarity but there has been very little opportunity for that in recent times. I will return to that in a moment. I ask the Minister if, when summing up, he will clarify exactly what the strategy is for responding to the Covid threat because I do not understand what it is. We were told at the beginning that the strategy was about hunting down the virus. We know the international advice was to test, test and test. Our official strategy at that stage was test, trace and isolate. We heard that mantra repeated over again. We never got to implement that strategy fully. It seems the system was always playing catch-up with the virus. When, finally, the virus really reached

its peak and figures started to drop substantially we did not use that opportunity to put in place a proper testing and tracing system. It is important to remind ourselves that the peak of the virus was back in April. There were steady reductions over the early summer and all of the indications were that the virus would be with us for some time and there was very high likelihood of a second wave. For this reason it was important that we got our testing and tracing system up and running fully. We have never done that. In spite of all of the promises of getting to a point where there would be a capacity of 100,000 per week we have never reached it. The highest was approximately 70% last week and that was an outlier.

What exactly is the strategy? We look at what other countries are doing and, for example, the New Zealand approach, where the strategy was elimination, has been rejected here. We look at what is happening in Sweden, which is to keep the country, society and the economy running and introducing measures to limit the spread of the virus other than closing down the entire economy. That is proving to be pretty successful when one takes everything into consideration.

We started off with the supposed strategy of test, trace and isolation. We never implemented it fully. Nor did we ever at any point review and reconsider what the strategy was. This is not about blaming anybody and there had to be an emergency response to the crisis situation back in early March and April. We saw this huge wave coming towards us and a need to respond very quickly. People did not understand the virus and there had to be an emergency response. It was not until everything was closed down that we succeeded in flattening the curve. That is not a medium-term strategy. It worked because everything was shut down. An enormous price was paid by everybody but it is continuing to be paid. I am concerned there has not been a review, or that the Government has not been upfront and clear about what exactly the aim now is. It seems that any time there is an upsurge the official response is a shutdown or lockdown. That is not a sustainable strategy. It cannot continue like this with two steps forward and one step back. What is the thinking at present on this?

Several months ago, I remember raising with the then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, the need to establish a wide-ranging expert task force to look at the broader societal and economic issues beyond public health. The public health advice clearly has to be dominant in any strategy but it should not be the only element. Unfortunately, the proposal was rejected by the Government at that stage. I struggle to understand what the Government's strategy or plan is. I hope that next week we will have something a bit more sustainable and logical and based on balancing risk because there is huge risk in many ways. Irish society and Irish people, and young people in particular, have paid a huge price.

I ask the Minister to produce a realistic strategy based on evidence and to explain it to us next week. He will have my support and the support of the Social Democrats if it is based on evidence and experience but to date we have been losing patience I have to say. Unfortunately, the Government has been very weak on engagement with the Opposition.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I want to put on the record of the Dáil my appreciation for the work undertaken by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, and the acting Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Ronan Glynn, in respect of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are indebted to them for their calm and wise advice and their expertise at this very difficult time for everyone.

With regard to the pubs, in the past I strongly supported the enactment of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015. I am very much aware of the harmful effects of alcohol on our health

system and on society in general. That said, it is clear that publicans have had a very difficult time since March and I fully appreciate the struggle they are engaged in to keep their businesses viable. We saw during the course of debates earlier today that publicans are well represented in the House by the Rural Independent Group Deputies and others and they do not need me to champion their case. However, it is obvious to me that it is far better at this time for people to be drinking in wet pubs where strict guidelines are in place than drinking in alternative locations such as house parties. I welcome the fact the wet pubs will be treated like any other business and that they are scheduled to open on 21 September.

The pub is the principal social outlet in many rural areas and social isolation is a key issue. However, I need to qualify this. I am very concerned about the number of Covid-19 cases in the Dublin area. We are told things are on a knife edge. If it emerges that the opening of the wet pubs is responsible for a rise in outbreaks of Covid-19 cases, we should not think twice about closing them again on a county-by-county basis in the interests of public health. The decision to open on 21 September must be kept under constant review.

Covid-19 has had a serious impact on the mental health and well-being of almost every sector in society, including children, teenagers, young adults, those with disabilities and their parents, workers, those who have lost their jobs and older people. People are facing huge uncertainties about their future at this time. In my role as a public representative I have never before seen such high levels of anxiety and stress in our communities. We really need to make mental health a priority. In this regard, Mental Health Reform, which represents 70 organisations, has launched its prebudget submission. Because of Covid-19, this is the year to make a real commitment to developing our mental health services. The sector was in crisis before the onset of Covid-19 but adequate investment in mental health services must be an absolute priority from here on in.

I welcome the news that the Government's medium-term plan for living with Covid-19 will be published next week. I ask the Minister to give serious consideration to allowing a greater number of spectators at outdoor events. I certainly think it is possible, given where we are now in this regard.

I also welcome the fact that clarification has been provided by the Minister that drug and alcohol support group meetings can continue to operate, subject to adherence to public health guidance relating to physical distancing and other protective measures. AA meetings are a very important part of our health service and I am delighted they can proceed.

We have heard a lot about opening our economy and society but now we need to rebuild our economy and society and a lot of work has to be done in this regard.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister, all our front-line services and particularly NPHE. The situation is very challenging at the moment with the increasing case figures.

I congratulate all our leaving certificate students who received their results this week and in many cases will go to college. My concern, however, is our student nurses and the supports in place for them and our midwives unable to work part-time while on placement. Student nurses on placement have been told they cannot work in other healthcare settings due to Covid-19. What supports are being put in place for these students who will be on the front line this winter and who will be working harder than ever? We will need our nurses more than ever, so what

will we do to support them financially? What supports will be put in place for our students? The Union of Students in Ireland has contacted me as well as other Deputies, I am sure, as has the INMO, about what supports we can put in place. I would like the Minister to come back to me with an answer on that.

NPHET was before the Covid committee a few weeks ago and those of us on the committee spoke to its representatives. We asked various questions. I asked about children going back to school and what we had in place for them, particularly as far as testing is concerned. I asked about saliva testing, which has been talked about for a long time. It is less invasive, particularly for children and staff. NPHET told me at that committee meeting that it was looking at saliva testing and thought it would be put in place. Will this type of testing be put in place? If so, when and is there a timescale for it? That is really important.

I know it was brought up earlier but I wish to bring up maternity hospitals and birth partners not being allowed into hospitals. I think the biggest issue with this is the confusion. The reason there is confusion is that in certain hospitals one can go into the maternity hospital with one's partner but in other hospitals one cannot. This is where I think all of us have concerns. I realise how hard the Minister is working, but there is a lack of communication and information. A lady, a family member, rang my clinic yesterday and asked why some hospitals are allowing partners in and others are not. Unless we get everything in place across the board and everybody is given proper information, this cannot be sorted.

We have spoken about wet pubs. I have made myself very clear that I understand we have to agree with and totally go with NPHET guidelines. I also believe, however, that the wet pubs should have been allowed to open earlier. I was very strong on that last week and I still am. I have met the vintners. They are very willing to work with every guideline that is given to them. They are willing to work under proper control. They will do whatever they have to do to reopen. This is so important because, as I have said before, we are dealing with families who have had wet pubs for years and who now do not even know whether they can reopen because they do not know whether it will be viable for them to do so. That is a huge concern so I have been very strong on it.

My biggest issue as a Carlow-Kilkenny Deputy is that Carlow town borders Graiguecullen, and when what we would call restrictions or lockdowns - there was a bit of confusion about it - were put in place in Laois, Kildare and Offaly, there was such confusion over that because by 12 o'clock that night there were restrictions such that shops, hotels and restaurants had to close. I got so many phone calls about this because my town borders Laois. There was such confusion. The concern now is the case numbers in Dublin and Limerick. I understand that the Minister has to put in place restrictions, but the restrictions that night were announced for 12 o'clock and there was such confusion. I know the Minister has done his best and I am not here to criticise. I listened to his speech today and heard what he said. We all have to work together. The only way we can do this is by working together. I hope everybody is here to work together because that is the only way we can solve this. If there are restrictions, however, I ask the Minister and NPHET to look at them carefully and realise the need to sort something out for people. People need to be given that little bit more information rather than a 12 o'clock lockdown.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to indicate to Members that I will go back to Sinn Féin now for three and a half minutes. Then it is back to the Government, followed by Sinn Féin and then People Before Profit-Solidarity. That is the list I have here.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The new pecking order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Carthy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The backbencher party, a new party.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister for being here. He is obviously incredibly busy and he has made himself available for quite a number of sessions over recent days, so I thank him for that. I come from a county that has had a strangely high rate and prevalence of Covid-19 cases recently. At the moment I think it stands at 40.7 per 100,000, which is incredibly high, considering that Monaghan is such a rural county and, globally, rural areas seem to be a little insulated from some of the worst effects, by and large. Of course, we have a fair sense as to why this is the case in Monaghan as opposed to our neighbouring counties. Predominantly, it is because there is a meat factory in Monaghan and there was an outbreak in it, but we still cannot get answers. On the day it was announced that cases had emerged in the ABP plant in Clones, I emailed the Minister, NPHE, the HSA and the HSE for information on the position on the number of cases because rumours were circulating all over the place. I asked what the official response would be in order to deal with the outbreak. I got a response, in fairness, from the HSA to tell me I should ask the HSE. That is essentially the only substantive response I have received. We have to get on top and take control of the situation regarding meat factories and food processing plants because it is not good enough.

There may, however, be another reason we have a high prevalence. I received an email last Tuesday, at 10.21 a.m., from a constituent who told me about a situation in her workplace. She tells me of two people who worked in her company, one from Monaghan and one from Crossmaglen. Here are the exact words from the email:

Monaghan person feels unwell on a Saturday and rings doc on call. Told they need testing and will be contacted. Contacted Sunday and test Monday. Still waiting for results on the Tuesday. 2 days already missed off work. Could be more depends on when they get results back.

Crossmaglen person feels unwell Sunday. Goes on line at 11 and gets test for 1.30 on same day. Results back on Monday at 7am. They are negative [thank God] so no work missed.

People are asking questions and it is not just a North-South issue. In different parts of this State on different days people have related to me very positive experiences with the testing regime, but there are too many of these anomalies.

This is my first opportunity to address the Minister on health statements, so I have to refer him to the situation of the hospital in Monaghan. Thankfully, the HSE announced back in July that 23 additional community care beds will be restored at Monaghan Hospital. We need services restored to Monaghan Hospital because the implications of the decisions that were made when the Minister's party was last in government are profound. According to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, at the moment there are 755 people waiting for inpatient care at Cavan General Hospital. In January the corresponding figure was 340. The reason for this is that services have been removed from our smaller hospitals. I ask the Minister not to do what his predecessors have done and just fob this off to the HSE. The decision to remove services from Monaghan Hospital was a political one; we now need political intervention to restore services to our smaller hospitals.

9 September 2020

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I congratulate the new Minister for Health on his role and commend him on the remarkable achievements he has had so far along with the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Foley, over recent days. In one week or two we have had the reopening of the schools, our teachers back in place, our Montessoris back in place and our crèches back in recent months. That has all gone incredibly well in my view and from the feedback I have received from teachers and parents. Of course, parents are utterly delighted to see their little darlings all back in school and that has been one big positive in recent weeks.

I wish to raise a couple of issues with the Minister. The student nurses entering their final-year placements are a concern. I have had quite a number of queries in this regard. It is very obvious that they could not work part-time for fear of transmitting Covid during the peak of the virus. We ask, however, that financial supports be put in place or that the Minister consider something to support our student nurses. They are coming to their final year of placement. They are our next generation of nurses. We are incredibly indebted to our nurses and healthcare staff throughout this global pandemic and it is important that we recognise that and give them encouragement for the future in terms of their own careers.

I agree with many of my colleagues that, for expectant mums, not being able to have their partner with them during the crucial time of giving birth has been difficult. We have received a number of calls on that. I understand that the less footfall there is in hospitals, the more the risk of Covid-19 spreading is suppressed but I ask the Minister to consider that as part of his roadmap for lifting restrictions.

There were outbreaks in Cavan General Hospital, meat plants and so on in my own constituency. The front-line staff in Cavan General Hospital have been exemplary in how they have dealt with Covid-19. The Minister during his time in opposition came to visit Cavan General Hospital and Monaghan Hospital, for which I am grateful. He met the staff and he knows the depth of compassion that they have. They are inspirational people. When Covid-19 hit, Cavan General Hospital had to be ingenious in how it dealt with space and social distancing, to the point that they had to hire Portakabins to deal with restrictions. Will the Minister, in his deliberations over future funding, please have a look at that? He has visited those hospitals. Capital investment is crucially needed.

I have received many calls from staff on the front line. Many are deeply affected by their dealings with Covid-19 and Covid-19 patients. Some of my colleagues have raised mental health and supports for front-line staff following this trauma. I ask that the Minister take this into consideration in any roadmap he lays out in the future.

I will comment on the reopening of wet pubs. Cavan and Monaghan are Border counties and we recently met many publicans who are mainly running rural pubs and have a problem that does not exist elsewhere in the country, namely, the Border. These family-run businesses are mainly run on pride rather than financial gain. They are important fixtures in our community where people meet up and congregate with social distancing. I am convinced that these people know what they are doing. They are professionals. With the reopening of those pubs, they will adhere to guidelines. In the Border counties, they have seen a mass exodus of people going north. We have heard that from the publicans. They are concerned about whether they will ever see their businesses returning to what was normal.

We know there were lengthy delays for serious hospital appointments before Covid-19. We know that is compounded by Covid-19. Will the Minister consider speeding up of important

operations?

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I will raise the issue of ongoing capacity and staffing issues at University Hospital Limerick, UHL. I am sure the Minister will be aware of it. The problems in this hospital are unresolved and figures show, unfortunately, we are a long way from having a resolution. In seven of the past eight days for which trolley figures are available, UHL has had the highest figure in the State. This is not shocking or unexpected to us anymore, unfortunately. It has become the norm but it cannot stay as the norm. Today, there are 46 people on trolleys; yesterday, there were 59 people on trolleys. We are almost back to pre-Covid figures. When Covid came to the country, trolley figures reduced significantly because people were refusing to attend their local hospital for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, we are back to where we were. If the Minister for Health is leaving, is another Minister staying?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I am.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the commencement of the construction of a 60-bed modular unit in UHL and acknowledge the HSE's efforts to commence the process of seeking planning permission for a 96-bed block but why it is taking so long? We have had an ongoing crisis for a number of years, since the amalgamation of the three local hospitals in Ennis, Nenagh and St. John's into UHL. We have had nothing but massive increase in trolleys, with thousands of people year-on-year waiting on trolleys. It needs to be prioritised and we need a commitment from the Government that the 96-bed unit will be completed on time, if not sooner. Limerick and the mid-west cannot afford to wait. There have been too many false dawns and promises and not enough action when it comes to UHL. I plead with the Minister, as I did in the previous Dáil on almost a weekly basis, that something be done at the hospital. The wait times and trolley numbers are increasing. We are all but at pre-Covid levels of people waiting on trolleys. The new unit must open on time and be fully staffed. The HSE has to sit down and speak to the nurses' unions, particularly, and the staffing level needs to be addressed. The reality is simple: it is not fair on patients or on the wonderful staff who do a fantastic job in the hospital. People in Limerick and the mid-west will say they have a good experience once they get into the hospital. The problem is waiting and waiting on trolleys. Our patients deserve dignity but dignity is not afforded to anybody waiting on a trolley in a busy corridor. The hospital staff deserve optimum conditions in which to complete their vital work. Great work is being done by medical staff during the pandemic. Their effort are, despite significant risk of infection, saving many lives. I am concerned that such great efforts will be undone if we do not get a handle on the overcrowding and staffing issues at the hospital.

Unfortunately, my home county of Limerick has experienced a dramatic and concerning increase in Covid cases. The increase, coupled with the issues at the hospital, and the upcoming flu season will create the perfect storm that could ultimately overwhelm our overstretched hospital staff. I ask the Minister to intervene. He will say there is not, but there is an embargo on staffing at the hospital. I spoke to a hospital porter yesterday and he is absolutely exhausted. He is working every hour because additional staff cannot be hired. There needs to be an immediate intervention. I know that the Minister has left but I repeat my invitation to him to come to Limerick and ask him to do that as soon as he can.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We just witnessed another reason the manipulation of the speaking order is very regressive step. The senior Minister has left before the opening spokespeople of four different groups in the Parliament will have a chance to put points to him, whereas he has heard three or four from his own party before that. It is a disgrace. In the two

minutes I have left I will say this: the Minister questioned some of the Opposition over pointing to the inconsistencies in the guidelines and the messages and he says that we have the information, we know and we should not be pointing things out. That is not true. We do not know what NPHEt thinks. More important, we do not know what the experts and scientists on the expert advisory group, which advises NPHEt, think. I have been saying this since March. Fianna Fáil were backing us in this point beforehand when I asked for the expert advisory group, that is, the actual scientists, to publish their minutes. They eventually published a few of them. Does the House know how far behind they are on those minutes so that we know what they are thinking about all these measures? The latest minutes were published at the end of June. That is how much of a gap there is between the considerations of the scientists and experts and our knowledge. The latest NPHEt minutes were published on 12 August.

We, therefore, have no clue what the experts think and whether it bears any relationship whatsoever to the ham-fisted, contradictory, inconsistent guidelines, communications and statements from the Minister. The result is we are losing faith and the people are losing faith in the Covid-19 strategy of the Government as infections rise. Let us consider even the publication of information today about private houses. This information states that we can open the pubs and do not need to worry because it is all in private houses. I thought: how did it get into the private houses? Did it come through the walls? Did it magically appear? No. As Professor Sam McConkey helpfully pointed out on the news, it probably came from work or whatever. Are we gathering that information? No. The HSE's data hub has next to no information. We have no clue where the community transmissions are coming from because we do not gather the information. That suggests that the contact tracing system is a mess because we are not gathering the data that would allow us to track and trace the virus.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is no offence to the Minister of State but it is scandalous that we are here to discuss health and the Minister for Health was present for the statements of a number of the other Opposition groups and backbenchers but then will not be there for a whole load of groups. I have a question that I will pose to the Minister of State and she might not know the answer because she is not the Minister for Health but the Government has chosen to put her in this position so I will ask her the question and leave her time to answer it.

Will the Tallaght Hospital paediatric emergency department be fully reopened as has been promised? Last week, staff at Tallaght Hospital were shocked to find out that the children's emergency department was being downgraded to an urgent care centre and all acute paediatric services were stopped. The nurses union has gone on record to say that this decision is simply unsafe. Back in March, when the services were temporarily closed, we were promised that they would reopen. It was even announced last week that they would reopen but then at the last minute, members of staff were told it would not be reopening at all and instead the service would be downgraded. This decision will pile extra pressure on Crumlin hospital and Temple Street Hospital, which are already struggling to cope. It is bad news for families in Tallaght and for children across Dublin. Will the Minister of State and the Department intervene to reverse this decision to ensure the hospital's children's services are fully restored as was promised?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputies Cahill and Higgins, who are sharing time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I left time for an answer.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: These are statements.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It was allowed earlier.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I did not allow it earlier on.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Maybe the Leas-Cheann Comhairle did not but it was allowed earlier.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am afraid it is not allowed in this session.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It was allowed when a Sinn Féin speaker was speaking.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It was not allowed in this session.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It was.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Not since I chaired the session. I chaired the session from the beginning and it was not part of the rules for this session. The Minister was here, he made a statement and we clarified that he would come in at the end for ten minutes, including statements. It was not an interactive session. The Deputy will have to take this back to the Business Committee if he wants an interactive session but I took this over from the beginning and it has not been an interactive session.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Sessions such as this have been carried out interactively. It is said that if time is left over then answers can be given.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That was not the case with this session. If the Deputy wants to take up the minute that he left over I will allow him to do so because he stopped short.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I hope I will get an answer from the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, at the end and he has time to get the answer because it is a huge issue and it has received relatively little coverage. The issue is that there is a plan to downgrade the children's department in Tallaght University Hospital to an urgent care centre as part of the national children's hospital but that is not open. It seems that the coronavirus has been used to speed up that process and that the children's department was closed because of the coronavirus but then it has not been fully reopened and it is a huge problem.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move on to Deputies Cahill and Higgins.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I want to start by immediately raising the case of Alan Clifford, which has been brought to my attention by his mother Kathleen. Alan attends an adult day service in Nenagh, run by the Daughters of Charity. Since 3 March of this year, Alan has had no access to services whatsoever as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. His mother Kathleen is Alan's sole carer and she was left in a situation of having to seek out different sorts of help from friends and leave from work to take care of her son, while also trying to juggle her job commitments. At this stage, all of Kathleen's leave has diminished and there is still no sign of a service resuming for Alan. I have corresponded with the Minister and had phone calls and different correspondence with Kathleen. It is noteworthy that there are a lot of families in Kathleen's situation and it is upsetting to see that the budget that was to be used for day services and residential services is now exclusively being used for residential services. This is not right. Day service users are in desperate need of this facility reopening and in order to ease the pressure on families such as the Cliffords, this has to happen. It is of vital importance in my constituency that the adult day service on Stafford Street in Nenagh opens as soon as possible

and that families, carers and service users need clear communication on this matter and a clear roadmap for reopening.

It is vital that Shannondoc services are resumed in the areas of Templemore, Thurles and Roscrea as soon as possible. This is an issue about which I am being contacted daily in my constituency. As it stands, my constituents have to travel from different parts of north Tipperary to Nenagh. I also spoke to an ambulance driver who is based in Thurles who stated their calls have increased dramatically as a result of the lack of Shannondoc services in Thurles or Roscrea. We need this full service to be restored as a matter of urgency.

I mention Nenagh General Hospital and the 24-7 accident and emergency services there. As it stands, University Hospital Limerick is serving north Tipperary also, outside of the hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. As we enter what will be a unique winter for us with unique challenges and with Covid-19 still present in our community, I urgently request that the accident and emergency department in Nenagh General Hospital would be open on a 24-7 basis. This is essential to take some of the huge pressure off University Hospital Limerick. This needs to happen as a matter of urgency.

I welcome the common-sense approach that has been adopted in Cashel to use Our Lady's Hospital again. This is something I talked about in this House many times and thankfully the advent of Covid-19 has got Our Lady's Hospital back into use. It has been used to ensure that patients can isolate with Covid-19 if needed and it is up to HIQA standards for the patients who were in St. Patrick's Hospital. St. Patrick's Hospital has been promised a capital development and I urgently ask for a roadmap for that development. Our Lady's Hospital can then be used as a respite, palliative care and step-down facility for South Tipperary General Hospital. It is urgent that St. Patrick's Hospital gets the capital investment that is needed.

I mention Dean Maxwell community nursing unit. I know the Taoiseach spoke about this matter in this House in recent weeks. This facility urgently needs to be brought up to Covid-19 standards and it needs urgent investment. Whether a greenfield site is the most appropriate solution or not is up to others to decide but we need a firm roadmap for the investment and timeframe for the Dean Maxwell unit in Roscrea.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Back in March, the message from the World Health Organization to all countries was to test, test and test. The Government has moved mountains to follow this advice to the letter. In the last week alone, 68,000 people have been tested. That is the equivalent of the population of Sligo now being tested every single week. That is what is needed to hunt down the virus, to keep it out of our nursing homes and to keep it away from our vulnerable people. Countless lives have been saved by swift and determined action by this Government but as we have seen over the past two weeks, numbers have steadily increased, predominantly in the Dublin area. This increase has led to a high-risk delay in getting a test.

As I know this is of great concern to the Government, I would like to take this time to highlight a specific case that came to my attention today. One of my constituents in Lucan was confirmed as a close contact of a colleague who received a positive Covid-19 test on Sunday. Many of his colleagues were also deemed close contacts. They were contacted on Monday by the contact tracing team, which confirmed they were being referred for a Covid-19 test and should receive appointments within 24 hours. When my constituent did not receive his appointment on Monday, he called the HSE live helpline that day. He was advised he should receive the appointment by Tuesday. He was added to an escalation list and was informed he would

definitely receive an appointment by 8 p.m. that evening. No text, phone call or appointment came through. He phoned the HSE helpline again this morning and was advised that no referral was to be found on the system and he would have to be added again, thus starting the process all over from the beginning. It has now been three days since he was first notified that he was a close contact and was being referred for a test. His colleague, who was tested in Tullamore, has already received his result but my constituent has not yet received his appointment.

Both were identified as close contacts at the same time. Another person, also based in Lucan, has not yet received his appointment either. By the time that my two constituents receive their results, a week will have elapsed since they were identified as close contacts. If they are diagnosed as positive cases, so much time will have been lost in tracing their contacts from last weekend. Since then, as we all know, the figures in Dublin have given us great cause for concern, and the situation here has been described as being on a knife-edge.

That is why it is critical that people in Lucan get tested as quickly as people in Tullamore. It is not fair, it is not right and it is not safe that when two people are referred at the same time, the person in Tullamore receives his or her result before the person in Lucan even
7 o'clock receives his or her appointment. Delays such as this will have a domino effect in allowing Covid-19 to spread across the capital city. We need to get testing and tracing back under control. We have seen the system being challenged before and we saw a concerted Government response to get it back under control, and that is what we need to see again.

Specifically, I ask the Minister to commit to providing mobile testing units in Lucan and Clondalkin as the first step to achieving this outcome. We did it before, it worked and so let us do it again. The virus is so contagious that it is a major challenge to meet our targets when our infection rate rises. We have, however, met that challenge before and we need that same level of determined focus to meet that challenge again.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment. I have not had an opportunity to do so before now and I wish her well in that journey. It is going to be a challenging one and it is very important for us all that she succeeds. Earlier, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, mentioned the words “solidarity” and “confidence”. Not too far from here, however, St. Mary’s nursing home, on the Merrion Road, is being closed. The closure was announced in June and at present, 20 very vulnerable individuals with disabilities live there. Many of the residents have been there for up to 50 or 60 years. They are surrounded by friends and the staff have, effectively, become family. The staff recently received a Covid-19 hero award from the former Lord Mayor, Tom Brabazon. The nursing home is free from Covid-19.

In the middle of a pandemic and with all the issues concerning nursing homes, it seems bizarre to be closing a nursing home that is free of Covid-19. St. Mary’s should not be closed but kept open and invested in. The nursing home is already 80% funded by the State and the HSE. The State must intervene and invest in these vital facilities. I visited the nursing home on the Merrion Road today and I met the staff and residents. Several of the residents had one request, and that was for the Minister for Health to meet them. I noticed earlier that the Minister for Education and Skills met some sexual abuse survivors. I ask that the same courtesy be afforded to the residents of St. Mary’s nursing home by the Minister for Health. Will the Minister meet the staff and residents of St. Mary’s nursing home? It is not much to ask for and it is important that St. Mary’s is funded and not closed.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: First, I again put on record my complete admiration and support for all our front-line workers. In recent weeks, we have seen more than 1 million students return to school and we must pay tribute to the teaching, caretaker, administrative and special needs assistant, SNA, staff who made this possible. Unfortunately, we are seeing Covid-19 numbers on the rise again and we must ensure that our front-line health staff get all the support they need. They have been through a traumatic time in the past six months and we cannot expect them to simply react as normal should this second wave of the virus get any worse. The best way for the public to support our front-line staff is to heed the simple advice to wash our hands regularly, wear face masks when in public and in places where it is not possible to socially distance and limit social contacts. If we heed this advice, then we will suppress this horrible virus and give everyone a chance to return to a normal way of life.

I will raise several issues. Nursing homes suffered an extraordinary number of deaths during the first wave of the pandemic. In my home town of Dundalk, Dealgan House nursing home suffered, like many more. I have said before that we need to hold a full public inquiry into the circumstances of why so many residents died in nursing home settings. Such an inquiry would not be about finding scapegoats, a blame game, or an opportunity for some to use as a political football. It would simply be a mechanism to allow us to find out where the systems failed in nursing homes, what measures we need to take to ensure that it never happens again and to help those in nursing homes understand better how the system failed.

The many families who lost loved ones in nursing homes, such as in the Dealgan House nursing home, deserve answers to the many questions they have about the circumstances in which their loved ones died. It is the least that they deserve. I call once more, therefore, for a full public inquiry into the circumstances of why so many residents died from Covid-19 in nursing homes like Dealgan House nursing home. The process should be open and transparent, it should get the facts and result in the publication of real and sustainable solutions for nursing homes in future.

We cannot have a situation where questions remain unanswered. We must get to the truth and act on it to ensure that all nursing homes are safe and friendly environments that offer a real quality of life for their residents. It is important to put on the record that my own mother was a resident of the Dealgan House nursing home and that her time there was excellent and she was treated with the utmost respect and dignity.

Staying on issues regarding Covid-19, I note that more than 120 health workers have been diagnosed with the virus during the past week and according to the INMO, this figure could be even higher because asymptomatic cases are not being picked up. Beaumont Hospital has been forced to close wards after patients and staff contracted the virus. I find this alarming. My understanding is that healthcare workers are not required to quarantine for 14 days when returning from a country listed as requiring quarantine. It is also my understanding that when a positive case is identified in an acute hospital, not all staff are tested. Surely, we must examine this situation. Healthcare workers must be protected but so do their patients. How can a situation arise where a healthcare worker does not need to quarantine for 14 days when returning from a listed country? Why are all staff not tested in an acute hospital when there is a positive case?

We saw how quickly this virus could spread in hospitals and other care settings during the first wave. What is most worrying is that the number of cases among older people is starting to increase, with 21 people over the age of 65 testing positive in the past week alone. I would like to hear the Minister of State's views on healthcare workers not being required to quarantine

when returning from a listed country.

On a related matter, our ability to care for critically-ill patients in intensive care units, ICUs, has been highlighted during this pandemic. When researching this aspect, I found that Germany and Italy had similar rates of Covid-19, but dramatically different death rates. In Germany, 4.7% of patients died, while in Italy that figure was 14.5%, more than three times higher. A simple explanation for this was that Germany had more ICU beds than Italy. Germany had more than 48 beds per 100,000 people, while Italy had just under seven beds per 100,000 people. If we look at Ireland, we can see that we have only six beds per 100,000. My point is that the provision of ICU beds in Ireland is inadequate. If a second wave of the pandemic hits us, I fear for the ability of our ICUs to cope. I appeal to the Minister for Health to look seriously at the situation regarding ICU capacity. We need to invest now and ensure that we are prepared for any eventuality.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has, rightly, seen most of the resources of our healthcare system devoted to combating it, we must not forget that people are suffering from other illnesses. New figures have revealed that cancer screening is down 60% for the first six months of 2020 compared with 2019. To put this in perspective, between January 2019 and June 2019, some 248,223 people were screened across the three screening programmes, while in the same period in 2020, that figure was 99,286. This is a decrease of 148,937. I find this extremely worrying.

The three cancer screening programmes, namely, BreastCheck, BowelScreen and Cervical-Check, were all shut down due to Covid-19. BreastCheck is still shut down, while the other two programmes are operating at a reduced capacity. My biggest fear is that we will see a large number of people who are suffering from cancer go undiagnosed. As a matter of urgency, I appeal to the Government that we must immediately introduce a programme to catch up and deal with this backlog. The Minister needs to make a comprehensive statement on this matter and outline to the House what measures the Government is introducing to ensure that all three screening programmes are brought up to date.

On a related matter, more than 600,000 people are now on outpatient waiting lists. What is most alarming is the number of patients who have been waiting more than 18 months for an appointment. There are 73,101 people waiting for an orthopaedic appointment, of which 17,138 have been waiting more than 18 months. That means that more than 23% of people awaiting orthopaedic appointments are waiting more than 18 months. There are 22,456 people on the waiting list for a neurology appointment, of which 6,455 have been waiting more than 18 months. That means that 29% of people awaiting neurology appointments have been waiting more than 18 months. It is time to stop such waiting times once and for all. We must make the necessary resources available and implement the necessary changes to ensure that we have a healthcare system that is fit for purpose. The bottom line is that people should be assured that they will get the required treatment and healthcare in order for them to receive the possible treatment and outcomes. It is time that we take a long, hard look at healthcare to see what is needed to make it world class in its delivery and outcomes.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I want to speak in this debate and I will obviously start with the context of Limerick city and county. A glimmer of good news emerged today when no additional cases of Covid-19 were recorded in Limerick. That is the first time that has happened for 24 days, since 17 August. This is a worrying time for the public but it is not a time to panic. We very much need to continue this trend. Limerick had 19 new cases yesterday but has none today. That is very positive.

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What we need to do in Limerick is to heed the advice of the Department of Health, which is worth repeating. People should reduce their social contacts, take a step back and keep their distance from others. People should not drop their guard because they know someone to whom they are talking. On feeling any symptoms, people should isolate, contact their GP, not go to work and remember to take a free Covid test. People should wash their hands regularly throughout the day, wear a face covering and download the Covid tracker application.

My view at this point is that our policy around Covid must aim to live with the virus, as distinct from extinguishing it in the short term. I wish to start on a couple of areas. It is important that we continue the momentum in Limerick where there were no new cases today. That is to be welcomed and is a tribute to the people of Limerick and the health services. I note that additional test centres have now been established, which is to be welcomed. We must get back to being able to exist and that is one of the reasons that I supported the call for the reopening of the pubs. We must ensure that we have implemented strict conditions in pubs and I know that publicans are willing to adhere to that. Hotels are going through an equally difficult time. I met some hoteliers on Monday who want to see what can be done to ensure their businesses will continue to be viable.

The message I have for the people of Limerick city and county is that we must ensure that we continue this downward trend. The rate of infection was 66.2 persons per 100,000 of population yesterday. That will be brought down with the news that there were no new cases today and that is to be welcomed.

I want us to look at the business sector and ensure that businesses are sustainable through supports to publicans, restaurateurs and retailers. We must ensure that we continue those welcome supports and the Brexit supports that were announced today.

I also want to touch on a topic in which the Minister of State is interested, namely, the area of disabilities. In Limerick, we have the Daughters of Charity, the Brothers of Charity, St. Gabriel's and St. Joseph's Foundation will also be coming into the area. We have been in touch with the Minister of State about funding to be provided for day services to ensure that people with disabilities are able to attend those services on a regular basis. The disability sector has been the most exponentially impacted area of all. The individuals who attend these services, their families and parents have been affected. We must ensure that those people can start to go to their day services. There is obviously a funding issue for the various organisations that I mentioned earlier, including the Daughters of Charity, the Bawnmore facility, St. Gabriel's and St. Joseph's Foundation. I know that the Minister of State is working on the winter initiative and she might give us an update on where that is. Many parents have been in touch with me and we must ensure that their children get back to day services in the Limerick area as quickly as possible.

The big challenge for us in Limerick over the short term is to get a downward trend in the spread of the deadly coronavirus. Today has been a step forward in meeting that challenge because there have been no new cases in Limerick for the first time in more than three weeks, since 17 August. We need to continue that progress, which is down to the vigilance of the Limerick public and health services in the city, county and region. We must continue to ensure that we can battle through this and that businesses and individuals can continue to function. That is important and I pay tribute to the Limerick public.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I thank the Deputy. I call on Deputy Richard

O'Donoghue.

Deputy Alan Farrell: There are two minutes left on the clock.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Is the Deputy taking that time? He is not listed here.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I will take that time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I apologise to the Deputy.

Deputy Alan Farrell: That is quite all right. I thank Deputy O'Donnell for sharing his time. I want to address two matters that I think NPHET, the Minister for Health and the public should be considering about the current phase of where we are with Covid-19. These issues have raised their heads since the schools reopened, as businesses are opening more prevalently and more people are in our towns, villages and cities. I strongly urge the public to wear masks outside schools. I have dropped my children to school on a number of occasions, as I am sure many other Members have. Even with staggered start times for our primary schools, the areas outside of most school gates are awash with parents. Some of those parents have not seen one another in a number of months and it is inevitable that chats happen. It is important that NPHET and the Minister for Health make a statement to parents asking them to wear masks, where possible.

The same goes for our busy streets. I have been in and around the city since the Dáil resumed in early September. I was also in the city centre in August and, of course, all Members were here in June and July. The city is slowly starting to get busier and there are places where a large number of people congregate, for example at lights as they wait to cross the street, etc. We have to start giving consideration to the transmission rates that are there in the community and we must recognise that those transmission rates will be dramatically reduced if people wear masks in the right setting. I appreciate that is outdoors but I still think people need to make the right choices. I just wanted to take two minutes to say that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I call Deputy O'Donoghue, who is sharing time.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: How do we support settled communities in our schools? I will give a few facts about schools. In our area, children who have not isolated after having returned from abroad are presenting at school. They are expected to go into pods with other children who have been isolated with their families since March. Where is the sense in that in our fight against Covid?

Children are presenting to schools having been away for months in a red zone. They are travelling into a green country and returning home. The rights of both sets of children are being violated, that is, the rights to an education and to safety. I raised this in the Dáil earlier this year. If people are travelling back from abroad in clear violation of Covid regulations, we need to have something in place to protect the children who are here.

There are children coming here who went back to school in September. Between September and Christmas, the size of a class could increase from five to 30 students within a couple of months. When our children went back to school, they all started at the same time. If people are returning to this country, they are entitled to an education the same as everyone else. However,

if they come into this country, they have to present themselves at a school and must ensure there is a safe environment for a child who is now back in the country. From that date, people should have to isolate for two weeks before being allowed into a school.

The passports of those coming into the country should be shown to the authorities and schools notified that they have re-entered the country, and that they need to isolate for two weeks before going back to school. We have to look after all children, settled or otherwise. We have to put in place something that protects all children.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I wish to discuss some questions in the short time I have available. It was beyond belief that the 100% capacity on buses was reduced to 50% at the last moment. I can agree with why it had to happen, namely, to ensure the health of students travelling on buses to school but why was it done at such a late stage? We had the whole year to get our act together and that decision was brought upon us at the last minute. I take grave exception to that decision. It has led to confusion, upset and families not having transport for their children to go to school. That is why it is such an important issue.

We should be able to get to the stage of spontaneous testing and results. Surely in the world we are living in today we should be able to achieve that. The more we can speed up testing and results, the more we will be able to open up all possibilities.

We should be doing other simple and straightforward things. For instance, in the county I represent there are two excellent hospitals in Tralee, the Bon Secours, which is private, and University Hospital Kerry. I am very proud of the management and staff of the hospitals and the efforts made with regard to healthcare, not least during this pandemic.

Other things need to be done. I refer to the dialysis unit in University Hospital Kerry. Due to social distancing, a proper canopy to protect people from the weather outside of the unit is urgently required and would not break the bank. If I only asked the Minister of State for one thing on the floor of this Chamber, it would be to ask her whether such a canopy could be provided. I know of a man whose two legs were amputated and is on dialysis who has to go out in all weathers to an area where there is no canopy. That is horrific.

Could the Department of Health please stop praising our healthcare workers? They do not want praise. Our nurses do not want praise. The people working in catering do not want praise. They want proper pay. Pay and conditions were agreed a number of years ago. They want their money. They want us to keep our word to them, and I ask the Minister of State to please do that and to provide a canopy over the dialysis unit in University Hospital Kerry. I would be eternally grateful for that.

Deputy Joan Collins: I will make a short contribution. I agree that we are at a crucial point and it will be one of many crucial points we will face over the next period in our war against the virus. We will have rearguard skirmishes, battles and everything else thrown into the mix over the next period of time. The Minister called it chapter 2. I do not know whether that is the correct term, but that is how he described it.

The public know the danger. If people are told what is going on, they will react and do what is necessary. People know that this virus can kill. A small fringe element is trying to say differently, but people generally know and have seen what is happening.

People will respond to clear communication and logic. It is when things start getting con-

fusing that people get frustrated and angry. I can understand why people get angry, because it has been a long and difficult six months and we have another long and difficult six months ahead of us. When one hears Dr. Ronan Glynn, Dr. Tony Holohan and other experts talking, it is crystal clear why the measures are necessary healthwise. Politicians have to respond to that and make clear points as well.

There is a conflict between when a message comes from NPHEH and when it is taken up by politicians. Lobby groups come out and pressure is put on to reopen sectors. That is okay. Many medical experts have said the economy has to open up but it has to be safe for workers and their families, social distancing has to be in place and handwashing has to happen. People are in difficult circumstances and workers should be protected in many ways. The clear message that we have to get out is that we are protecting people. I do not think that message has got out, particularly in meat factories. The message has been confused and people are concerned about it.

There were outbreaks in April and again more recently. Advice was not listened to. The workers were not tested enough and were not separated when they went home to their families and communities. The situation has to be examined. We know from a migrant rights group that this is still a problem.

Another key point is the need for a robust test, trace and isolation system that includes testing contacts. Dr. Gabriel Scally and Professor Paul Moynagh spoke on a radio programme today and said this is crucial. I am scared about what we are facing into because I have an underlying illness. No matter how much I try to protect myself, when I am out I am taking risks. Testing has to be robust. Professor Moynagh made the point that there were no cases in meat factories at the beginning of July but by the middle of the month, 80 people tested positive in a Kildare meat plant.

Only 4,000 people a day were tested, of whom 2,000 were hospital workers. Some six days later, only 2,000 people a day were being tested. If we have capacity for 15,000 tests a day, that is what we should do. We should be testing hospital workers, crèche workers, healthcare workers, teachers and those working in meat factories. University students come from different communities and they should be tested, and there should be follow-up tests if the system can manage that.

I heard in the echo chamber that the character of NPHEH could change over the next period of time. Proposals or talks are happening in the background. I heard that the committees around NPHEH may be eliminated. If that happens, the Minister has to come into the Dáil and explain exactly why that is happening. I heard a proposal that a NPHEH team would include representatives from industry and agriculture. NPHEH is a public health committee, not a mixture of industry, vested interests and all of that. That is going to confuse the message again. If that is going to happen, the Minister has to come in here and explain that.

My final point is that people in the community must be advised, particularly with the rise now in Dublin that we are told is at a knife-edge, as to where the cases are and the areas they are in. I do not mean pointing at people in particular but to general areas. We found out today that five pubs caused an infection cluster, as had restaurants. We have to be told because then people can and will be careful and will make the extra effort to look after themselves, their families and friends. There has to be more detail provided as to where those clusters are coming from and the communities involved.

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Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank all the Deputies for their contributions to the vital debate here this evening on the Government's response to Covid-19. While I was sitting here for a number of minutes after the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly left, I took notes and would like to respond with some of these before I go into the rest of the speech that the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, has prepared for me, and which I will then read out.

As to my colleague across the floor, Deputy Andrews, who spoke about a visit to St. Mary's, I will liaise with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, on that issue and if he is not able to attend I will certainly go there myself to meet the residents.

Deputy Cahill spoke about a particular case. I will not discuss individual cases on the floor of the Dáil but when it comes to adult day services reopening, if anybody is listening in here this evening who has a member of their family who has not returned to one day of service yet in any of the adult day services, I would like them to make contact directly with my office. That is not where we would want our adult day services to be. My understanding is that all adult day services are open and that there is, at a minimum, a 40% return to capacity. If anyone is not receiving at least two days a week in any of their adult day services, please let me know.

While I acknowledge that there is a significant issue around transport at present, I need to know that the adult day services have reached out to all our vulnerable people to ensure that a pre-Covid-19 service is available to them. That also addresses the issue raised by Deputy O'Donnell in Limerick.

As to the issues raised by Deputy Quinlivan, this is not the first time he has raised these issues on the floor of the Dáil. He has repeatedly raised these issues and I know that the Minister is acutely aware of every single one of them.

Deputy O'Donoghue, also from Limerick, has raised an issue about schools and spoke about a particular school and area. This needs to be red-flagged with the Minister for Education and Skills and not just for the cases in one area. Where children who are returning to a particular school have left our jurisdiction and have been in a red zone, the principal and the authorities need to be aware of that because public health is there to protect all families.

Finally, in response to Deputy Joan Collins, clear communication has to be the piece. Members of the public have been amazing in their response in taking on board everything that has been asked of them over the past number of months. When there is clear communication, they will respond accordingly and will react in the same way.

As we go forward into the next phase, whether that be chapter 2 as the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly has said, clear, concise, communication must continue. It is important for us as elected representatives to continue with that clear line of communication and not to muddy the waters.

Our overall goal is to reopen our society and economy as safely as possible, given our current knowledge of Covid-19, the causes of the transmission and the pattern of the disease in our community. It is a challenge facing governments the world over. In developing our response we are guided by NPHE and by the advice of Departments and Government agencies. Collectively, our objective is to strike a balance between what is safe and what may risk increasing transmission of the disease. The greater the degree of reopening and the more contact people have with one another, the higher the risk that we will see an increase in the transmission of the

virus. This requires careful consideration as to the best course of action. We all want to return to normal but it is not possible for each sector to return to normal at the same pace. Therefore, we are prioritising certain sectors of society at this time in the hope that we will all be able to return to normality at some stage.

The key message is that maintaining virus transmission levels at the lowest possible level is key to maintaining progress with Covid-19. We continue to see a combined effort by everyone living in Ireland to maintain the solidarity that has marked the past number of months, with people continuing to do the difficult work of remembering to keep apart, to keep washing one's hands, appropriate coughing and sneezing etiquette and more recently, the wearing of face coverings on public transport and in shops. I know all Deputies will join with me to thank the individuals for their hard work and resilience. It is clear from the experience of this disease both in Ireland and abroad that an extremely cautious approach is required.

We are still waiting at this stage for effective treatments for the disease. While a huge amount of progress has been made and a number of drugs have been shown to have an effect on Covid-19, we are still without a definite treatment. We are also still without a vaccine although there continues to be encouraging progress reported in the development of new vaccines.

For now, the public health advice remains our best defence against Covid-19. However, it is important to record the progress that has been made. Much of our society and economy has now reopened. What has changed in many respects is how we interact with others in these situations. It is important now to think of how we do something and not just what we do. New public health measures were agreed on 18 August in response to an increase in case numbers. These measures remain in place until 13 September. In the meantime, our public health teams, the HSE and NPHE continue to monitor very closely the prevalence of the disease within Ireland and are endeavouring to suppress it as quickly as possible wherever it appears.

The Government has also agreed that it will set out a roadmap for resilience and recovery in order to guide the next stage of our approach.

Finally, I extend again my sympathies to the families and friends of those who died in recent months due to contracting Covid-19. I also acknowledge the contribution of the front-line workers in the national effort to combat this disease.

It is also important to say that we sometimes forgot to acknowledge certain sectors when we moved from phase 1 to phase 3, one of which was the adult disability sector. It played a phenomenal role on 13 March, when many of the adult day services just closed down and the service users were returned to family members where these families no longer had the access or opportunity for respite and where their loved ones put the last stroke on the calendar on the wall on 13 March. Some have only begun again to mark their calendar in the past number of weeks. Those families became very frustrated in the latter weeks because they felt that they had been forgotten about and that their services were not going to open. There was poor communication. The most important thing we have to remember is that during Covid-19, the Department of Health, the HSE, the front-line workers, families and service users all worked so hard together to protect the most vulnerable. There was serious cohesion among all. It is important as we go into our next chapter to ensure that this cohesion remains. At the same time, as we reopen economies and society we do not want to leave anyone behind. As Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities, I certainly do not want to see any of my service users left behind. Yet again, I say to any family member watching in tonight that if his or her loved one has not

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returned to an adult day service I need to know and would like to know. Please communicate with me because I will need to know why this is so.

Mental Health and Older People: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Members for the opportunity to update them on developments in my area of responsibility, which covers mental health and services for older people.

The protection of the vulnerable continues to be a priority for the Government, especially in these challenging times. We recognise that those with mental health issues and older people are often among the most vulnerable in society.

While much has been achieved in mental health in recent years, largely due to a welcome and broad consensus both inside and outside of the Oireachtas, much remains to be done. We are fortunate in Ireland to have in place fundamentally robust legislation, policies and services that have been built up over time and which, overall, compare favourably internationally. More importantly, there are identified and widely agreed pathways to undertake further improvements on all these fronts, including improved residential and community-based care for children and adults and psychiatry of later life.

In terms of mental health, my objectives right now are to progress the commitments reflected in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, and also to maximise the response of the mental health system to the evolving issues posed by Covid 19. I am, for example, progressing the update of the Mental Health Act 2001. I am determined that the legislation required to open the new forensic mental health facility at Portrane to replace the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum is completed as quickly as possible. This significant and modern facility is expected to open early next year.

The establishment of the monitoring and implementation committee to oversee the new policy, Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone, is well advanced. This will be key to building on the fundamentals of A Vision for Change, driving new service developments and instigating new approaches to delivering some existing services through, for example, the greater use of digital technologies. I intend to increase, as overall resources allow in future years, the €1 billion or thereabouts given to the HSE this year to maintain and develop its wide range of mental health and suicide prevention services. These span all specialties and ages, from mental health promotion and early intervention to acute inpatient care and clinical programmes such as self-harm or eating disorders. Improving access and reducing waiting lists, where possible, are key objectives for the Government, notwithstanding acknowledged difficulties and the greatly changed operational environment posed by Covid-19.

Hopefully, the opportunities posed by the new policy, new infrastructure, increased training places and new technologies will assist in improving recruitment and retention rates in geographic areas of the country where these have, for whatever reason, traditionally been below the national average.

Since becoming Minister of State, I have met various mental health groups and advocates

and visited services on the ground. I intend to meet and visit many more, Covid restrictions allowing. While I accept the scope for improvement on many fronts, my experience so far has been that the passion of advocates is matched by the dedication and professionalism of our mental health and other care staff to deliver the best possible service, often in the face of increasing demand and unprecedented circumstances. Some of the negative stories I hear do not correlate with the positive reality on the ground.

As I have indicated, work continues on draft heads of a Bill to revise the Mental Health Act 2001. These relate, for example, to revised criteria for detention, new definitions of mental illness and treatment, improved safeguards for change of status from voluntary to involuntary patient and the treatment of children under the Act. This process takes into account Ireland's international obligations, such as the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as recent legislative changes in Ireland, including the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015, and proposed protection of liberty safeguards. These changes and others, when included in revised mental health legislation, will further improve the protections available to mental health service users.

The implementation and monitoring committee envisaged under Sharing the Vision – A National Mental Health Policy for Everyone will be representative of relevant stakeholders, including service users, which is extremely important. It will drive reconfiguration, monitor progress against outcomes and deliver on commitments made in the new policy.

I would like to highlight, in particular, the issues posed by Covid-19. The pandemic is understandably a source of significant stress, anxiety and fear for many people. This arises from the disease itself, as well as from impacts such as increased social isolation, disruption to daily life and uncertainty about employment and financial security. Just as effective physical measures can be taken to limit the impacts of Covid-19, there is simultaneously much that can be done to promote resilience, protect mental health and aid recovery, where this is necessary. It should be remembered that other serious diseases and illnesses can potentially lead to mental health pressures that are often also positively addressed.

All levels of the HSE mental health service, in conjunction with many State and other agencies, will continue to respond in the best possible way to Covid-19. We all want to ensure that services continue while at the same time introducing more tailored measures to deal with mental health needs during and following the pandemic. It is worth noting, in terms of the effects and challenges of Covid-19 on our mental health system, that approximately 90% of supports were continued during lockdown. In addition, a blended approach to service delivery was quickly adopted by many organisations and that will help inform greater clarity around the roles and responsibilities throughout the sector in the future. I thank the many organisations that have acted very quickly.

Approximately €1.1 million has been provided for a mental health promotion and well-being campaign, through enhanced online supports funded by the Sláintecare integration fund. This funding has been used by the HSE to further update the mental health signposting website www.yourmentalhealth.ie. The funding enhanced psychological oversight of the new free national crisis text line, provided free online counselling for those affected by Covid-19 through MyMind and peer group support for healthcare workers and medical staff. A further €1.1 million is supporting the HSE psychosocial strategy. This will enable the healthcare system to plan additional integrated solutions to augment existing interventions funded to date.

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HSE mental health services have a proven response model in place for monitoring and safely delivering services to the maximum level possible in pandemic circumstances, for both community and residential services. The Mental Health Commission will continue to play an important role in helping to monitor and combat Covid-related issues in mental health centres under its ambit. The Department will continue to work with both the HSE and the Mental Health Commission to ensure the evolving situation is monitored and any required actions are taken as fast as possible. We have been working with the Department of Education to provide a collaborative approach to assisting leaving certificate students and their families in dealing with the additional anxieties associated with cancelled examinations and the return to school or going to college. A guidance document and list of supports have been developed for parents and teachers. The website *www.gov.ie* has been updated and provides a good starting point for any student, parent or teacher looking for information on what is available during this difficult time. I am conscious today of all the students waiting for their first round offers from the Central Applications Office on Friday.

The impact of Covid-19 on society in general, but on older people especially, has been considerable. Older people have made huge sacrifices to protect themselves and the rest of society. We, as a country, owe them a debt of gratitude for their selfless action. I am acutely conscious of the grief people have experienced over the past six months. I offer my deepest condolences to all those who have lost loved ones.

Maintaining our well-being and resilience in these challenging times has not been easy. Our lives have changed dramatically over the past six months. We have all had to adapt to a new normal that is different for every one of us. Perhaps the biggest changes have been experienced by those most at risk, namely, older people and those with underlying conditions. My Department and the National Public Health Emergency Team have, from the outset, focused on them, establishing a subgroup on vulnerable people as part of our early response to the pandemic. The subgroup has provided oversight and assurance with regard to the measures required to protect vulnerable groups from the virus to the greatest extent possible. Specific guidance for the over-70s and medically vulnerable has been provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and is available on its website.

The Government's In This Together campaign has provided lots of tips and advice on looking after mental well-being, staying active, eating well and staying connected, drawing together a range of activities that can be pursued at home or locally, alone or with family members or friends online. The campaign has simple key messages on staying connected and creating a routine in addition to tips on stress reduction and links to services providing a valuable and vital resource of trusted information in one place. Through social media channels, the campaign called on those who were aware of vulnerable people in their locality to ensure they were checked on and looked after, either through helping with groceries and shopping or helping them to link in with relevant services.

The Community Call initiative has mobilised resources and community initiatives to support those who have been cocooning to help them to gain access to services. Community Call has been supported by local authorities, An Garda, the GAA, other sports organisations and community volunteers. As part of this, each local authority established a helpline that vulnerable people can phone if they are looking for basic services, such as the delivery of food or meals, or transport for essential trips.

Just 30 minutes of activity per day could have a great impact on one's health. Resources

such as those provided through the In This Together campaign, Sport Ireland and other partners have been very valuable in promoting the need to remain sufficiently active even when restricting the number of contacts or cocooning. Our clear message is that whatever people are going through owing to reduced social contact or isolation, we should all stay as connected as possible, thus helping to strengthen community and individual resilience and restoring hope that we can and will recover. We will make it through this together.

Supporting older people to remain in their own homes and communities, live with dignity and independence and to be engaged in their communities is a key tenet of Government policy. We are committed to the development of improved committee and home-based services, shifting care to homes and offering greater choice for older people. This includes the development of the statutory home care support scheme, in addition to developing and enhancing services, such as reablement to support people to live at home for as long as possible and to reduce reliance on care in congregated settings.

Work is ongoing in the Department to determine the optimal approach to the development of the statutory scheme within the broader context of the ongoing reform in Ireland's health and social care system, as envisaged in the Sláintecare report. This work has been informed by stakeholder engagement, which will continue through the development of the scheme. The HSE continues to work closely with providers and community staff to identify where a service is most required and has been undertaking risk assessments of local services. This is to ensure, in so far as possible, that day care centres can resume in the context of Covid-19 and having regard for public health advice. Day care services will resume when safe and when all infection prevention and control measures and the requirements of physical distancing can be maintained so as to protect service users and staff and to prevent any further spread of the virus. Some centres may not be suitable owing to the constraints of the physical environment, and it will be necessary to continue or expand alternative service delivery models developed during recent months. I am deeply aware of the impact of the continued delay in the reopening of day centres on older people and the important role a day care service can play in their lives. I have asked the HSE to ensure that it will continue to assess the risks and benefits of reopening, in addition to continuing to expand and explore alternative ways of delivering services to this vulnerable group. I am continuing to meet the groups that work with and on behalf of older people to determine how older people can best be supported during these challenging times.

The Covid-19 nursing homes expert panel report was published on 19 August. The report contains 86 recommendations in total and over 15 thematic areas, with associated timelines for implementation over the short, medium and longer terms. We have established an oversight structure to ensure the implementation of the important recommendations contained in the report. This encompasses the establishment of both an implementation oversight team and a reference group.

I am acutely aware that Covid-19 and the resulting national and local lockdowns generated specific challenges for people with dementia and family carers. Day care and respite services have been suspended and the usual routines have been disrupted, creating additional pressures for service users and their families. The HSE has adapted its community services to provide a flexible response so the needs of people with dementia continue to be met during the Covid-19 crisis. Primary care team support is operating nationwide, with referrals being made to community supports, including the Alzheimer Society of Ireland's dementia advisory service and the local authority community response forums. The HSE's memory technology resource room network has been centralised, with advice and video assessments provided by telephone and

online.

Deputy Mark Ward: As this is my first time addressing Deputy Butler in her capacity as Minister of State responsible for mental health and older people, I congratulate her on her appointment. As Sinn Féin spokesperson on mental health, I look forward to working with her in a spirit of constructive, genuinely solution-focused, tangible opposition.

For too long, mental health has been the Cinderella of the health service. We need parity of esteem between mental health and physical health. In June of this year, the former Minister finally published *Sharing the Vision - A Mental Health Policy for Everyone*. There are 100 recommendations in the document, 41 of which are classed as short term and to be implemented within 18 months. These short-term recommendations comprise the foundations of the whole policy. They are the building blocks on which it is built. If these foundations are not secure, the policy itself will come tumbling down. It is almost three months since *Sharing the Vision* was published, yet there are still no costings or timescales for its implementation. As part of the Minister of State's discussions on the upcoming budget allocation for mental health services, she should ensure that the appropriate resources to implement the 41 short-term recommendations are made available if she is to give this policy document a fighting chance.

The first recommendation is for an independent national implementation and monitoring committee to oversee the process. With regard to the previous document, *A Vision for Change*, the Minister of State's predecessors chose the recommendations to examine without taking into account the overall vision of the document. This is not a game of Jenga whereby one can pick and pull the policies that look the most appealing but in which, ultimately, everything just collapses.

It is a shame that the Taoiseach did not believe mental health warranted a place at the Cabinet table. If he had, it would have given the Minister of State direct access to those who make the policies on housing, education, social protection and other matters right across the spectrum. The policy decisions made at that level have a direct impact on people's mental health.

As with the Minister of State, I have had several meetings right across the country with relevant stakeholders. One of their key asks - I am trying to help the Minister of State out on this - is the reappointment of the HSE director of mental health services, who would report directly to the Minister for Health.

The decision of the HSE to remove the post of national director sent out a clear message that mental health is not a priority for the executive.

There are huge concerns in respect of all areas of mental health service provision, but most notably in that of child mental health. More than 8,100 children and teenagers were awaiting psychology appointments at the end of June in 2020. This figure represents an increase on last year's and shows that systematic underinvestment in and mismanagement of mental health services are coming home to roost. What worries me most is that 3,359 of these children were waiting over a year. This is unacceptable. Early intervention is key to a child's development and any delay in treatment can have an untold detrimental impact on children's future well-being. Sometimes we get lost in figures. We hear figures all the time in the context of Covid-19 and get lost in them, but behind each of those figures that make up the number of 3,359 waiting for appointments is a child with an individual story and an individual need. It is a vulnerable child who deserves a service.

I challenge Deputy Butler, during her tenure as Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, to get rid of the draconian practice which leads to some of our vulnerable children with acute mental health needs being admitted into adult psychiatric hospitals. It is frightening for any child to be admitted to a hospital for mental health reasons but this is exacerbated for those children who are placed in adult units. In 2019, 54 children were admitted to adult units. Child or adolescent mental health care should not be dealt with through a service that is not specifically equipped to deal with their needs.

As the Minister of State will be aware, two weeks ago I received a petition from Stacey Quinn who collected 45,000 signatures calling for 24-7 access to emergency mental health services. I commend Stacey on her activism and passion and the Minister of State on acknowledging the petition to me yesterday. What Stacey and the 45,000 signatories are calling for is not rocket science. All they are seeking is something simple, that is, 24-7 access to emergency mental health care. If I bang my head on the outside, I will be treated by a medical professional. If I have an issue going on inside my head, however, I will not receive the same level of care. Mental health issues do not occur just between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and they do not take the weekend off. As the Minister of State mentioned, mental health issues have not taken a break during the pandemic. In fact, we have heard from numerous stakeholders that mental health problems have been exacerbated because of Covid-19.

We can have no half measures when it comes to mental health. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has only increased pressures on an already under-resourced mental health service. We heard from the Covid-19 committee that there will be a huge demand for mental health supports post pandemic and that this demand has already been seen during the pandemic, right across the spectrum. Our community-based mental health services that were already bursting at the seams prior to Covid are now seeing unprecedented demand for their services. Despite modest Government investment in mental health services in recent years, we have seen little improvement in waiting lists. The figure of €1 billion allocated for mental health in 2019 was much lauded by the Minister of State's predecessor and thrown out by him at every opportunity. However, I remind the Minister of State there was also a budget of €1 billion back in 2009 and there has been no substantial increase in funding in over ten years despite a much higher level of demand.

Tomorrow is World Suicide Prevention Day. Last year, 421 people lost their lives through suicide. That is 421 too many. I wish to send my condolences and solidarity to everyone who has lost a loved one through suicide.

Increasing the priority and spending on mental health services is not a cost, it is an investment and one the Minister of State cannot afford not to make.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I congratulate the Minister of State and look forward working with her constructively.

Covid-19 has had a disproportionate effect on our older population, not just in the number of elderly people who died but in how the Government's response impacted on their daily lives. In the context of every roadmap and announcement, they were told to cocoon and stay hidden in their homes and that everything would be okay. We see now that everything was not okay.

The level of over-subscription to the Age Action and Irish Red Cross hardship fund shows that there is a huge need for the Government to set up a fund of its own. While I commend the

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work of Age Action, it, and groups like it, exist only because of the continued failure of successive Governments to provide proper funding and services for our older population. More than 21,000 applications were received for the Age Action fund. With €103,000 raised, only 453 applications out of 21,000 were granted. This was not Age Action's fault. It petitioned the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to help in meeting this demand. It is a disgrace that calls were ignored and that many vulnerable elderly people were left with no additional financial support during this difficult time. I have spoken with representatives from Age Action who expressed their deep frustration at this. Many of these applications were from people who relied on external supports such as day care centres, which are still not open, while others require technology to assist in maintaining social and familial relationships.

Samaritans Ireland agreed a memorandum of understanding with ALONE, many of whose volunteers felt overwhelmed by the levels of emotional distress expressed by the callers. Between 9 March and 28 June, ALONE received more than 25,000 calls from older people and made almost 120,000 calls. We need day care services for older people to reopen. We need repair works on older people's services. I particularly want to see the long-awaited repairs to Monasterevin Day Care Centre prioritised and completed as soon as possible. This has been an ongoing saga for many years.

Finally, I would like to recommend that people watch the movie "I, Daniel Blake". I have a copy and it should be compulsory viewing for all politicians. While set in Newcastle in England, the story will be familiar to people who must apply for any State supports here in Ireland. We need to remove the huge amount of red tape to make it easier to apply for State benefits. For example, the form to apply for the carer's allowance is 40 pages long. Some State supports can only be applied for online. This disadvantages many of our citizens, particularly, the older people I deal with.

Will the Minister of State engage with the many groups that represent older people and listen to their views? Please give them the help they deserve because they are the backbone of our country.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I wish the Minister of State all the best. I only have a short amount of time. I could talk for hours but I presume Members are all glad that I am prevented from doing so.

My parents are in their 80s so I wish to concentrate on relaying the concerns of a son about having two parents in that age bracket. My mum is 80 and my father is 81. They are active and very much community people as everyone around us and throughout much of Tipperary knows. My mother would have been going on her 15th trip to Belarus this year only for Covid-19. I do not know if I would want her going there to work in the orphanages the way the situation is at the moment. My parents are active in the community but their lives have changed dramatically and so have the lives of many elderly individuals across Ireland. We need to concentrate and focus in on them because they have paid their taxes. They have worked, by God, have they worked. They have worked so hard and they have gotten us to where we are as a community, a society and a country and we cannot just let them rot. I often feel they are being forgotten so it is the Minister of State's job in government to make sure they are not.

I want to refer to a gentleman who lives near me. I will not say his name, although if I asked him, he would not mind. However, I have not asked him yet. He basically said that he will not tolerate another cocooning lockdown situation and he will take his chances. He is 86 years

old. He could not really go to the pub because the pub is closed, not that he drank much. He cannot go to see his grandchildren and great grandchildren play hurling, or his granddaughters and great granddaughters. He has no car so he walks around the road on the bit of land that he has, which is not much. He basically hopes a neighbour will drive by so he can have a chat. He goes to mass once a week for 20 minutes or 25 minutes.

We have all the statistics in the context of what Age Action Ireland and ALONE have said. We all know what we are dealing with here. What I am asking the Minister of State is simple. All the technology in the world is not going to work for many of our elderly. We need a plan for them. This will be with us for a considerable period irrespective of whether we get a vaccine. They deserve to live within our society and have a good quality of life like the rest of us. I ask the Minister of State to ensure that next week's plan is elderly proofed. I am sorry for getting down into detail. We need to have a specific plan to ensure that all our elderly can get out and about, have stimulation, and go to social and sporting events in a controlled and safe way.

Someone in their 80s asked me a very simple question as to when they could go back to playing cards, just the six not a nine even. This person used to play three or four times a week and that was their social outlet. How can we organise our society to ensure that the elderly can get out to play bridge, other card games or whatever their activity is? As a society we need to ensure that happens.

I take this opportunity to compliment the HSE. In the mid-west, including in my constituency of Tipperary, through the national programme for older people the HSE has introduced a very good capital programme. It is in the process of building a new wing in the Community Hospital of the Assumption in Thurles. That unit will be interventionist. It will scan the elderly around that area of north Tipperary and assess those who need to be brought in so that they do not end up as bed-blockers in acute care. This was thought out by the HSE through the Covid emergency funding. This was never thought of before early this summer. The previous Minister for Health was not aware of it and the current Minister for Health asked me what it was. I think it is a very good thing to look after the elderly and prevent them ending up in acute care. Given what the HSE is doing in the mid-west, in Clare, Tipperary and Limerick - I understand it is going on in Waterford as well - it would be good if that model could be introduced nationally.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I call Deputy Ó Cuív, who is sharing his time.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment. She will do a very good job. She is a very caring person.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: On a point of order, we usually follow the Labour Party.

Deputy Alan Kelly: There was a mix-up last night.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I am following the schedule that is in front of me. Government speakers are next, followed Sinn Féin speakers and then Social Democrats. I ask Deputy Ó Cuív to continue.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is not the order that was followed in the last statements session.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): It is the order that I have in front of me and I can only go with the order that is in front of me.

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Deputy Róisín Shortall: Maybe we could have-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: In the last session, Deputy Shortall followed me.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I accept that.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The Cathaoirleach said a mistake was made and apologised for calling people in the wrong order.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I thank the Deputy. I say to Deputy Shortall that it will have to be taken up with others. I apologise.

Deputy Ó Cuív is in possession and he lost about a minute and a half. The clock might reflect that.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We will start the clock again?

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As I was saying, I wish the Minister of State all the best. She has a significant challenge. Over the years, it has always been more difficult for mental health services to get the money than it has been for some of the more high-profile acute services. We will give her every support we can in trying to get this money. As we are coming up to the budget, it is important that we are discussing this today. We could say much more, but we do not have the time. We should keep in mind that more than twice as many people commit suicide in this country as die in road accidents. We know how we rightly invest in road safety. We need to realise that this problem is there. The numbers have reduced but there is a long way to go.

Approximately 70% or 80% of suicides are male, but more females self-harm than males. We need to look at the holistic side of society and ask if we are putting unnecessary pressure on people. Every year I am appalled at the amount of pressure on leaving certificate students. We need to find a better way. We are a “cure” society and we may not give the same attention to things needing long-term care where there is no magic fixed finite cure as the world would see it. We need to recognise that in some cases, people with mental health issues need ongoing support which needs to be funded. The issue of waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services needs to be tackled urgently.

I will speak briefly about older people. We need to look at the hierarchy. People should be where they want to be. If they want to be at home, they should be supported at home. If they want to be in sheltered housing they should be in sheltered housing and unless they choose to go to a nursing home, the nursing home should be the least favoured option for the State for many reasons that have become apparent. I put one major challenge to the Minister of State, which is that she bring in statutory home care. I know they will tell her it will take forever drafting Bills and whatever. I would rather a flawed Bill than no Bill. We can always amend and improve Bills as time goes on. We need statutory home care. The Minister of State will find that the time will go very fast in the job she has and the process can be very slow. She should publish and be damned. We can improve it in the House, but we need to see it introduced in the term of this Minister of State.

There has been considerable talk of older people. People thought it was a rule - we found out in the end it was not - that the over 70s could not leave their homes. I think that was wrong on balance. We now know that going out in the fresh air was low risk. The mental health risks

of staying home all the time, totally isolated, were considerably greater. There are plenty of safe places to exercise and walk. We need to listen to what older people say. As one who is more chronologically challenged than most in this House, I think we should stop being maternalistic or paternalistic towards older people. People who are chronologically advanced in years - Micheál Ó Muirheartaigh is the ultimate example - are well able to make their own decisions.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I wish the Minister of State well in her new role. For far too long mental health issues have been ignored, stigmatised and demonised. What the Minister of State said in her speech was absolutely correct. Many families contacted my office, concerned over the lack of mental health services during the Covid pandemic and asking when they would resume. It is important to have a roadmap for that and I know the Minister of State will do so, which I welcome.

We have half the European average of acute psychiatric beds available and funding for our mental health is half what it is in Europe. We are not investing where we need to. Twenty extra beds were promised to the psychiatric hospitals in the south east in 2018. That did not happen. In my area, eight beds should have been provided in St. Luke's Hospital in Kilkenny. I would really appreciate if the Minister of State could commit to addressing that.

I am glad that the most recent Mental Health Commission report showed that the Department's compliance level increased from 46% in 2017 to 73% in 2019. The Mental Health Commission visiting all these hospitals is very important and will have a significant effect on everybody. The report welcomed the appointment of a support service manager in 2018 to improve things such as hygiene and catering. It also found that everyone was willing to work to monitor and evaluate standards of care and make improvements where possible. This report, however, also found that services were recorded as being over capacity on several occasions, which is a concern. Coupled with the fact that children are not getting access to age-appropriate services, this really highlights the urgency of the situation. Previous speakers have spoken about child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. There is a waiting list of two and a half years for CAMHS. I know the Minister of State is aware of this because I spoke to her about it. This is unacceptable. I know she is also aware of another issue because she is working on it. In 2019, in excess of 50 teenagers and adolescents were placed in adult wards in psychiatric units. That is unacceptable. These are the areas in which we need to deliver and this is what we have to do.

The number of admissions is rising, waiting lists are growing and nobody has the resources to deal with these issues. We have seen an enormous rise in mental health issues since this global pandemic first hit and we are going to see things descend into chaos if we do not look at our capacity now. If we are to increase the number of beds, we obviously must increase the number of appropriate staff. One of the biggest issues I see is that of staffing. People wish to use services but the staff are not there. Getting staff will be one of the Minister of State's greatest challenges. That is what we need to do. We need to keep our staff and to get staff into our psychiatric hospitals and services. That was one of the biggest issues I faced.

The final point I will raise with the Minister of State relates to older people. I know how important this issue is. All of us speaking will appreciate how important our elderly people are to us. My elderly mother is at home. She is 85. Covid has been very hard for the elderly. Testing in nursing homes is very important and I know the Minister of State has been working with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, in that regard. I work with two section 39 care homes. One is in Carlow and the other is in Bagenalstown. These care homes are like a home

from home. There have been significant cuts to funding for section 39 bodies. If we do not fund these homes, I fear that some will close. In fairness, I know the Minister of State is coming to visit one of these homes in Carlow this week but, across the country, keeping these care homes open will be one of our greatest challenges because there does not seem to be funding for them. I thank the Minister of State and wish her well.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The last few months have taken a toll on everyone, particularly those suffering with mental health issues. It has been an intense period and the stress and anxiety associated with the coronavirus has put a strain on many of us. Before the pandemic and the lockdown, mental health services across the State were bursting at the seams. They did not have the capacity to deal with the number of people presenting for services. It can be difficult to get people to engage with mental health services but, when they do engage, they can find themselves turned away because of a lack of capacity. This is a disgrace. It is a result of decades of underfunding. People presenting to mental health services are extremely vulnerable. It is simply not good enough for the door to be closed on them in their time of need. This is not the fault of the staff, who do great work, but rather a sign that the whole system is completely overwhelmed.

We have seen endless documents and reports outlining how poor our services actually are but Governments have continued to sit on their hands and hope that glossy documents will be seen as progress. A Vision For Change was produced in 2006 but everything still seems to be the same. It was a great document but its recommendations have barely seen the light of day. We now have Sharing The Vision. I hope the 41 recommendations identified for the short term are implemented within the 18 months.

It was reported in the *Irish Examiner* last week that 2,315 children are currently waiting to see a specialist in CAMHS. Some 224 of these have been waiting for more than a year. This is completely unacceptable. In my own constituency of Dublin Bay North, 152 children have been waiting more than three months just to be allocated an appointment. I believe the Minister of State will agree that is not right.

Last week, my colleague, Deputy Ward, and I had the pleasure of receiving a petition from Stacey Quinn, which the Minister of State has now received. Ms Quinn is a constituent of mine. She collected 45,000 signatures calling for a 24-7 mental health service. As the Minister of State knows, it is not only between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday to Friday that people need services. We need a publicly funded mental health service of which we can all avail and we needed it yesterday.

Consultations and reports are fine but, unfortunately, they do not improve even one person's situation. We need action and we need proper services. I wish the Minister of State the very best in her new role.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I believe everybody in this House is only too aware of the challenges in respect of mental health. We see people facing such challenges in our own families, in our communities and in our constituencies. People regularly come to the House to talk about the level of need, particularly unmet need, that exists. That has been going on for some time. The real test of people's commitment to prioritising this area comes at budget time. That is how we show how serious we are about mental health services. To be serious means providing the necessary funding at budget time. In addition, in the particular circumstances we are in at the moment and in light of the very significant additional need arising from the pressures, stresses

and anxieties of Covid, the demand for additional funding and additional services will be all the greater. That has to be part of the medium-term plan to be published next week. It is just as valid a need to be met as any other need contained within that plan. I certainly hope that, in addition to a clear roadmap to restarting all of the other health services that have been put on hold, mental health services will be given priority within the plan.

In recent years, what we have seen with regard to funding and recruitment has largely been smoke and mirrors. For as long as I can remember, there has been wrangling in this House about whether money has been fully spent in a particular year. Looking back over recent years, approximately €50 million less than was committed to by successive Governments was delivered. Money was not ring-fenced. We are therefore starting from a position where there has been a shortfall of approximately €50 million. In addition to this are the additional pressures arising from Covid.

Earlier this week, the chief operations officer of the HSE, Ms Anne O'Connor, made a statement in which she made it very clear that there had been a significant increase in the number of referrals to mental health services, especially among older people and children. This is a massive concern because these services were very much overstretched before the pandemic. As others have said, at the beginning of the year 2,000 children were on the waiting list for CAMHS. We can quote figures. I have the figures for the psychological services here. As of last May, there were more than 10,000 children, adults and older people on waiting lists for psychology services. A waiting list of three months is the maximum one would see in most other countries. Let us even take out the impact of Covid and look at what is happening with regard to psychology services. In children from zero to four years of age - cases of infant mental health problems - and taking out, as I said, the first three months, there are currently 798 infants waiting more than three months for psychological services. There has been much talk about what is happening at the moment in education with the leaving certificate and so on. We know children in particular are under huge pressure due to Covid. Before Covid even started however, the number of children and teenagers waiting for psychology services was 5,600. That is 5,600 teenagers and children waiting more than three months for psychology services. In the adult age group, 18 to 64 years of age, the figure is less startling; it is about 1,500. It then drops again for older people. However, it is indefensible that we have a situation like that where teenagers, children and infants - almost 7,000 people in total - are waiting for psychology services for more than three months, and that was before Covid. This is an absolute national crisis. We need the funding to be put in place urgently and we depend on the Minister of State to deliver that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Returning to the Government side, Deputy Dillon is sharing with Deputy Cahill.

Deputy Alan Dillon: First, I wish the Minister of State the very best in her new portfolio.

I welcome the opportunity to highlight the incredible effort and sacrifice made by our older people in recent months as we navigated the Covid-19 era. I cannot overstate the significant changes Ireland's older people made to their daily lives in order to adhere to public health guidelines and those efforts must be commended. For the countless grandparents the length and breadth of Ireland who missed their grandchildren's birthdays and for those who remained cocooned at huge personal sacrifice and chose to act responsibly, the changes were significant.

I previously raised the issue of mental health being the next big challenge arising from Covid-19. Older people have played such an important role in containing the impact of this pan-

demic. We must recognise, however, that they need support to continue doing so. To give one example, I am aware of a Castlebar woman in her 80s who set foot outside the house only twice since March, despite being in reasonably good health. She did so once for a healthcare appointment and the second time to visit a supermarket. Some of our older people, who once yearned to remain living at home for as long as possible, are now suffering from chronic loneliness and a sense of withdrawal from society as a result of being voluntarily housebound. Thankfully, we have a programme for Government which takes account of Covid-19. However, we need to update existing policies and strategies, such as the national positive ageing strategy, the Irish national dementia strategy, the housing options for our ageing population policy statement and the national carers strategy to ensure they are fit for purpose in what is now a changed world.

I for one want to ensure that our older people feel their sacrifices over the past few months have been recognised and that they feel confident their Government and we, as a Parliament, have plans in place to bring some degree of normality back to their lives. It seems fitting to quote the phrase that a nation's greatness is measured by how it treats the weakest members. However, I do not think this fits what has been seen over the past few months by Ireland's older people. In the face of a pandemic the likes of which none of us has ever witnessed, they stood resilient and ever-willing to play their part for their communities and families by putting service above self. In the weeks and months ahead we need to ensure we do not neglect the incredible personal sacrifices witnessed throughout every community. We cannot take these sacrifices for granted and must ensure the mental health of our older people is protected.

We, as individuals, must continue to play our part and assist where possible. We must continue helping to ensure our older people have avenues to connection, be it through technology such as ipads and phone calls or through traditional communications such as letters or post-cards. The Minister of State and her Department are facing an incredible situation of global significance where our incredible healthcare workers are working in extremely challenging circumstances. While they continue to do their work, we must look beyond the walls of our healthcare facilities to ensure the mental health of our older people is prioritised and measures must be put in place to address their concerns.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I thank the Minister of State for the manner in which she has settled into her new portfolio. She has really hit the ground running, particularly in the area of mental health. I would like to highlight the work she has put into ensuring Thurles will have a Jigsaw centre open by the end of the year. This facility will provide a face-to-face service in Thurles which will be accessible to all young people who live, work or attend school or college in County Tipperary. In addition to this there will be online support and services through a range of digital inventions such as phone and video support, a freephone support line, Jigsaw live chat, email supports and more. Young people are facing increased rates of anxiety as a result of school pressure, social and personal circumstances and now the added stress of the Covid pandemic. A facility such as this has long been needed for County Tipperary and I appreciate all the work the Minister of State has done on this with me.

I stress the need to extend the Jigsaw services to other areas of the county, particularly the population centres of Nenagh, Clonmel, Roscrea and Tipperary town. These areas have for a long time been in need of mental health supports and services for young people. As the Minister of State knows, our county has no psychiatric beds and we need them in both the north and south of the county. I am in constant contact with constituents about the need for psychiatric treatment in their home county. Families and loved ones of those living with mental illness are contacting me on a daily business about this. At present Tipperary people either have to travel

to Ennis or Kilkenny for such facilities. These hospitals are already struggling with bed spaces and I call for psychiatric beds in County Tipperary as a matter of urgency.

There are some wonderful voluntary organisations and I will mention Carmha in Nenagh working with mental health issues. It provides counselling facilities for people in need in their communities. It is vital that groups such as Carmha are provided with secure funding on an ongoing basis. They need to be supported through the State and also to have the assurance that funding will be provided on a continuous basis and not just on a once-off basis.

I highlight two cases of people in my constituency and the difficulties they have had with the mental health services over the past couple of years. The Minister of State is aware of these cases but I would like to put them on the record. One is a young lady who I have been dealing with virtually since I was first elected in 2016. She is now 23 years of age. Her psychiatrist recommended that dialectical behaviour therapy, DBT, was the best course available to her to try to deal with her condition. This young lady has tried to commit suicide on two occasions. I have been trying to get her access to a DBT course for three and a half years. At first she was refused access because she had a County Tipperary address. The course was based in County Limerick and people from the mid-west region were denied access to it if they had a County Tipperary address. We finally overcame that hurdle and now Covid is the obstacle in her way. This young lady has been trying to access this course for three and a half years and it just not acceptable that a person with her mental health issues can be waiting such a long period of time for access to a course that her psychiatrist recommends as the best possible solution for her, the best possible hope of recovery for this young lady.

I also highlight the case of a man for whom we have been trying to get a bed in the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum. This constituent has been suffering from mental health issues for years and is currently in prison on a minor charge. He has been in and out of Ennis on a number of occasions and each time he is released he is rearrested within a matter of hours for some minor offence. This man is unwell and desperately needs treatment. His family are worried sick for him in prison as his condition continues to deteriorate. He urgently needs to be assessed and needs a place in the Central Mental Hospital so that his condition can be treated. I have spoken to a number of legal experts in the field who have all stated the same thing, which is that prison is not for this man and that he needs urgent help in an appropriate facility.

I understand the Covid pandemic has placed increased pressures on the Exchequer. I recognise the work the Minister of State has done in her brief and I thank her for what she has done for my county to date. We need resources and action at local level to deliver for voluntary groups. We need psychiatric beds in my county and appropriate treatment in suitable institutions for those suffering from mental health issues as a matter of urgency so the Covid pandemic does not turn into a mental health pandemic.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Lockdown, cocooning and self-isolation have disproportionately affected the elderly during the pandemic. This has given rise to serious concerns regarding their mental health. For many of the elderly, especially those who live alone, their only social contact takes place outside the home. As a consequence of the pandemic, they are effectively cut off from any interaction with others in the community. We cannot underestimate the importance and impact of community centres, bingo halls and churches on the mental health and well-being of the elderly. For example, in Finglas we have Odin's Wood Day Care Centre which provides a variety of services and activities for the elderly on a daily basis. The centre provides day care for those aged over 65 years. Individuals are collected from their homes and brought

to the centre. They can avail of personal care in the form of a shower, a bath, hair dressing or chiropody. They can interact socially and can avail of the services of a community nurse, who visits the centre every day. They can also eat in a communal area with a four course meal provided daily for those who attend the centre. It was to open on Wednesday in a limited capacity but the centre received an email from NPHEt stating it was not to open and it was not given a timescale as to when it can open. I am also aware of other day care centres in the same boat.

Many people are fortunate to have family and friends on whom they can rely for support in these trying times. Many who do not have such a support system must rely on social services or voluntary organisations. Such contacts can, unfortunately, put them at additional risk as they are in a vulnerable group. Cocooning and self-isolation help to reduce infection and the transmission of Covid-19, particularly for such a high-risk group with a decreased immune response. However, it has the inadvertent consequence of keeping them separated from everything that had previously kept them active and engaged. This has left many elderly people even more socially isolated and inactive than before. Additionally, the elderly are more likely to have many underlying conditions, resulting in increased hospitalisation, with the potential consequence of increasing the risk of contracting Covid-19. Cumulatively, these can all lead to chronic stress, anxiety, depression and increased loneliness. The lack of exercise can also lead to deconditioning, resulting in weakness, the loss of strength and potential falls. Lockdown and self-isolation can also lead to a reduction in the cognitive stimulation that comes with socialising and engaging with neighbours and the community at large, potentially leading to a rapid decline among those with medical or cognitive frailty.

Among the measures that could be put in place are, for example, the implementation of universal screening and treatment for mental health for the elderly. The Government could also look at extending the behavioural and mental health competency of primary care providers, who could help identify concerns and issues before they arise. For those in the community, a dedicated unit of trained professionals should be set up for the purpose of maintaining daily contact with the elderly, especially for those with little or no support. It is happening to a degree at the moment but is more or less on an *ad hoc* basis. The entire process needs to be better co-ordinated.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I wish the Minister of State well in her new job. As a result of Covid, the past six months have affected the well-being of everybody but old people have suffered disproportionately. A total of 56% of all deaths have been in nursing homes and the vast majority of deaths in the State have been of older people. There was, and still is, a sense of fear with regard to how old people interact. Even the word “cocooning” was almost derogatory and some older people took its use to task.

In all of the grimness there was a bit of light because sometimes in the darkness there has to be sunshine. There was an amazing film in the “Letters from Lockdown” short film series by RTÉ about Margaret Lynch who is 100 years old. It is absolutely fantastic and really encompasses the generational gap between older people and their grandchildren and how Covid affects them and their families. Every time I see the film I shed a tear - but I also smile - because of the effect the past six months have had on old people.

There has been a digital divide in the past six months, which has been compounded by the ageist society we have. There are many things the Minister of State cannot do but something practical she could do is what Age Action is calling for, which is to include in the budget for 2021 a digital allowance in the form of a €2.50 increase in the telephone support allowance

because of the digital divide during the lockdown. This would be very welcome.

I noted the contribution of the Minister of State on day care centres and Deputy Ellis made a pertinent point on these services. My mother goes to a service in Clondalkin but she has not been there for the past six months. She was going every day to get her hair done, have her dinner and meet her friends but this has broken down. It is very important that these services resume very quickly. The lack of routine and social isolation that have happened are unquantifiable with regard to older people in the State.

If there is one thing the Minister of State can do in practical terms it is to try to address the aftershock of Covid, what we are living with and what it has done to old people. This can be done through opening up day centres as soon as possible, when all of the guidelines have been adhered to, and giving more resources to the older generation in particular. They have paid their taxes and done everything but the pandemic has stopped them in their tracks. There is always hope and I have referred to the “Letters from Lockdown” short films. There is always hope. There is hope in adversity and there is hope in this pandemic.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I wish the Minister of State the very best of luck in her new role. She has massive determination and an overwhelming desire to make a real difference in this area. Having listened to how well she is briefed, I am setting great store and faith in her ability to deliver in this very challenged area. I also welcome the very measured and informed contribution from Deputy Ward and I assure him we have signed up to a programme for Government that pledges to work to end the admission of children to adult psychiatric units. We also aim to seek the expansion of Jigsaw services for young people throughout the country. I have already had a number of conversations with the Minister of State on the provision of a Jigsaw service for County Longford. I hope during our time together in the House we will also be able to implement a dedicated youth mental health service in County Longford.

We have heard much this evening about the impact of Covid and specifically its impact on mental health. In reality, we had a mental health crisis well before Covid and it has not gone away. Nor should we be allowed to forget the patients, and there are many patients who, along with their families, continue to suffer in abject darkness. One of the most heartbreaking aspects of our work is when families, often in the depths of absolute despair, reach out to us because they fear and in many instances justifiably believe that the mental health service has failed them and their family members. That is an indictment of us as legislators and a damning indictment of our mental health service.

Over recent weeks I have brought two specific cases from my community to the Minister of State’s attention. Both cases feature young people. Both feature heartbroken parents and grandparents and devastated siblings. In both instances we have parents battling and pleading to get the care and referrals their family members so desperately need. We had one young person who was suicidal and self-harming and who genuinely felt this world was not for them. The Minister of State has read the devastating account of this family’s battle for the appropriate treatment. The patient’s family pleaded for access to a range of holistic treatments that would, they hoped, dissuade suicidal emotions, including the dialectical behavioural therapy, DBT, so desperately needed to help regulate emotions. That family rightly believes that this patient was failed not only by the HSE but also by the Government over two and a half years. Sadly, there are very few happy endings in this sector. Families, to their credit, do not expect magic wands but they do want to see a fit-for-purpose service based on intervention, real and meaningful engagement with patients and recovery plans.

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If the Minister of State can bear with me, I wish to raise the case of the second patient on whose behalf I have reached out to her and to the HSE on a number of occasions in recent days. He has now spent an agonising ten weeks in isolation at a mental health facility. That is not the health service we, as a modern progressive nation, want or deserve. Staff at the facility have themselves reached out to the patient's parents and pleaded with them to raise this case politically and appeal for his transfer to a forensic setting where he can come out of seclusion in a safe and secure environment. I am pleading with the Minister of State to follow through on this and we will, I hope, see that happen. I have known this young patient for many months. When he is in form he is a wonderfully engaging young person with loads of potential. When the darkness overwhelms, however, he is sadly a different person. He is a young person with enormous potential, and his family and the healthcare professionals who have worked with them are anxious for an intervention that will adequately address the necessary care needs.

Over many years our mental health service has failed thousands of people. The service has come through a significant journey, but there is much more to do, as the Minister of State and I both well know. The two cases I have discussed with the Minister of State are just a touchstone to 100 more such cases. Let us ensure we do not fail them and we impress upon the service providers the need to respond and intervene as appropriate.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This is my first opportunity to engage with the Minister of State in this brief. I believe her to be a decent person and I wish her the best of luck in what is a challenging brief. I hope she will use all her energy to try to change things. It will not be easy but it is vitally important she do so.

I wish to raise with the Minister of State two issues, the first of which I suppose has a cross-over with the brief of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, but I think it is relevant to her own brief as well. I refer to the day centres. We are still getting an awful lot of contact from staff as well as the families affected. They are upset and concerned. Decisions were taken in March of this year that we can all understand because of the situation we faced. Since March, however, people with intellectual disabilities and families with people with intellectual disabilities in their care have been under incredible pressure. They have borne it with dignity and patience but also a great deal of frustration and, I think, sadness and a sense of isolation. At the very best of times this can be almost 24-7, fairly intense and very challenging and difficult, but at this moment in time it is far more than that. The lack of day services is affecting the people themselves who avail of the services. There is a lack of routine and a limitation on social connections. It is having an impact on their physical health, their morale, the deterioration of their mental health and their sense of independence. That has a huge impact on them, but then it consequently comes to the home and to the parent, the sibling, the son or daughter or whoever it may be who is looking after them, and it becomes even more difficult and unsustainable. We urgently need to address this. We are finding this to be an issue and, as I said, there are many families concerned about it right across South Lee, whether Turners Cross or Ballincollig, and places in North Lee such as Farranree, Blackpool and Mayfield. A lot of these centres still have not reopened, so that needs to happen as soon as possible, and I know that the staff are anxious to see that as well. If the Minister of State could give more detail on this in her summing up, I would appreciate it.

The second point I wish to raise with the Minister of State is community healthcare organisation 4, which is Cork and Kerry, particularly as it relates to South Lee, in my constituency, which is always the poor relation, particularly when it comes to CAMHS, and always has the longest waiting lists. There are currently 411 people on the CAMHS waiting list in Cork and

Kerry; 103 of them have been on the list for over a year, which is by far the largest number waiting this long of any community healthcare organisation; and 1,292 children are waiting for psychology appointments. To have children and youth in such difficult situations - crisis situations - and for them to be told the appointment is four months, six months or a year away is just not good enough. This also means that when the appointment comes, because there is so much pressure, sometimes the appointment is not really what it should be because the professionals are under pressure, and I appreciate that.

I always try to be constructive. I will conclude with a point I raised with the Minister of State's predecessor, Jim Daly. This is not going to happen overnight, but it seems to me very obvious that we produce any number of psychology students each year but that they cannot afford to be clinical psychologists. They cannot afford to go into that line of work because they have to take all that time to gain experience, not be paid further, get a very limited amount towards their education and sustain themselves at the same time. It is just not sustainable unless one comes from a background where there is a bit of financial support. I know there is a limited number of bursaries, grants and so on but it is nowhere near enough. We need to crack that. There are many people who are passionate about this, who want to help and who want to be psychologists and they cannot afford it. We need to address that.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Although I have wished the Minister of State well personally with what is, as Deputy Ó Laoghaire said, an unenviable portfolio, I do so again now. There have, however, been years of underinvestment, and I use the word "underinvestment" because, after all, the outcomes of early intervention and successful mental health treatment are an investment as much as education is. Ireland's mental health system was already under immense pressure because of the lack of investment before this pandemic, and now services are stretched even more. Our communities are in dire need of funding or investment to support them through this tough time. I know the Government is putting together a budget and the Minister of State will influence that, not just because she is a Minister of State but also because she is a woman. I do not care who hears me saying this. I believe women work differently and know how to impress on people the real, serious issues. I want the Minister of State to remember, however, that for every number and statistic quoted in the House there is a person. It is a child, brother, sister, mother, father or grandparent, not just a number, and that is what worries me about the statistics. There may be 1,020 children on a waiting list, but they are all somebody's brother or sister. What the Minister of State does will affect all those people we know and love.

Mental Health Reform, the national coalition of 70-plus organisations, has launched its pre-budget submission and sent it to every Deputy. It states that there are fewer staff in the system now than there was in 2008, yet mental ill health is at epidemic level, and worse it will get because of the pandemic, although not just because of the pandemic alone. We need an out-of-hours service, and not just in Wexford because it appears from the contributions of Deputies that it is needed all over the country. We need a 24-hour crisis service to give people at risk a proper chance of survival.

This would give their close family and loved ones with no expertise in coping with these situations assurances that there is help at hand and a service that lets them know that we, as politicians, have their back. We, as politicians, understand that the risk of suicide in mental health patients is grave and we need a 24-hour service that can distinguish care differentials between

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adults and children. As it stands, many communities depend greatly on voluntary organisational services. One such service of which I cannot speak highly enough in County Wexford is MarineWatch, which patrols Wexford Bridge on a nightly basis to prevent the loss of life. No amount of gratitude from me or the public would suffice to express the value of what these people do. I hope the support and services of voluntary sector organisations like this will not go unnoticed when it comes to the Department and the Government putting a budget together for 2021.

Mental Health Commission says we need at least an additional €80 million put into mental health services. I call that an investment. Some €80 million is needed as an immediate measure to provide for an increase in the number of mental health patients and issues that have arisen during Covid. If there is any doubt about funding these services, let me tell the Minister of State what can be achieved and provide the good news story she is looking for. It is not all doom and gloom. I have had numerous phone calls from parents whose children got through the leaving certificate, but only because they were lucky enough to access services at a time when their children needed intervention to deal with mental health issues. If they were left untreated, they might not have been able to complete the leaving certificate. As it stands, they got that treatment and are now applying for college places. There are those who are applying to join organisations and start careers they never thought they would have because of their poor mental health.

The point is that the mental health services work, but only when they can be accessed. There are good news stories of achievement and survival but the problem is accessibility and availability. I do not accept it is just a financial deficit. I recently wrote to the Minister of State about a vacant position for a child psychologist for the CAMHS unit in Wexford. I thank her for a prompt response but I do not under any circumstances accept the reason is a HR issue. I will not quote the circumstances because they are in themselves devastating but if it was the private sector, I imagine it would be a legal matter. I will have to take this up again. In terms of the impediment to the appointment of a child psychologist being a HR issue, Wexford CAMHS unit being without a child psychologist and there being no other applicant, it is fundamental to the success of CAMHS in Wexford that a child psychologist is appointed and we get over the HR issue in order to save lives. We will take that up again. The system is archaic in taking that approach. We have to restore the faith of the people in Wexford in the Government and have the staff requirements filled in the CAMHS unit in Wexford because the issue is ongoing for years. If we have one applicant who wants to take up the position of child psychologist and if we are told it is not a funding issue, how can we say “No” to this qualified person who has held the position before?

The Minister of State is from the neighbouring county of Waterford and I want her to visit the unit in Wexford, which would be a trip on the Passage East car ferry. The least the staff, who are under severe pressure, deserve is a visit from the Minister of State and they can inform her first hand. I do not expect it to be next week or the week after but she needs to visit that unit. I thank the Minister of State for listening to me. It is devastating to hear that what we are hearing tonight from every Deputy appears to be rhetoric. It is not rhetoric. Mental health and the elderly people in our society are as close as it comes to the education of society.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this important matter this evening. Elderly people have been massively impacted by this virus. All those months they had to isolate or, to use the new word, “cocoon” at home have changed their lives utterly and many will not be the same again. I was hurt recently when the Government suggested el-

derly people needed to be careful. One was not sure whether it was because they were going to give the virus or get it. I resented and rejected that comment by Government.

The people at home are one thing but the worst thing that happened regarding the virus was that elderly people died in nursing homes and hospitals on their own. That was the very worst part of the whole pandemic that hit this country. Elderly people like to have their families with them as they approach their last days, as has been traditional. This did not happen and I am very sorry about that. We saw on the television the other night cases of where elderly people died, were thrown into a body bag and put into a coffin while family members had to stand outside the graveyard. It was terrible.

On the first day the Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, took Leaders' Questions, I had the opportunity to ask the Taoiseach to ensure families could visit their elderly relatives in nursing homes and hospitals. I am sorry to say it is not happening and if it happens on a very rare occasion, someone is wheeled out to an emergency exit door or a hallway. The elderly person who is visiting has to stay outside, whatever the elements. That is not satisfactory and we need to develop some way that either the families are tested coming in or the person in the home or hospital is tested. We have to ensure that family members visit.

I have one question. Is a member of the National Public Health Emergency Team involved in producing test kits? We need to know that because the kits are a savage price and they are costing people undue-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: I congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment and I agree with my colleague, Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, who said last night that there is no better person in terms of her care for the unborn in our campaign some time back. She gave great support to that and if she gives the same support in the job she is in, we are in safe hands.

The mental health system is preparing for a tsunami of cases from young people. Staff working in the sector are worried. The sector cannot cope. Ireland's mental health services have a litany of shortcomings, such as a lack of funding, long waiting lists and a disjointed system without an adequate joined-up approach to caring for the individual. The mental health system in Ireland is especially poor at serving young people. Now, with demand expected to increase due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there are worries over whether the system can cope. The big question many constituents have is whether the system can sustain an anticipated spike in cases and referrals.

One major issue in the third level sector is that the €2 million announced last October by Mary Mitchell O'Connor, the then Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills, for student mental health and well-being initiatives has not materialised. This was announced nearly 12 months ago. What happened to that funding? I have been contacted by many families across west Cork who cannot access mental health services. One such family had a daughter who needed urgent care from professionals and was on the verge of suicide. All of us have been touched by family or friends who have committed suicide and the devastation and trauma it leaves behind is undescrivable. The Government appears to love talking about mental health but that is not followed up by action, given the lack of resources in the health service. It is so wrong on so many fronts that people are being left in acute mental health units who simply do not need to be there.

I am calling for an urgent review of the availability of mental health services in every county by the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people. This review should be swift and comprehensive and it should be done in a timely manner. The findings of this review should then be debated in Dáil Éireann within four weeks of this day. We simply cannot allow more people to take their lives due to mental health illness while this Government fails to implement the required policy interventions.

As the Minister of State has responsibility for older people, I must take the time to ask her about the cross-Border directive. Thousands of people in the South of Ireland requiring knee, hip and in particular, cataract surgery, are going to the North for surgery. Due to Brexit, I asked the then Tánaiste last year if the cross-Border directive would continue and the answer I got was that legislation had been put in place to make sure it would. Is this the case? Myself, Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, Councillors Ben Dalton O'Sullivan and Danny Collins and others have taken thousands of people to the North for eye surgery. Can the Minister of State tell me if this cross-Border directive will continue after Brexit? People cannot be left to go blind on the Government's watch.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputies Pringle and Connolly, who are sharing time.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I was caught on the hop there.

An Ceann Comhairle: That does not happen too often.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: There has been a lot of talk tonight about wishing the Minister of State well and we have spoken a couple of times at this stage already but I wish her well in her role as Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, in particular, because it is a vitally important service. While the Minister of State's intentions might be well and good and she will do her best in this role, unfortunately the Government will not give mental health services the attention they need to ensure they are developed. That will be a problem, it has been a problem for many years and it is not something the Minister of State will be able to solve as it stands. The Covid-19 crisis has put a focus on mental health services and it has shown that they are badly wanting, as if we did not know that already. We knew that before this crisis began and before January of this year because mental health services have always been given the least thought among our health service system as a whole.

I want to focus on the mental health reform pre-budget submission, which is vitally important, and which other Members have mentioned tonight. It calls for €80 million to be invested this year in the budget, which is not much in terms of a €16 billion to €17 billion overall health budget. I would like to see it being delivered but we will have to wait and see whether that will happen or not. That will be telling.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Deputy Pringle for leaving me lots of time. I have already wished the Minister of State the best and I look forward to working with her. I am going to make use of the few minutes I have to zone in on a number of matters.

If the Minister of State wants to leave a mark, she might set up the independent monitoring panel as a matter of urgency. This was a recommendation from many groups. We had A Vision for Change and to me that was perfect. I am on record as saying it was the most wonderful vision in theory but it was never implemented. The independent monitoring body sat for two three-year periods and it did an excellent job. It was so good that it was abolished. I ask the Minister of State to reinstate it as a matter of urgency. I am a tiny bit disappointed that the Min-

ister of State said in her speech that it was well advanced. Let me take that as a positive message and I ask the Minister of State to give me a date when it will be reinstated in order to assure me. The Minister of State mentioned representation across all of the therapies, not dominated by psychiatry. There is a role for psychiatry but there is also a role for clinical psychology and the various therapies. The Minister of State mentioned the users as well. That is one issue and I would appreciate if the Minister of State could give a date for it.

I refer to the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015. This Act became law in 2015 after a long campaign well before my time. I hope it does not go on well after my time because the Act was enacted and everything was good about it but the decision support service is not functioning, even though it has been established. What are the consequences of that? We have people being made wards of court on a weekly basis when there is absolutely no need for it and they are functioning at 100%. That Act abolished that whole concept and said we should assist people to make decisions. That is the second matter I ask the Minister of State to zone in on because that will make a huge difference to people's lives.

The third matter I want to zone in on is what we call our elderly. I do not like to distinguish in terms of age. The worst thing about the Covid-19 crisis was that we told people over 70 to stay at home. It was a dreadful message and I foolishly went along with it. At some stage, I realised this was totally unacceptable and the former Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, said he realised it was a wrong use of language and he would not do it again. We have spent years trying to bring equality into our language and we got rid of it in one go in a pandemic by talking about cocooning, which really meant locking up. We did it in such a deceptive way. We did not tell people they had a choice, even though they did have a choice. We should drop that.

We do not need to keep making statements about suicide. It was all there in A Vision for Change, which became Sharing the Vision and prior to that it was called Planning for the Future. We know what is happening and what is required. It is all set out in A Vision for Change. It has been updated and we have changed the title but it is all there. Anecdotally, we can stand here and tell the Minister of State about the suicide rates. It is not acceptable and I do not want to talk in an anecdotal manner. I want to ensure that the services are there on the ground.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into acute focus our lack of services. Day centres have been mentioned and I do not have time to go into them. There are a whole load of emails from people who are at the end of their tether because the day centres have not opened. The Government has to tell us what the plan is and when they will be opened in order to give hope.

An Ceann Comhairle: I invite the Minister of State to respond to the debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Dáil again for the opportunity to conclude these statements and I thank everybody for their time and patience tonight. A huge amount of contributions have been made and they were all made in a positive vein, which I welcome. I will do my best to try to answer as many statements as possible if I can do so in the time allowed.

I thank Deputy Ward for his constructive approach and I look forward to working with him. We met yesterday and I would like to continue in that vein. He raised the matter of children in adult services and as I have said to him, that was one of the first matters I raised when I came into the Department. A reduction in the number of children admitted to adult psychiatric units is a priority for the HSE and it is a priority for me and for every Deputy in the House. It is fully

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accepted that admission to an age appropriate facility is in the best interests of the child. The HSE admitted 50 children into adult services last year. I have found out since that in a lot of those cases, they might have been males aged 16 or 17, whereas the CAMHS unit may not have been suitable for them at that particular time and they had to be housed in an adult facility for a while. On a couple of occasions, some of them might have entered such a facility on more than one occasion in the same year. I accept that a lot of good work has been done and the numbers have reduced but we have more work to do and I will continue to make sure that number comes down steadily. One child in an adult psychiatric ward is one too many for me.

Deputy Patricia Ryan mentioned Age Action, ALONE and the Community Call initiative and everyone here will compliment Age Action and ALONE and the fantastic work that was done.

I also wanted to mention Sharing the Vision and in that regard Deputy Connolly mentioned the national implementation monitoring committee. That is something that has been continuously worked on since I came into the Department. I will be different to other politicians and I am hoping to move this in the first week of October. It will be national mental health month in October and my aim is for us to put that committee in place. There will be an independent chair and there will be lots of sub-committees that encompass everything. It will not be top heavy at one end. The one aspect of Sharing the Vision that I love is that for the first time ever it is patient-focused and patient-centred and it is all about care in the community. The national implementation monitoring committee is hugely important. It will hold me, the Department, the HSE and everyone to account and will let us know very quickly whether we are doing the right thing or not. My aim is for the first week in October. That is my plan and that is what we are working towards at the moment. I am hoping nothing will change that.

I also wish to talk about the CAMHS waiting list, a subject which was raised frequently tonight. The waiting list stands at 2,366, which is a huge number of children waiting for supports. Deputy Ó Laoghaire mentioned that the numbers in the Cork and Kerry area are very high, which they are, at over 400. The numbers in Galway, however, are extremely good. I will start visiting all the CAMHS units and meeting the different teams across the country, but I accept that the numbers are too high. I have been working with the HSE to see how we can reduce them.

Not everybody likes the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, but for the first time ever we are going to look at using it for diagnostics. Legislation will be needed for this to happen because the current NTPF only deals with situations where people go into hospital to have hip or cataract operations, for example. We will need legislation to see how we can move forward with using the NTPF in the area of diagnostics and how we can buy diagnostics. We also want to ensure that there are no unintended consequences. When children come under the care of a CAMHS unit, they are being cared for in the community, and the most important thing is that that level of care in the community carries on. I am conscious of that, and I hope to move on that initiative soon as well.

Many Deputies mentioned day care centres. This matter is close to my heart. I am a strong advocate of day care centres. I met the relevant team in the Department of Health this afternoon to discuss this issue. I am very concerned about the effect that the continuing delay is having on older people. One Deputy, I think it was Deputy Gino Kenny, mentioned that his mother attends day care services. My mother is 83 years old - she is watching in tonight - and she also attends day care services. I know everybody is missing those centres. The HSE is continuing to assess

the risks and benefits of reopening the day care centres. One of the main issues is that some day care centres have more space and capacity. Grants have been put in place, for example, in some situations, such as for community halls where people meet at different times. The grants are to support those initiatives by assisting with the installation of hot water in bathrooms, hand sanitisers and all the different supports needed. The problem, however, is transporting the patients, residents and service users to these facilities and that is where we are seeing the issue. I am strongly in favour of day care centres, however, and I want to see them reopen as soon as possible. Each CHO, therefore, is carrying out a risk assessment of every day care centre in its area. I cannot give a timeframe. We were hoping to open the centres in September, but then the numbers rose again. The situation is fluid, but I will keep the Deputies updated.

I met many active retirement groups, which are also anxious to get back into the community halls. People want to get back to playing bridge, and there are also knitting clubs and many others such groups. The whole thread running through the debate was that we have to compliment our older people. They did what was asked of them. It was very difficult cocooning for that length of time, but they did everything asked of them and they have been very stoic during Covid-19. Now, however, they want to get on with their lives and get back into the community. We will work very closely with the active retirement groups to ensure that happens.

I also met several Deputies regarding Jigsaw. New Jigsaw services will be rolled out in Bray and Thurles before Christmas. Jigsaw services now have 66% coverage throughout the country, but it will be great to see more such services available. Many people also spoke about suicide and tomorrow is international suicide prevention day. Last Friday, I was involved with the launch of the suicide statistics for last year. Unfortunately, as somebody said earlier, we lost 431 people to suicide last year, that is twice as many as were killed in road traffic accidents. I am not for one minute trying to lessen the tragedy of road traffic fatalities by making that comparison. Some 431 families were devastated by the loss a loved one to suicide last year. Connecting for Life is Ireland's national strategy to reduce suicide and that was developed between 2015 and 2019. I will not say it has gone out of date, but I will renew it so that process continues to 2024. That is very important.

The final matter to which I will refer relates to the Central Mental Hospital, which is currently located in Dundrum but which is no longer fit for purpose. It will be moving to the new National Forensic Mental Health Service facility at Portrane very soon. I will come before the House again soon with legislation to change the currently specified location for the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum to the new facility in Portrane. I hope it will be possible to get support from across the House for that Bill. I have ensured that it will be simple, stand-alone legislation.

I thank so many people for coming in tonight and sharing their perspectives. If I have missed anything, we will pick up on the relevant questions and come back on the issues to which they relate.

Defence (Amendment) Bill 2020: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

An Ceann Comhairle: When we concluded our previous consideration of this Bill, Deputy Colm Burke was in possession. As the Deputy has completed his contribution, I call Deputy Andrews.

Deputy Chris Andrews: Sinn Féin welcomes this Bill. Last night, several Deputies mentioned issues relating to conditions, training and pay in the Defence Forces. It is in the context of conditions that I raise the issue of 12 homes in Cathal Brugha Barracks in Rathmines. An example is one 70-year-old woman who has lived there for 47 years. Her husband was a member of the Defence Forces and her son, who has also been an active member of the Defence Forces for the past 20 years, lives with her. They are referred to by the Defence Forces as “overholders” even though they have not been asked to leave or vacate the premises. That woman and her son have asked to buy the property to give them some sense of security because there is none for them now. The Defence Forces have always refused to sell, mainly for legal reasons. A similar case occurred when a family tried on three occasions to buy their home, but the Defence Forces withdrew from the agreements each time. What way is that to treat our Defence Forces’ members, our veterans and their families?

Members of the Defence Forces are already badly paid and operate in difficult and challenging conditions. Twelve families have been left in this situation of having no security regarding their homes and, to compound the issue, the Defence Forces will not carry out any repairs to these 12 homes. In addition, permission has also not been given for the residents to carry out repairs. The result is that those houses are crumbling around the residents, and it is unfair to allow people to live in this type of limbo, with no security or clarity regarding what will happen to them or their children in the future. When we talk about conditions, therefore, it is important that we put in place measures to give security to families such as those I mentioned. The legal issues need to be resolved, so I ask the Minister to consider the situation of these residents in the context of conditions and pay for members of the Defence Forces and their families. This is an important matter.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I welcome the provisions in this Bill, which formalise and give full effect to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is not before time that we are doing this. I also strongly welcome the formalisation of the authorisation of a force commander of an overseas operation to exercise operational control over Defence Forces’ contingents.

It is true to say that Members across the House are all proud of the significant role that the Defence Forces play in international peacekeeping. As Members are well aware, not a day has passed since 1958 without Irish peacekeepers on duty. Indeed, in recent years, members of the Defence Forces have played roles at the highest levels of the United Nations, including Irish Brigadier General Maureen O’Brien who now serves as acting force commander with the UN in the Golan Heights in Syria. Hundreds of members of the Defence Forces are now serving overseas on peacekeeping missions in various parts of the world. Across the House, we are proud of that.

The Minister referenced section 4 of the Bill when speaking in the debate yesterday. That section addresses re-enlistment and the Minister told the House that the section could be removed because it has already been dealt with in Covid-19 legislation. However, the issues around re-enlistment and retention of Army personnel have not been dealt with. Deputy Howlin yesterday raised issues about the value of taking young people into the Army and providing them with skills and training, and how valuable that has been, and that also must be dealt with.

In that context, I want to raise the fact that we are awaiting the publication of the review of technicians' pay and grading that was promised as part of the Croke Park agreement. I understand that review has been completed but it needs to be published. It is important that we publish it as quickly as possible. We are losing many skilled members of the force who are leaving for better conditions in the private sector, and this retention issue is impacting morale in the Defence Forces and on our operational capacity. We must retain skilled technicians. It makes no sense to train them and lose them after they have become skilled. There is also a need to implement the recommendations of the high-level implementation plan, and the working time directive should be made applicable to the Defence Forces, as has been promised in the programme for Government.

The last time there was a discussion around the Defence Forces, the outgoing Minister of State gave indications about the issue of membership of congress. In 2018, the European Social Rights Committee found that the Government's refusal to allow members of the Defence Forces to join the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, was a breach of the European Social Charter. The issue of the ageing out of members of the Defence Forces because of arbitrary cut-offs also needs to be addressed.

How we value our Defence Forces reflects on the country as a whole. We have all been aware in recent times, with Covid and Brexit, that there is never any time when we can take issues of national security for granted as they apply to the Defence Forces, food security and anything else. There is a tendency for people to take these things for granted, but moments of crisis show more than ever how important those things are. While supporting this Bill, I ask the Minister to give those issues consideration. I appreciate that he is highly focused on Brexit at the moment, but these issues also need consideration.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: This is my first time addressing the Minister for Defence so I congratulate him on his portfolio and hope he will have a successful term. I support this Bill which brings about a number of required changes to existing defence laws. I pay particular tribute to the many men and women of our Permanent Defence Force who step up time and again. They helped when there was flooding in Cloonlara and Ennis in County Clare, where I am from, and more recently during the Covid pandemic when those men and women supported our front-line staff. I will elaborate on that in a few moments.

The numbers in our Defence Forces continue to fall, it is sad to say, and Covid-19 will add to the challenge of recruitment. The commitments on defence in the programme for Government urgently need to be acted upon, and I hope they will be a priority for the Minister as he takes on this portfolio. The single greatest asset of the Defence Forces must be their personnel, and yet numbers are now seriously below strength and it is time to rebuild significantly. The decline over recent years left the forces with just 8,423 members at the end of March of this year, some 1,077 below the current agreed strength. In 2019, turnover reached an unsustainable level of close to 10%. This could be considered an existential crisis and cannot be allowed to continue. The retention crisis means that the Defence Forces are experiencing significant underspend of their annual budget allocation despite the scale of this crisis. It is vital that Ireland recommits to its Defence Forces and defence capability.

I am glad that the programme for Government commits to establishing an independent commission on defence. The commission will look at the pay, allowances and composition of the Defence Forces and consider recruitment, retention and career progression. I note that the commission will result in the formation of a permanent pay review body, and it is important

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that all recommendations made by the committee and their subsequent implementation must be consistent with national public sector wage policy.

It has been mooted that the pay commission would be established before the end of the 2020 and report back to the Government within 12 months. I would like to know where that is at now. It seems to me that, for far too long, the focus in Ireland has been more on investing in high-tech equipment for the Army as opposed to the actual personnel who wear the uniforms, their recruitment and retention. That is the main cause of the recruitment crisis we see at the moment. I have heard of some instances where troops are expected to work extra hours in the evenings and at weekends for as little as €2 or €3 per hour. I know of one recent instance when the Army brought quite a number of its personnel from around the country to help the HSE offload containers of personal protective equipment, PPE, that the Government had procured from China and other places in Asia from its resource headquarters. Some of those soldiers were paid and understood that they could take home that pay but were taxed significantly. The pay that they took home ended up being minuscule and those members of the Defence Forces felt that they had stepped up to the role at a time of crisis and what they took home to their families was negligible.

I hope that the Minister can intervene in the case of unfilled positions within the Defence Forces, across the Army, Navy and Air Corps. There are currently 1,076 unfilled positions, 882 of which relate to those who left the Defence Forces last year.

I also want briefly to raise the issue of medals. Some 27 soldiers from the Jadotville siege were nominated for medals and only eight of those men are still alive. I hope that their bravery will be recognised by this Government. I know that parchments were issued to them last year and there has been much talk in recent times of medals being awarded. Those medals need to be awarded before any more of those men pass away and go to eternity.

An Army veteran living in my county brought an issue to my attention in August. A lot of consultation will be required on this because it divides opinion, but he suggested that those who served with the Irish Army along the Border over the course of the Troubles, right up to the time of the Good Friday Agreement, should be awarded a medal or some kind of recognition for the duty and service they gave to the State at that time and the daily dangers which they faced. There is a counterargument to that. Some would say that was home service and does not merit a medal but I hope the Department, as it continues to consider whether to award medals to those who served at Jadotville, would also engage with veteran groups, particularly those who served the Irish Army during the Troubles, to see whether we could formally recognise in some way their service during those turbulent years.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I would like to take this opportunity to address the issues around our Defence Forces as a whole. We are here today with a Bill before the House that seems merely to address housekeeping issues around the Defence Forces and how they operate, specifically while overseas. While it may be internationally accepted that companies deployed overseas will fall under the command of the regional troops, I certainly hope that this is not an underhanded way of signing off on our neutrality down the line.

I was a member of the Army Reserve and can easily say that I gained hugely from my time there. I gained experience in teamwork skills and general life skills that have truly benefited me. We trained and worked hard and pushed ourselves physically and mentally. That being said, I, along with many of my counterparts, signed up on the understanding that Ireland was

and will remain a neutral State. This is something we must continue to ensure.

In the overall context of our Permanent Defence Force, the lack of basic pay and conditions is appalling. Section 4 of the Bill makes provision for the re-enlistment of previous members of the Defence Forces. While I accept that from time to time expertise and experience is required, I feel this is only a requirement in our Defence Forces due to the brain drain in recent years. We are struggling to attract young recruits into the Army, Air Corps and navy due to the extremely poor pay and conditions available to them. That is the reason we are struggling to recruit and keep members, and is the only reason we need to make provision to bring back retired members to fill these gaps.

The aeromedical service in Athlone has come under pressure due to a lack of suitably qualified pilots in the Air Corps. Naval vessels are moored in Cork due to the lack of staff to enable them to go out on patrol. This is simply not good enough.

Members of the Defence Forces recently came to the rescue of people in distress due to flooding, gorse fires and more. In our country's time of need, our soldiers could be relied upon. They are often seen as our heroes in our time of need, but they do not get paid accordingly. When the Pope visited soldiers they were expected to sleep in desperate conditions and were fed substandard meals, but worst of all they were being paid substandard wages while on duty. This is simply not good enough and we can no longer accept it. We need to address these issues, and it would have been much more important to have raised them on the floor of the House.

Deputy Patrick Costello: Like other speakers, I welcome the Bill. It essentially codifies a lot of the current practices. Part of the difficulty for me is that while this is welcome and clear command structures are definitely needed in cases of lethal force, we are in many ways treating the symptoms and not the root causes. Currently our Defence Forces based in Lebanon are part of a mixed battalion involving Maltese, Polish and Hungarian soldiers. It is important that if a Polish major is giving orders to an Irish captain who in turn is relaying them to a Hungarian rifle unit on the ground that those things can flow clearly.

What happened to the days when we could send a full battalion of our own and did not need to worry about these things? The reality is that our ability to do that has been eroded by organisational problems and problems with recruitment, support and retention. This Bill is treating the symptoms of those problems but not the problems themselves.

We have a difficulty with recruitment. Obviously, Covid is making that harder at present but there is a long-standing problem with recruitment. When we hear about the Defence Forces in the media it is either, as has been said, that they are heroes who come to the aid of a civilian power and provide support that others cannot or we hear about the poor conditions of Defence Forces families who are living on the breadline. If a person sees such news stories, will he or she want to put a family in that situation of living in penury despite the fact that he or she is risking his or her life for everyone else? That is a fundamental difficulty which, if we do not address it, will continue to cause problems.

There is not just a recruitment problem. We are losing experienced members of the Defence Forces, people who have skills and qualifications and are in leadership positions. When we start losing them, we create a spiral of unhealthiness and unsustainability within an organisation.

If there is only one mechanic in a particular unit, he or she will be under significant extra pressure to do overseas duty. Where does that leave him or her? He or she will have to go on

duty for 18 months at a time again and again and be pulled away from his or her family and home simply because we do not have others with the same qualification as a result of all of these problems.

That is the sort of thing that will make a person wonder if it is worth it for him or her. Being a member of the Defence Forces is, in many ways, a vocation and we are letting them down with poor management and organisation. As I said, we are creating a sick organisation which people leave because it is sick. This builds up more pressure on those who remain and encourages them to leave as well. It creates an ongoing spiral. This is something we have seen in many other organisations.

Let us get things sorted to ensure the Defence Forces can function. What are we doing right now to ensure they can function? Other Members spoke about officers doing the work of two, three or four other officers. Are the structures we are using in the Army suitable for what we are demanding of the men and women in our Defence Forces? The fact that we are seeing a brain drain and are struggling to recruit would suggest that the structures we have are not suitable.

We have a proud tradition of involvement in the United Nations and peacekeeping work, and a lot of young men and women want to be part of that tradition but do not see the Army as an appealing place to work because of what we are talking about. The vocation for international duties and peacekeeping work has been tarnished by cosying up to things like PESCO and multilateral arrangements.

We need to consider deeply the value we as a society place on our Defence Forces and the roles that we will ask them to undertake. As climate change bites, the world becomes more chaotic and flooding in Ireland becomes worse, resulting in the chaotic scenes of flooding we have seen around the country where the Army has been called in, we will be coming to the Defence Forces for their expertise and ability to respond quickly more and more. The situations they will go into will be more and more dangerous.

If, as I said, we want people to answer the call and take up a vocation to serve the State as a member of the Defence Forces, are we going to give them the support they need? I feel the Bill in some ways supports them and gives clarity to those who are serving overseas. However, as I said it is addressing the symptoms and not the root causes, and there are much wider concerns I hope we address.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the chance to speak on some of aspects of the Bill. During the general election when we were all on the canvass trail, I met and spoke to many Defence Forces personnel in Dublin West and in every single case they said to me that they were proud to serve and to be a member of the Defence Forces. However, they all had disappointing stories to tell of how they were treated in terms of their pay, conditions and retirement entitlements.

Having committed their lives to the Defence Forces and, in some cases, risked their lives on UN missions in war-torn countries, they feel let down by successive Governments and Ministers for Defence. This Dáil term is an opportunity to right some of those wrongs. That will not always be possible because some people have left the Defence Forces, but for those who are still in the Defence Forces and those who intend to join there is an opportunity to address the matter. A significant number of Deputies have spoken about this and the message is very clear.

The measure of the pride of those to whom I spoke was their willingness to rejoin and play their part during the Covid crisis. Like all employees, all personnel in the Defence Forces must

be treated with respect and fairness. The very fact that we had a call for people to come back into the Defence Forces shows that there is a real need for a certain skill set within the Defence Forces. The option to enlist should be attractive. I hope that will bring an end to highly qualified officers leaving their posts at a personal cost of €60,000 or more, as I have heard in some cases. There is an urgent need for the Government to establish a full commission on the future of the Defence Forces and an independent pay review body. Ireland's Defence Forces are recognised worldwide for their humanitarian work in strife-torn corners of the world and are highly respected where they are based.

Finally, our neutrality is something that has allowed our Defence Forces to go to some of the most dangerous places in the world. I urge the Minister to ensure this is protected at all costs because we will continue to ask our Defence Forces to go on UN peacekeeping missions to very dangerous places. If we do not protect our neutrality, we will not be protecting the members of our Defence Forces.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Berry, who has a particular perspective on these issues.

Deputy Cathal Berry: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. I am conscious of the clock.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has 20 minutes.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I will finish up a little bit early to facilitate other Members to speak. I have a number of points to make.

I thank the Minister, Deputy Coveney, for coming in here tonight. I understand that there are great demands on his time at the moment, particularly when we see the extraordinary events today across the Irish Sea. His presence this evening, therefore, is greatly appreciated. I am also very grateful for the very positive engagement we have had over the last couple of weeks and months. I am far more hopeful now than I was even three months ago that we can finally get to grips with the problems in the Defence Forces and move on from there.

The next point I will make is on the legislation itself. I have no difficulty with the legislation and am very happy to support it. As the Minister mentioned, it is just housekeeping. I can understand from a legality point of view why one might want to enshrine and codify it in primary legislation but the reality is that it is not going to change anything on the ground. We could have added a few more amendments and I will give the Minister a number of suggestions which he might wish to consider. In this Chamber we make minor adjustments at the top that can have significant and disproportionately positive effects downstream.

We should have approximately 4,000 people in the Reserve Defence Force, but we have approximately 1,000, in effect. If one tried to run a school with 25% of the required number of teachers or a hospital with 25% of the required number of nurses, it would be a mission impossible. We really need to focus on the Reserve Defence Force. Many people do not realise why we call them the Defence Forces, and it is plural for a reason because they consist of the Permanent Defence Force and the Reserve Defence Force. The next group of amendments that we make to the Defence Act 1954 should be focused primarily, but not exclusively, on the Reserve Defence Force.

First, we should legislate to allow our Reserve Defence Force to serve overseas in niche

operational roles like medicine and communications, in particular. Second, in addition to being able to serve operationally, they should be able to go on training exercises and courses abroad. Third, they should be able to participate in ceremonial events abroad. The Reserve Defence Force should be allowed to travel overseas for those three reasons. It will certainly take itself far more seriously if we take it more seriously too. These three things would make a great difference overnight, unlike the legislation in front of us, which is all well and good but does not impact anything on the ground.

I would like to make a further point from the perspective of members of the Reserve Defence Force. We know how understrength they are. The Minister, or his predecessor, quite rightly introduced legislation to provide for the re-enlistment of personnel into the Permanent Defence Force. Why do we not allow for the re-enlistment of personnel into the Reserve Defence Force? There is no harm in bringing back Reserve Defence Force people who have left if they are a good fit for the organisation.

A further point I would make is that there should be a seamless transition for people like myself who have recently retired from the Permanent Defence Force if they are interested in serving in the Reserve Defence Force. It should really be a box-ticking exercise for such a person. The measures I have proposed would have a great impact on the Reserve Defence Force within 24 hours. The numbers would be populated very quickly up towards 4,000. Those are the amendments I would consider from the perspective of the Reserve Defence Force.

From a Permanent Defence Force perspective, I would like to mention an issue that can be solved very easily even though it is a real bone of contention. A provision in the Defence Act 1954 means that a soldier who does not serve the full five-year term must purchase his or her discharge. This is a 1954 Act for a good reason because a provision like that has no place whatsoever in modern employment legislation. Private soldiers and Teachtaí Dála have one real thing in common. They both sign up for a five-year term. If I resign my seat voluntarily now and walk out of here, I will receive a golden handshake. If private soldiers do not complete their full five-year term, they are handed a bill for €300, which is completely scandalous. This can be very easily changed and would have a huge impact on morale.

I would like to refer to a number of non-legislative amendments which would make a significant difference. The first involves additional pay for the navy. The Minister has done a great deal of work on this in recent months. We hope we are looking towards having a very positive announcement in the next couple of weeks. We know how bad things are in the navy. I have mentioned them before and I will not mention them again. An improvement in pay would be a small difference but it would bring hugely positive effects overnight.

My next point relates to quarantine money. For Covid-19 reasons, troops who are serving overseas are brought into barracks for an additional two weeks of work before they deploy overseas for six months. They do not get to see their families for six and a half months. They should be getting some additional pay for the two weeks of quarantine they are doing before they travel. This is a major bone of contention for the people in Syria and in Lebanon at the moment. In some cases, people's spouses have to give up work for two weeks, which means a loss of salary for these families. Anything the Minister can do from this perspective, particularly if it can be done in the next couple weeks, would be greatly appreciated and would have a very positive effect on morale.

As the Social Democrats speaker mentioned, an announcement on the technical pay issue

was made with great fanfare on 4 July last year from the plinth by the Minister for Finance and the then Minister of State with responsibility for defence. I presume these announcements were made in good faith. That was over 14 months ago. I know it is probably an unfair comparison to make, but it strikes me that we are currently taking issue with the British Government because it is claiming it does not want to honour an agreement it entered into. The Government entered into an agreement with the Defence Forces and its representative associations in good faith on 4 July last year and it is now up to our Government to honour that commitment. We are not talking about big money. A commitment was made and it should be followed through on. There is no risk of contagion to other parts of the public service. If there was a risk of contagion it would have happened on 4 July last year when it was announced. As a result of the failure to implement the technical pay announcement, we have had huge haemorrhaging of paramedics, mechanics and technically qualified people. Again, a small adjustment could make a significantly positive impact on the ground.

A very positive sentence in the programme for Government commits this Government to providing the same level of medical care to enlisted personnel as is provided to commissioned officers. If the Minister is looking for something that could be implemented very quickly, I put it to him that this could be done next week. This measure would have a significant impact on morale and would demonstrate something tangible for the troops. Providing private medical care to enlisted personnel who are injured, as is done with the commissioned officers, would make a great difference. It is very simply done. Instead of writing “Captain X” on the form, the medical officer just puts down “Corporal Y” and they should then have the exact same access to medical care. We have over 100 personnel who are on long-term sick leave because they are awaiting operations, having injured their backs or knees, or have torn ligaments and are languishing at home for months on the public waiting list. If we could expedite their return to the ranks it would make a great difference. The enlisted personnel also have to pay for their own treatment even though they are injured at work and this encourages them to litigate.

If the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence were paying for their medical treatment, there would be no requirement to litigate. That is another measure that would make a very big difference on the ground.

From a non-legislative perspective I want to mention the budget, which is coming up on 13 October. Traditionally, the Defence Forces always get the lowest level of increase. In addition, the majority of that increase, over the past five years in particular, has gone to paying Defence Forces pensions. The reason for that is the very poor policies that were pursued in recent years, which drove many people out of the Defence Forces against their will, and the pensions bill has risen. If there is anything the Minister could do from a budgeting perspective to ensure that the Defence Forces can get their fare share, it would be greatly appreciated.

The Minister was very good to visit the Curragh Camp recently, and the Ceann Comhairle will verify what I am about to say. Even though it is a wonderful place full of wonderful people, the Curragh Camp is the most derelict town in the entire country bar none. I challenge anybody to mention any other town in the country that has such poor infrastructure. It is not just an Army barracks but a functioning town with two primary schools and a secondary school. If there is anything that can be done from an infrastructural perspective there, it would make a major difference.

We can be creative in respect of our budgeting. First, I do not believe all the funds should

come from the defence Votes. There is a lot of housing on the camp in the Curragh that could very easily be funded through the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. The Minister might liaise with his colleagues at the Cabinet table to see if there is any funding from the housing budget that could be routed towards the Curragh. Second, we must remember also that it is an international third level institution taking students from abroad. We have a brand new Department of further and higher education, research, innovation and science with a blank canvas, so if there is any funding in that Department that could be funnelled towards Defence Forces training institutions, that might be a possibility also.

The fourth point I want to make is about our new Secretary General, Ms Jacqui McCrum. The announcement that we have an external candidate as Secretary General was wonderful. I have heard nothing but positive comments as to her attitude and performance to date. It is a huge plus that her most recent job was working in the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection where she had to devise, advertise and implement social protections for people who are struggling. Her appointment is to be greatly welcomed. I would go so far as to say that her appointment has the potential to have the same effect as people of the likes of Matthew Elderfield during the financial crisis when he came in to work with the Financial Regulator or Professor Patrick Honohan when he came in to work with the Central Bank. There is great potential and hope in this regard and I very much look forward to working with the Secretary General, Ms McCrum, over the next number of years.

I used sit up in the Gallery when I was a soldier here guarding the Leinster House campus about 20 years ago in happier times. I remember being here one night and seeing the Minister's father, who was Minister for Defence. I never thought for a moment that I would have to come into this Chamber and advocate for very basic living standards for service personnel and their families. It is wonderful to close the circle and be able to address another member of the Conneely clan from that perspective. I presume the Minister's is the only family whose father and son have occupied the position of Minister for Defence.

I hope the Minister regards me as being on his side. We want him to be a very successful Minister for Defence because if he has a successful Ministry, the Defence Forces, and the country, will be very successful. I very much look forward to working with the Minister over the next number of years.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Carol Nolan is sharing time with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm labhairt ar an mBille seo. I record my congratulations to Tipperary woman, Roberta O'Brien, who has become the first woman in the history of the Naval Service to achieve the rank of commander. That certainly needs to be acknowledged here. As I understand it, Roberta joined the Permanent Defence Force in 1995 and was part of the first ever intake of female personnel in the Irish Naval Service along with her classmate, Orla Gallagher, who is now a lieutenant commander. It is great to see this development and I hope many more women will follow the trail she has blazed.

To come back to the Bill, as I understand it from the explanatory memorandum, the intention is to make several important provisions. These include permitting the delegation by the Minister for Defence of a limited degree of control and authority over Defence Forces contingents deployed as part of an international force to the force commander of that particular force. While the memorandum is careful to assert that the amendment will not alter the current command structure within the Irish Defence Forces but merely underpin current practice in respect of the

day-to-day operational control, it is difficult to see that this is actually the case. This strikes me as serious legislation with respect to the delegation of ministerial powers. In trying to think of some similar situations, I was reminded of the provisions of the Ministers and Secretaries Act 1977, whereby the Government, by order made on the request of a Minister, can delegate to a Minister of State all the powers and duties of such Minister of the Government. It appears that something similar is happening with this legislation. The Minister is granting official power that, up to this point, was his or hers alone, to an international force commander. That does not strike me as being inconsequential. What I and many others would be concerned about, more broadly, is that the Bill, while it is somewhat technical in nature, also creates the impression that the autonomy and sovereignty of the Irish Defence Forces is slowly being eroded within an international context.

I understand entirely that operational efficiency is important. I understand it is a good thing for our Defence Forces to work in smooth partnership with our allies, but have they not always done that? Have they not always made themselves responsive to the operational commands of the various force commanders under whom they have served? For example, section 2 proposes that any delegation of operational control will provide that each member of the Defence Forces assigned to an international force led by a force commander will comply with every lawful order issued to him or her by a member of the international force in his or her military chain of command. Is there a record of the Irish Defence Forces not submitting or complying with legitimate orders? I am asking the Minister for greater clarity to be provided on the problem that this Bill seeks to address. If the Irish Defence Forces have been compliant, and there is no reason to think they have not, why is this Bill necessary? Why are we embedding authority over our forces to an international force commander and delegating ministerial powers to achieve that?

My view is that when it comes to international participation we have an honourable and distinguished history. How will this Bill improve on that? I ask these questions as a non-specialist in the area, like so many of us here, with the exception of an Teachta Berry. I can only speak to the immediate concerns that the Bill creates for me as someone who values the extraordinary work of our Defence Forces but who would be instinctively cautious about seeing them at ever-increasing levels of disposal for international force commanders.

It would be remiss of me to let this occasion go without raising the issue of pay and conditions for our Defence Forces. We know from statements made before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence last year that 3,200 personnel left the Defence Forces between 2014 and 2018, which is an astonishing 34.7% of the average strength for those years. As it has been noted, people should not think that this is due to early mandatory retirement ages for the Defence Forces personnel. A staggering 82% of those were premature voluntary retirements.

Problems such as these highlight enormous gaps that exist between the rhetoric of previous Ministers in terms of what is being done to improve retention and morale and the actual reality of life in our Defence Forces. I have repeatedly highlighted this issue as a major concern and would really love to see it addressed.

We know that departures from the Defence Forces rose sharply during the economic crisis, particularly from 2010 to 2012. The 2012 reorganisation of the Defence Forces permanently lowered their strength to the current level. Now that we have officially re-entered recession, it is highly likely that existing retention problems will be deepened. I accept, as the Oireachtas

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Parliamentary Budget Office has pointed out, that the strengthening of our Defence Forces high-level plan shows the Government is progressing the implementation of the Public Service Pay Commission's recommendations. The Oireachtas Parliamentary Budget Office notes that this plan includes reviews of technical pay arrangements, incentivised long-service arrangements, barriers to extended participation and current retention strategies. It appears to provide a framework for addressing the recommendations of the Public Service Pay Commission. All of this will depend on the level and quality of the monitoring of, and reporting on, the implementation of the plan. It is essential for the confidence and credibility of the plan that this happen. I hope the Minister can commit to progressing it here tonight.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Defence Forces for their massive efforts and work in their peacekeeping duties over the years. They are held in high regard all around the world.

The recruitment, retention and remuneration of the members of the Defence Forces have been the subject of extensive public and parliamentary debate over many years. One of the main issues the Defence Forces members continue to face is low pay. The Defence Forces personnel are at the bottom of the public sector pay scale. The main problem is the ban on industrial action. The Army does not go on strike; that is part of its code. Much of the blame for this is laid at the door of the Department of Defence. The Department operates a policy of coming in under budget each year. It does this by keeping the number of soldiers in the Army below the desired strength and by underpaying soldiers and other members of the Defence Forces. That is wrong and needs to be addressed. In this day and age, soldiers or others working in the Defence Forces need proper pay to support their families and put food on the table. The Minister must recognise that. If the Government wants to keep the members of the Defence Forces going, it needs to pay them properly. It is as simple as that.

It has been highlighted to us that sometimes soldiers have to sleep in their cars because they cannot afford to drive them home and drive back again in the morning. That is wrong and needs to be addressed. Defence Forces personnel will work and do their duties, as the personnel before them did, but they need to be paid. It is as simple as that. The Government will have to do that. We are told that more than 3,000 members of the Defence Forces left between 2014 to 2020. In the end, they will drift away completely. They are highly skilled. I know a member from Kilgarvan, Daniel Cremin, and another from Gneevgullia, Breda Sullivan. They are proud to be members of the Defence Forces but they are finding it hard to survive on the pay they are getting. I ask the Minister to address the issue. It is as simple as this: if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys. If the Government is not going to pay the people in the Defence Forces, it not going to have them. It is as simple as that.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.15 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 10 September 2020.