



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 16 Meán Fómhair 2020*

*Wednesday, 16 September 2020*

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10 a.m.

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Before we proceed to Private Members' business, the Chief Whip has an announcement to make regarding the Order of Business.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** In accordance with the Business Committee report of yesterday evening, it is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or the order of the Dáil yesterday, that, in regard to today's business, the Dáil shall sit later than 10.15 p.m. and shall adjourn not later than 11 p.m.; No. 24, motion re workers' rights shall be taken immediately following the Topical Issue debate for two hours, following which the Dáil shall be suspended for 20 minutes; and any deferred divisions that would normally be taken this evening will be taken in the weekly division time on 23 September 2020. It is proposed in regard to tomorrow's business that the Dáil shall sit later than 8.03 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of the debate on the Ban on Rent Increases Bill 2020; the sitting shall be suspended for 20 minutes immediately following the proceedings on No. 6a, motion re restoration of Private Members' Bills; and the Dáil shall be suspended for 20 minutes on the conclusion of statements on climate action, following which a maximum of eight Topical Issue matters shall be taken.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the proposal agreed to?

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** A number of very important votes were to take place this evening. Why is not possible for this voting block to go ahead?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The reason the voting block is not proceeding is that the Standing Orders as set out last week necessitate that it be taken in the convention centre where every Member can be present. There is an ongoing discussion with Deputies and parties on all sides of the House with a view to facilitating more business in Leinster House. However, because today's sitting is in Leinster House, the votes will be deferred until the voting block on Wednesday of next week.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** We were able to have votes in this Chamber last week, which proved that we have a system for allowing a vote to go ahead. I cannot see why the workings of

this House are being obstructed such that votes are not allowed to proceed. It is only common sense that they should go ahead. We have proved we can do it and I do not see why we cannot do it this week.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The explanation has been given. The Business Committee and the Dáil have agreed the Order of Business. We will move on to Private Members' business.

### **Taxi Industry: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— that 19,636 Small Public Service Vehicles are registered with the National Transport Authority in 2020;

— the 3,059 taxis and hackneys which are wheelchair accessible, with many people relying on these daily;

— the very important service taxi drivers provide as part of the public transport system across Ireland;

— the selfless contribution that taxi drivers have made during the pandemic, with many working throughout, despite the dangers, ferrying nurses and doctors to hospitals to ensure they could continue to care for patients;

— the huge challenges faced by the drivers in the taxi industry as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic;

— the evidence given by taxi representatives to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response;

— that 23 per cent of drivers in the industry are aged over 66 years and are excluded from the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme;

— that 15 per cent of drivers in the industry are aged over 70 years, and while the public health advice was for these people to limit the number of close contacts they had, many were forced back to work early, due to the lack of State support;

— the taxi protest scheduled, which highlights the frustration expressed by drivers at the lack of support and assistance from the Government and the National Transport Authority during the current pandemic;

— that the recent media reports, which suggest taxis could be banned from bus lanes, have caused offence and concern in the industry at an already very challenging time;

and

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— the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles (Taxi Advisory Committee) has lost the confidence of many drivers; and

calls on the Government to:

— hold constructive engagements with taxi drivers and their representative groups to discuss the challenges faced by the industry and to listen to the constructive proposals

brought forward;

— introduce a financial assistance package to help drivers to get back to work;

— introduce a temporary moratorium on the issuing of new taxi licences during the current pandemic;

— permit, for the length of the current pandemic, a two-year extension for vehicles which would normally have to be replaced as a result of the nine-year rule, provided such vehicles are safe and roadworthy;

— undertake a review of the current Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles (Taxi Advisory Committee); and

— establish a National Public Transport Forum and produce a long-term strategy for the future viability of the taxi industry here.”

I am sharing time with Deputies Ó Broin, Ó Snodaigh, Paul Donnelly, Ó Laoghaire and Mitchell.

Yesterday, thousands of taxi drivers took to the streets in protest. Nose to tail, they filled four lanes around Merrion Square and every inch between there and Ballyfermot. It was an incredible display of solidarity and strength but it was also a last resort for them. I take the opportunity to commend the four taxi representative groups which organised the protest, namely, the Taxi Alliance of Ireland, the National Private Hire and Taxi Association, the Irish Taxi Drivers Federation and Tiománaí Tacsáí na hÉireann.

Yesterday’s protest was an event of unprecedented scale and was borne out of the absolute frustration of taxi drivers at an unprecedented time. The four representative groups make five demands of Government. First, they want a financial package to help taxi drivers get back to work which recognises that the current one-size-fits-all approach by Government is wholly inadequate for those sectors worst affected by Covid. This is particularly the case for drivers who work for themselves. Second, they call for the retention of and continued access to bus lanes and quality bus corridors for taxi drivers. Third, they are seeking a moratorium on the issuing of taxi licences and the introduction of a buy-back scheme. Fourth is a request for a two-year extension to the nine-year rule. Their fifth demand is for the disbandment of the taxi advisory committee and the establishment of a national transport forum.

These five demands reflect the three core issues which are at the heart of the taxi drivers’ protest and at the heart of the Sinn Féin motion, namely, the need for recognition, respect and support for a sector which provides an essential public service and has been devastated in a very particular way by Covid and the restrictions that come with it. Taxi drivers provide an essential service within our transport network. Many people with disabilities rely on taxis daily, whether for school transport, trips to and from scheduled services or simply to get them from A to B.

The same applies to the transport of essential healthcare staff and goods. Taxi drivers work 365 days a year, 24 hours a day and seven days a week. That is a statement of fact. They should be recognised by Government, and feel recognised by Government, for the essential role they play in our transport services.

The Government should ask itself why they feel no such recognition. Taxi drivers are regulated and licensed by the National Transport Authority, NTA, and display the Transport for Ireland sticker on their vehicles. Why do they not feel recognised or respected? The answer is that they can point to where they have been excluded, isolated and ignored. Their call for the disbandment of the taxi advisory committee is an example of that, as is the handling of the phantom proposal in regard to bus lanes. I am glad the Taoiseach clarified that particular issue yesterday in the Dáil when he said it was not on the agenda. He and the Minister will be held to account in that regard. It is an example of how taxi drivers have been excluded from decisions about their own industry and their own future. That is completely unacceptable. They are at the end of their tether. Work has completely dried up. The industry is entirely dependent on the movement of people, a busy Croke Park, a busy airport, busy nightlife, gigs and festivals, and busy businesses. All of these are gone. Coupled with the wholly inadequate supports provided by the State, thousands of drivers are struggling to make ends meet. To put it bluntly, they cannot make ends meet. Fixed costs have remained in place. The NTA estimates that these are in the region of €15,000 per year. Many taxi drivers have been left with little or no income for six months. If they are lucky, they are on a reduced Covid payment and eligible for a €1,000 grant in support. One should bear in mind, however, that they might be expected to pay €40,000 for a new vehicle on 1 January 2021. They are watching more people enter the sector as licences are being given out, thereby diluting the available work.

I look forward to this important debate. It needs to mark a step change in Government engagement and support for the sector. I urge Members to support the motion, which reflects the drivers' concerns and calls on the Government to step up and recognise the important role taxi drivers play in our transport system.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The taxi industry is in a deep crisis. Yesterday's protest, which saw thousands upon thousands of taxi drivers participate, demonstrates the depth of the problem. The industry has been deeply affected by the closure of the entertainment, sport and tourism sectors - sectors that also need greater attention from this House and the Government.

From the outset, taxi drivers have been let down by this Government. It started with the taxi drivers over-66, many of whom were earning up to €500 per week, not receiving any pandemic unemployment payment despite the fact that they have mortgages or adult children in university. We saw the failure of the Government to properly regulate the insurance industry. Taxi drivers who availed themselves of the pandemic unemployment payment were trying to switch to personal policies but in some cases they were not getting the support they should have received. Then there was the reduction in the pandemic unemployment payment to €203 for taxi drivers based on their 2018 returns, even though they were earning significantly higher amounts in 2019 and 2020. There are upcoming suitability tests and vehicle tests, and the ten-year rule will require taxi drivers who are currently not in employment to replace their vehicles. They have no ability to meet the payments but could be penalised and lose their right to earn an income in the future unless some action is taken on these matters.

All the Government has offered taxi drivers is a grant of up to €1,000, which barely covers the cost of making a vehicle Covid-compliant. From my discussion with taxi drivers in my con-

stituency - I am sure Government colleagues will have had the same experience – I have learned that many are actively considering leaving the industry because there is no prospect of a return to normal employment within the next year or so. As my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, clearly outlined, these are not just problems associated with Covid but deeper problems owing to the failure of the Government to fairly regulate the industry. The industry needs proper regulation, which we would support. The lack of proper regulation is why the Taxi Advisory Committee has lost the confidence of drivers and why the Taxi Regulator is often criticised by many of us, from all sides, in this House for not being responsive to political engagement. That is why the entire system needs an overhaul. I urge Government Deputies not only to support this motion but also to work with us to try to ensure the taxi industry is fit for purpose, properly regulated and working in the interest of drivers and passengers.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Early on in this crisis, I held a Zoom meeting with well over 70 taxi drivers. They were really upset and concerned about their industry. Like many Deputies, I have received hundreds of emails and calls from taxi drivers since the beginning of the pandemic. They feel the taxi industry has been overlooked by the Government. It is now imperative that the Government commit to a financial package to get drivers back to work. As we see from the statistics, many drivers are in the older age group. They may be over 70, and some are over 80, and have no income other than their taxi driver income and pension. A financial package should include a temporary weekly subsidy similar to the wage subsidy given to employees. Grants need to be made available for fixed costs and modifications to cars to protect the driver and passengers. Along with this, licence renewal should be free of charge.

We take a taxi, a public service vehicle, to get from A to B. I learned from talking to many taxi drivers yesterday that they are really concerned about the proposals they have heard regarding the quality bus corridors and the banning of taxis from using them. Many are puzzled, arguing that since a taxi is called a public service vehicle and taxi drivers have public service licences, they should be allowed to use the bus lanes, as they currently do.

Drivers are really concerned about the lack of engagement from representative bodies regarding consultation on traffic and the failure to plan access at major events. This needs to be addressed.

The small public service vehicle, SPSV, suitability test is in place to ensure all public vehicles are up to standard. It should be based on the mechanical performance and safety of the vehicle, not the age. An extension of one to two years would lift the financial burden on a driver imposed by his or her having to replace an end-of-life taxi that is in perfect working order. Many taxi drivers are saying the current period is not long enough and does not give an opportunity. Most drivers have lost a good six months of income. Even those who are back working now say they are really struggling to earn a wage every week.

A national transport forum allowing all bodies that use the public roads to have a positive input regarding the transport system of the State now needs to be established. I urge Members to support this motion.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** For many years, taxi drivers have felt they have not been listened to, and that they have been the last to be listened to when it comes to transport. Yesterday, they came out to say they will not take that any more. There are 22,000 taxis on the road. There are between 1,000 and 1,500 in my county, County Cork, and the drivers' families rely on them. They face enormous uncertainty and potentially very significant hardship. It is a

really worrying time to be in the industry. What the drivers are demanding is not unreasonable. First, they are demanding respect and recognition. They play a crucial role. Their work is often challenging. Taxi drivers have faced abuse and ill-treatment. They are a key link in their communities. They know regular customers and help those with mobility challenges to function. This is true in both urban and rural areas. We all know of taxi drivers who are doing runs for prescriptions and helping customers with messages. They know their customers.

Some have tried to suggest taxis are not public service vehicles. I totally reject that. A taxi is a small public service vehicle; that is what is stated on the licence. Indeed, taxis are very often key enablers of other forms of public transport. I often travel by train to Dublin, and sometimes by bus. How did I get to Kent Station early yesterday morning? I got a taxi. I have often got a taxi from Leinster House to Heuston Station. Taxis still make a significant difference in reducing the number of cars on the road between Cork and Dublin, and on all other such routes.

Taxis are public vehicles and should be treated as such. I am sure the Minister of State is limited in what he can say in his speech but I would appreciate it if he could make it very clear that he too views taxis as public transport vehicles.

There needs to be real engagement. The Taxi Advisory Committee is not fit for purpose. It needs to be reformed. That is clear. I raised this with the previous Minister but there was no progress. I hope that, under the current regime, there will be progress. There needs to be real engagement from now on. The process needs to be representative and give a voice to the owner of a single plate in addition to all others.

Owning a taxi has become more expensive. Fixed costs now add up to over €11,000. Financial assistance is needed.

I wish to raise the issue of insurance. Other Deputies have also raised it. I want to give two examples. In addition to there being high premiums, there is some sharp practice in the insurance firms. One taxi driver sent back a disk over 11 weeks ago but still received two bills for premiums from Liberty Insurance. Some taxi drivers were requested by their insurer to change the date of their direct debit payment but when they did so they ended up paying €20 more. There is some sharp practice that needs to be tackled, as well as the overall need for the reform of the insurance industry. We are also calling for a temporary two-year extension to the rule that requires taxis to be less than ten years old. If ever there was a time for greater flexibility, it is now.

I have also raised the issue of the adverse situations which older drivers face. Up to 23% of the industry's drivers are over 66 but they are not entitled to the pandemic unemployment payment. There is also a proportion of drivers who are over 70. Some of them were forced back to work early due to the lack of State support. That is a situation in which they would rather not have been.

These issues need to be addressed. Taxi drivers need respect. I hope the Minister of State can address that. They also need support. I welcome the fact that yesterday the Taoiseach acknowledged that some of the schemes are not fit for purpose for taxi drivers. Now we need to see action on that as well as on the regulatory issues.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** The Minister of State knows that taxi drivers have been some of the hardest hit workers by this pandemic. They received little support from the Government, despite us hearing that the industry is on its knees. There is no work for taxi drivers. This is

down to the fact that we have no concerts or football matches, people are working from home, and few people are going out socialising.

Throughout the pandemic, taxi drivers have shown that they are essential workers. They dropped our nurses and doctors to work and took patients to hospital. They made sure that thousands of retail workers got to work in order that we could have food on our tables. All they are asking for is some fairness.

Yesterday, I got an email from a single mother who is a taxi driver but has not been working since March. She is struggling to make ends meet. In her email she told me how she is finding it impossible to manage and how she has to borrow from friends and family to pay her bills. Just last week, she was told by the Department that her pandemic unemployment payment was to be cut. How will this woman manage? This is just one example of families who are put to the pin of their collars. There are thousands of other examples of taxi drivers.

Those taxi drivers over 66 are excluded from the Covid payment. These drivers are at high risk and they have been locked out of pandemic supports. Why? What taxi drivers need from the Minister of State is a package of financial supports which will give them a break and to keep our taxis running.

Many drivers in my constituency will be watching this debate. They are waiting and hoping to see that the Government will act. They are worried how they will pay their mortgages and their car loans. What they need to hear today from the Minister of State is that he understands the financial stress they are under and that the Government will support them.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** There would not be a public transport system if it were not for taxi drivers in the State. Many Members have spoken about the necessary work they did before and during this pandemic of taking front-line health and retail workers to work. We always knew taxi drivers did school, hospital and factory runs. They facilitated our economy. They, like others, have been listening to the claim that we are all in this together. We need to ensure there is a Government response which shows them we are all in this together.

Many issues relating to taxi drivers have been not been dealt with over many years. We have the whole issue of deregulation under Mary Harney's tenure many years ago. Several speakers mentioned the absolute necessity that we deal with regulation, as well as the fact that the taxi advisory committee and taxi regulator are not fit for purpose. We need to gear up to ensure we have a system which is absolutely fit for purpose.

I spoke this morning to Paul, a taxi driver in Dundalk. It is always useful to have a taxi driver on speed dial, particularly if one's car breaks down and one has something important to do. Paul told me that previously he would have started work at 6.30 a.m. doing factory runs to the likes of PayPal in Dundalk. Now people are working from home, which we understand given the circumstances, but this means many taxi drivers are not clocking on until 8.30 a.m. They are down a serious amount of money.

However, the one item that is not down for them is their expenses. It is straightforward. The taxi drivers have it down to five demands. I want to raise the spectacularly high rate of insurance they have to pay. Paul told me that he now pays €2,500 per year for insurance on his car. He has had no accident or claims. Seven years ago, he had two cars on the road with properly licensed drivers for less than that.

This is an industry which already had serious viability issues which needed to be dealt with. The industry is now absolutely hammered. Many Members mentioned the ten-year rule. Taxi drivers cannot even earn what they were earning previously. To be expected to sell what in many cases are good cars, cars which have been checked and regulated, because of the ten-year rule is not fair. For a taxi driver nearing retirement, it does not make sense for them to sell a ten-year old car and get a loan for tens of thousands of euro to replace it. The Government needs to step up and ensure supports are given to an industry which is under pressure but which we will need in the future.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth):** I move amendment No. 2:

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

“notes:

— that 19,638 Small Public Service Vehicles (SPSV) are registered with the National Transport Authority (NTA) in 2020;

— the 3,059 taxis and hackneys which are wheelchair accessible, with many people relying on these daily;

— the very important services taxi, hackney, local area hackney, and limousine drivers provide as part of the public transport system across Ireland;

— the important contribution that SPSV drivers have made during the pandemic, with many working throughout to provide important transport services, including transport services for the Health Service Executive (HSE);

— the huge challenges faced by the drivers in the SPSV industry as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic;

— the evidence given by taxi representatives to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response;

— that 15 per cent of drivers in the industry are aged over 66 years and are not covered by the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme and instead can avail of other social welfare payments such as the State Pension;

— that 9 per cent of drivers in the industry are aged 70 years and over, and that the fall in passenger demand for SPSV services occasioned by Covid-19 means that many drivers, in this cohort in particular, may decide not to return to work within the industry;

— the important role of the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles (Taxi Advisory Committee), which has played a crucial role in advising the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and the NTA with proposals to support the SPSV industry through this uncertain time, particularly since the Minister invited proposals from the Committee to support the recovery of the SPSV industry in June 2020;

— the measures taken by the NTA immediately after the start of the pandemic, in March 2020, to assist SPSV drivers, including an extension of licence validity for licences expiring between 13th March and 12th June, 2020 and the publication of information and guidelines

to assist SPSV operators;

— the further measures taken by the NTA to reduce the costs faced by SPSV operators such as waiving late licence renewal fees through to March 2021, extending vehicle age limits for SPSV licences renewed between March and December 2020, and facilitating, in conjunction with the insurance industry, the suspension of insurance for those operators who stop working temporarily;

— the availability of the PUP, introduced in March, to self-employed SPSV operators, many of whom have availed of the payment when passenger demand for SPSV services fell significantly due to Covid-19; and

— the measures available to self-employed SPSV operators under the Government’s July Stimulus Plan, including the Covid-19 Enterprise Support Grant, the Covid-19 Business Loan Scheme, the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme, and income tax relief measures for self-employed individuals who were profitable in 2019 but loss-making in 2020 as a result of the present pandemic; and

acknowledges the Government’s commitment to:

— continue its constructive engagement and dialogue with the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles (Taxi Advisory Committee) and SPSV representative groups to understand fully the issues facing the sector and, to the extent possible, identify measures to support SPSV operators returning to work and the future sustainability of the industry beyond the present pandemic;

— fill vacancies that have arisen on the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles and, insofar as is practicable, ensure a balanced representation of taxi, hackney and limousine drivers from both urban and rural areas;

— continue to ensure that self-employed SPSV operators are able to avail of current and forthcoming financial support measures to the greatest extent possible; and

— keep the question of age limits for SPSVs under review, noting that they have been extended for SPSVs due for renewal for the remainder of 2020.”

I welcome this opportunity to discuss how the pandemic has affected the small public service vehicle industry. The term “small public service vehicle” is a somewhat cumbersome one to use. However, Covid-19 has affected not just taxis but hackneys, local area hackneys serving rural communities, and limousines. Limousines and chauffeur-driven services are especially dependent on overseas tourism and major events for their trade and have been particularly devastated by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the disruption that it has wrought to this country’s vitally important tourism industry.

The small public service vehicle industry is a vital part of the country’s public transport system. We all agree it has made an important contribution since the start of the pandemic. Small public service vehicle operators were correctly recognised as essential workers providing essential transport services throughout the pandemic, including to the HSE.

While there are few parts of the economy that have been untouched by Covid-19, it is fair to say that public transport has been one of the most badly affected sectors. The small public service vehicle industry primarily exists to bring people together for major events and social

occasions. Accordingly, it has been especially hit by social distancing and the need actively to limit and avoid such major events and occasions. The Government recognises this and I will outline some of the measures taken by the National Transport Authority, NTA, the statutory regulator, and the Government to assist and support the industry through this difficult time.

Support for the small public service vehicle sector commenced at the very outset of this pandemic. As Covid-19 began to unfold in March, the NTA acted to support operators by extending by three months all vehicle licences due to expire between 13 March 2020 and 12 June 2020, inclusive. The NTA also published information and guidance on its website to address the concerns of operators and advise on how best they could operate to minimise the risk of spreading Covid-19.

As operators stopped working and the pandemic continued, the NTA's response continued with additional measures. The aim of these measures was to ensure that, wherever possible, operators who decided to stop working temporarily did not face undue costs for doing so. The NTA, in conjunction with the insurance industry, facilitated the suspension of small public service vehicle insurance for those operators who temporarily stopped working and chose to suspend their licences. The authority also waived the late renewal fees, effectively allowing operators to stop operating for up to one year without facing any undue costs for doing so.

As Deputies will be aware, a rule is in place that normally prevents most vehicles from being licensed as taxis and hackneys if they are more than ten years old. This rule is to ensure that equality of service is provided to passengers, recognising that newer vehicles are generally safer, more comfortable for passengers and more environmentally friendly. The adoption of this rule was an important recommendation of the taxi regulation review of 2011. Nevertheless, one of the biggest costs that SPSV operators face is the cost of the vehicle. In recognition of that, and to ensure that SPSV operators do not face undue costs, the NTA has temporarily extended for the remainder of this year the age limit for vehicles due to have their licences renewed. The NTA will continue to monitor this policy as the situation develops, and any decision on a further extension of vehicle age limits will be made closer to the end of the year. This is a sensible approach which recognises the current reality of Covid-19 and the uncertainty it generates. I do not accept the need for a wholesale extension of vehicle age limits by two years for all vehicles, as proposed by Sinn Féin. Frankly, I do not see any reason a new diesel vehicle, licensed last year, should have its age limit extended through to 2031 because of a public health emergency in 2020. I hope this pandemic will be long behind us by 2031, with the national SPSV fleet then composed mostly of low-emission vehicles.

I will also take this opportunity to discuss the supports available to SPSV operators via the Government's unprecedented suite of financial support measures to assist businesses to restart after Covid-19. Recognising the unprecedented nature of the challenge to the national economy, the Government has developed an ambitious series of national initiatives, with broad eligibility criteria. Officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport have worked with their counterparts across the Government to ensure that SPSV operators, many of whom are self-employed, can avail of these measures to the greatest extent possible. Self-employed operators who have closed their claims for PUP on or after 18 March 2020 can avail of the Covid-19 enterprise support grant from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. This grant can be used towards the costs associated with reopening a business and can include the purchase of cleaning materials and personal protective equipment, PPE.

Licensed taxi dispatch operators, self-employed taxi drivers and other SPSV businesses can

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avail of liquidity and investment measures. These include the Covid-19 business loan scheme, which provides for loans of up to €25,000, free from interest for six months, with a Government rebate available for the interest payable for the following six months, and the Covid-19 credit guarantee scheme, which offers a partial Government guarantee of 80% to participating finance providers against losses on qualifying loans to eligible small businesses, a category including self-employed owner-operators of SPSVs. Relief is also available to self-employed SPSV operators through the tax system. Tax relief is available to those businesses which were profitable in 2019 but loss-making in 2020 due to the impact of Covid-19. This relief allows losses of up to €25,000 to be used against profits in 2019.

As I said, many operators, faced with a dramatic fall in demand for their services, have had no choice but to avail of the PUP. Taxis and hackneys are particularly dependent on pubs, clubs and major events for many of their passengers, while limousine operators are especially reliant on overseas tourism that has all but stopped as a result of the pandemic. Recognising that it may be some time before these traditional sources of passengers return, the Government has extended the PUP until April 2021. The NTA continues to monitor passenger demand for services, and this information is fed back to SPSV operators. It is vital that SPSV operators on the PUP are supported by the provision of this type of information so they can make an informed decision regarding when to return to work.

I also acknowledge the important role being played by the taxi advisory committee and its chairman, Con O'Donohoe. The committee was established under legislation to advise the Minister and the NTA, and it features a broad membership of SPSV drivers, dispatch operators, service users and other stakeholders. In June 2020, the then Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, former Deputy Shane Ross, met with the committee and invited it to submit proposals on how best to support the industry and ensure its future sustainability. Officials have since worked with the committee to explore how these proposals can best be implemented, and they continue to engage with the committee to determine how best to support the industry as Covid-19 continues to unfold. The committee is an important forum, and that is why the Government will commit to filling the vacancies on the committee with members who can represent a broad cross-section of interests in this vital industry.

I would especially like to see representatives from the limousine and chauffeur area of the industry in recognition of the particular challenges they face in preparing for next year's tourist season. Dialogue is important and that is why my colleague, the Minister with responsibility for transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, met with representatives of the taxi industry last week to discuss their concerns. The Minister assured representatives that he and his officials will continue to work with the NTA to identify the challenges faced by the industry, to ensure that the industry can continue to access the Government's range of financial supports to the greatest extent possible, and to ensure that operators are not unfairly penalised for taking a break from the industry during this difficult and challenging time.

I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion today and for providing me with an opportunity to discuss these important issues. There is much in this motion with which I agree wholeheartedly. I agree with its positive sentiments regarding the taxi industry and the vital work that sector has rendered throughout the pandemic, particularly to the HSE. I also agree that this is an industry that has faced especially grave challenges as a result of Covid-19. However, because of the measures I have just outlined, I cannot agree that the Government and the NTA have shown the industry a lack of support and assistance. I also cannot agree that there is a basis at this time for the wholesale extension of vehicle age limits as set out in this motion. I also believe

that the taxi advisory committee should be able to continue its statutory mandate by representing the voices and opinions of a broad range of stakeholders, including passengers, to assist the Minister and the NTA in ensuring the provision of a reliable and high-quality public transport service from the SPSV sector. I reject this Sinn Féin motion and, on behalf of the Government, I call on the House to support my amendment.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister of State for his statement. It is disappointing that he cannot support this motion as it is. I think that shows a misunderstanding of the situation and I will outline why. I am speaking in respect of the 227 registered taxi drivers in Mayo in particular. They provide an essential service, especially for rural Ireland. These operators still have to worry about their car loans, tax and NCT costs. I spoke to taxi drivers from all over the country yesterday. Having heard their stories, I commend my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, on moving this motion to highlight the situation.

I will concentrate particularly on older taxi drivers because we know that almost one in five taxi drivers are aged 66 or older. They are not eligible for the PUP. On one hand, therefore, they are being told to cocoon, while on the other they are being forced back to work because they do not have any money and they are being pushed into poverty. One taxi driver told me yesterday that the most vulnerable people are out working to try to keep their heads above water, and that is exactly what they are doing.

We speak about the Government and the muddled nature of its messaging. Taxi drivers are receiving a very clear message, however, especially those taxi drivers and others aged over 66 years. The message they are receiving is that they do not matter. They tell me repeatedly that they are being discriminated against. Regarding the tax write-off, they are told that they should cocoon and not use their cars. At the same time, however, they cannot avail of the tax write-off for the three months. They feel a terrible sense of injustice, therefore, and that they do not matter.

I have heard reports of taxi drivers, and others, aged over 66 years turning to moneylenders just to keep going, and some of them are doing that to send their grandchildren to college. Those are the facts of the matter. These are people who were already in their 50s when they had to bear the costs of austerity, the bank bailout and reckless lending, and everything else, when this country was destroyed. They will not get a loan now. It is fine to state that there is a suite of measures, but I am fed up hearing about this suite of measures. Taxi drivers in that age range will not get a loan now when they go to a bank. They also know that the banks will be calling in existing loans in October. Why do we not support them with the PUP? We also have a school transport crisis. Why do we not explore, even as a short-term measure, the possibility of allowing taxi and hackney drivers fill that gap? Yesterday, the feeling among the drivers of being discriminated against was palpable. We have to listen to the taxi drivers. They are human beings and they are struggling to survive. The suite of measures just does not do it for them. They need a payment. They need to be supported. We need taxi drivers as an essential service. We need them now and we will need them in future. We need to support them. I plead with the Government to listen to the taxi drivers throughout the country who provide this essential service.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** We have heard stories of the invaluable contribution taxi drivers make in big cities and towns. There is no denying the importance of this aspect of this issue. I want to focus on another aspect of how taxi drivers are an essential part of the transport infrastructure in rural constituencies such as Wexford. Rural areas do not have the luxury of rely-

ing on public transport. For many older constituents in smaller villages such as Ballindaggin, Killealy, Ballymurn, Clonroche, Arthurstown and Rosslare, to name but a few, it is taxi drivers who provide the only link to sporting grounds, shops, the GP and the local pub.

Taxi men and women in rural areas are the bone and sinew of our community. They break the cycle of rural isolation for many lonely people. We know their names and we know their stories. We rely on them to take us to the shops or home safely down the dark roads that cannot be walked at night. The gestures, the flying of helicopters or all the clapping in the world will not put one loaf of bread on their tables. What they ask for now is a little bit of support in return. Now is the time to help them in their hour of need.

The motion calls for a financial assistance package to help ordinary hard-working taxi drivers to get back to work and to allow them to continue to provide the essential link in the mobility chain for their communities. It asks for respectful engagement with drivers and their representatives and for their constructive proposals be taken on board. It calls for a temporary moratorium on the issuing of new taxi licences during the pandemic. It asks that we permit for the length of the pandemic a two-year extension for vehicles that would normally have to be replaced as a result of the nine-year rule, providing such vehicles are safe and roadworthy. It asks for a new approach to be taken on engagement with and oversight of the industry and for a stringent review of the taxi advisory committee.

These are not insurmountable requests. They are moderate in nature asking only for what is needed to survive. I, for one, value the contribution made by taxi drivers keeping tight-knit local communities, villages and cities connected. We should act now to give them the support they deserve. It is my belief that every Deputy, particularly those from Wexford, should have no problem in supporting the motion.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I congratulate all of the drivers who took the time to take part in the protest yesterday. It highlighted the importance of unity of purpose and action. Like a lot of other Deputies, I have been asking questions of the Government about how we can help the taxi industry to remain viable in the midst of the Covid pandemic. I have to say I am not impressed and, more importantly, taxi drivers have not been impressed with the vague promises. They ask simple questions about safety measures for themselves and their passengers. They wanted a simple ABC to go back to work but that did not seem to register with whoever was answering the questions.

When I put questions to the former Minister with responsibility for transport, Shane Ross, on a possible stimulus package I was given a spiel about the work the Department has done for taxi drivers, such as temporary licence waivers, guidelines for cleaning and interaction with the insurance industry. I do not believe this is any more than the bare minimum of what the Government should have been doing when the industry was so heavily restricted by Covid. Quite frankly, I do not think much has changed since then.

The taxi regulator has been anonymous throughout and this is one of the reasons we need a permanent national public transport forum. A taxi driver told me that the regulator is great at telling taxi drivers what they cannot do but not great at telling them what they can do to continue to operate safely. This seems to be the general message we hear from taxi drivers. Taxis are left without an advocate and with a Government that imposes higher and higher costs of doing business without mutual benefit for drivers in terms of protection or subsidisation in times of extreme crisis such as Covid. It is clear the Government has to do things differently. We now

have a living with Covid plan but we have to consider establishing a national public transport forum to produce a long-term strategy for the future and viability of the taxi industry.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** The lockdown and restrictions put in place have affected many industries. The pandemic has hit the taxi industry particularly hard. Most taxi drivers have families to support and many have mortgages to pay and, of course, the usual household bills. As self-employed people they need an income to be able to do all of this. In addition, they still have to pay for their insurance, taxi licence fees, car loans and other ancillary costs. They cannot work from home. When they are not out driving their taxis they are not earning money. This forces many taxi drivers to have to go back to work to have an income.

Taxi organisations have said many older taxi drivers are forced to go back to work for financial reasons. The pandemic unemployment payment is paid only to those between the ages of 18 and 66. A total of 23% of taxi drivers are over 66 years of age and as such they do not qualify for the pandemic payment. I have had many calls from taxi drivers who are not eligible for the payment because they are over the age limit. They have detailed to me the hardships they face as a consequence. Such drivers are also a vulnerable group because of their age and many have underlying health conditions. They are putting themselves at potential risk by returning to work to try to earn a living wage. There needs to be some flexibility by the Government to correct this anomaly. The closing of hotels, restaurants, pubs and places of entertainment has meant a sharp decline in taxi use. There has also been a substantial decline in footfall through Dublin Airport. The loss of such large numbers of users has meant that over the course of the pandemic taxi drivers have had to work long hours for little reward.

It would not make any sense in this climate to issue new taxi plates. We should also look at the recommendations from the taxi advisory committee, in particular with regard to the nine-year rule. For a taxi to be deemed fit for purpose it has to go through two comprehensive tests. These are the NCT, which is basically a mechanical test for a vehicle, and a suitability test, which ensures a taxi operates to minimum standards of size, accessibility and comfort. If the taxi meets the requirements of both tests there should be no necessity to get rid of the vehicle once it is ten years old. I opposed this rule many years ago and argued vehemently against it. Does the Minister know that taxis in the United States can be 20 or 30 years old and black taxis in England can be more than 20 or 30 years old? This does not make sense. If there were a proper testing facility with proper means to test and confidence in the tests we should be able to extend these rules.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We have to comply with the time rules.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** I know. Bhí an t-am an-chóngarach.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I thank Deputy O'Rourke of Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. I also thank the organisers and participants of the huge demonstration that took place in Dublin yesterday. In an ideal world, it would have matched up on the same day as this motion was taken but alas, for reasons that have been well discussed, it was not to be. It was a powerful demonstration and one that showed the unity of purpose and cohesion that has emerged in the taxi movement during what it has gone through and continues to go through in this pandemic.

It has been well discussed which sectors have been impacted and to what degree during the pandemic. Obviously the health sectors have been impacted in a particular way. On the economic side, we see the aviation and arts sectors on their knees, the domestic tourism sector

struggling and taxi drivers absolutely on their knees. The extra complexity with taxi drivers is that they are dependent on those previous sectors. They are dependent on a thriving services industry, as was mentioned by the Deputy from Louth with regard to runs to the PayPal factory. It is similar in my constituency with the big employers and in constituencies throughout the country. The early morning couple of hours is vital to get a few quid on the table and enables taxi drivers who are unable to work unsociable hours late into Friday and Saturday nights to make money. Those runs are vitally important and the fact that they, as well as everything else, are gone has been a further nail in the industry.

We have to face facts. The men and women who drive our taxis have never been truly respected by this House or many other sectors throughout the country for the service they provide. During this pandemic they did runs to pharmacies and hospitals and brought people for Covid tests. We all know one of the flaws in the Covid testing system was the requirement to have a car. That impacts in particular on older people and people who do not drive. They are just as vulnerable and, in the case of older people, more vulnerable, to the illness. Taxi drivers stepped up and got them to their tests. Many did so without taking payment. I know that for a fact. They felt it was their opportunity to assist in the all in this together movement of which we have all been a part. It was their public service, the two words in the middle of their four-letter acronym. They did so without too much fuss and for the good of those individuals and the country.

As Deputy Crowe said, they have been given the bare minimum in return. They have been given a few pointers. They have been told they can engage with the insurance industry and that something else will be paused. All we have to do is look back at the time when face masks became compulsory on public transport. There was a large photo op in Merrion Square with the then Taoiseach, Minister for Health, the NTA and Dublin Bus. It was fantastic. I know bus, train and Luas drivers were happy with that clarity and at least knew where they went. Taxi drivers were totally excluded from that, and they are in closer proximity to passengers. We have come a long way with our mask wearing, but we have to remember where we were in June when that decision was made. Taxi drivers were left outside of that and remain so. It is just not good enough.

There was a really powerful meeting of the Covid committee in July with representatives from the taxi industry to discuss what they were going through. Many of their asks are still as, if not more, relevant than they were in July. The taxi industry has been criticised over the years for having too many diverse voices and not being unified, but when it came to the Covid committee it sent a joint submission. Following on from yesterday, we are seeing a unity of purpose and the industry coming together.

The motion is very good and detailed, and I commend Deputy O'Rourke on it. This issue was mentioned in the Covid committee a couple of months ago, but no progress has been made. The Government should consider immediately stopping the issuing of new licences. That is common sense. The Government needs to examine the possibility of a grant system. It cannot be one size fits all. Rather, it would have to be something that has some flexibility. As has been mentioned, while income has hit the floor the costs have remained the same if not increased. They need something more tangible than pointers and guidelines.

Vehicle age limits are an issue and are included in the motion. If there is a way of finding some kind of consensus on extending vehicle age limits, the Government should consider agreeing to that.

Cashless payments, Government transport contracts and school runs have been mentioned. Taxi drivers are more than willing to do school runs. We know Bus Éireann is scrambling to try to find minibuses and coaches to do school runs. Taxi drivers are available and willing to do that work. It would cost money but it would get children to school and ease the burden on parents who are struggling with having to get to their place of work as well as getting children to school.

There needs to be a genuine promotion of the use of SPSV. It needs to be put forward as a genuine option and something that gets the full weight of support. We need taxi drivers. I live in an area that has no rail link and is only served by Dublin Bus. There is a large rural area in my constituency with a very irregular bus service and no rail link. Taxis are a vital public transport solution for people living in such areas. The Government needs to back that up by promoting them.

I mentioned face masks and visors. It almost seems too late to say so, but they are still important. A clear message needs to be given by the Minister to the industry with respect to face masks and visors. That would not only provide clarity, but would also tell those in the industry that the Government cares about them as much as they care about buses, trains and those who are delivering other transport services.

There is a need for a package for the industry and relief for insurance and other costs that have racked up as many have been unable to work. There is also a need to recognise the impact of this situation on the mental health of many taxi drivers at this time. They are, by definition, sole traders and many work on their own. Many are raising families. Many others are on their own. They have endured a particular sense of isolation during the pandemic due to having no work and being unable to discuss that with colleagues as one might be able to if one is part of the company.

It also comes from years and years of not being respected. If there are opportunities to come from this pandemic, one is the possibility of changing that narrative for this sector and others. The motion is a very good way of doing that and that is why we are supporting it.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I too want to thank Sinn Féin for bringing this motion forward. It is important. In many ways, we would have debated this earlier had we been properly functioning before now. I also want to acknowledge the effort that taxi drivers put in to showing the strength behind the need for a financial package to get drivers back to work.

Small public service vehicles are a vital part of the public transport system and we need to acknowledge that. Many taxi drivers ended up in this business following the last crash. Many made work for themselves and it was the tourism sector that was the first to show some green shoots following that crash. We will require them to be in a position to assist in that recovery when Covid is a thing of the past. We have to ensure that this sector, which is predominantly made up of taxi drivers as well as those who drive limousines and hackneys, comes out of this intact. How do we do that? We do it by supporting the industry.

Some people want to get out of the business, but they have loans and outlays that do not allow them to do that. We have all spoken to such people in recent months. They are in a catch-22 situation. Many are putting themselves at risk by virtue of the fact that they are in an age range that should not be mixing as closely as they are required to do at work. Many are not being paid an additional payment over the State pension. That is a difficult circle for them to

square. They cannot square it on their own and requires support.

I know where the licence issue came from. I was on the taxi forum that was set up in the 1990s under the auspices of the Dublin transportation office. There were months of collaboration between various leaders in the taxi system and various agencies of the State. Some very good initiatives came out of that. Taxi drivers did not expect the system to be deregulated before the ink was dry on the agreement. There were very valuable things done in the forum and much of that good work now requires us to take stock and examine how we can make sure the industry continues and is healthy and that people can make an income from it.

While there is resistance to introducing a moratorium on the issuing of taxi licences, such a moratorium could be introduced for a specified period. That could be done quickly. Another issue is that there is not enough work for the number of taxi drivers we have. One only has to look at the taxi apps, which is where people often hail taxis nowadays, to see that there is no work coming in. It is important that we recognise that there are too many people seeking to earn an income from an economy which is not functioning. People are working at home, there is no night-time entertainment and our tourism sector, at least as it applies to outside visitors, is pretty much shut down. These areas represent the work needed to keep the number of taxi drivers we have gainfully employed.

It is really important that we consider Christmas. This is the most significant stretch of time with regard to night-time entertainment and, at this time, the economy functions slightly differently. Now is the time to look at this. We need to get the numbers down right across the country and especially here in Dublin because, if we do not, this period will be very difficult to manage while allowing the economy to function. It is really important to think about this particular sector because there are sectors within sectors. Airport runs, Christmas parties and so on were staples but that work is no longer there. This is a large sector and people need the wherewithal to get out of it at a time when new people are entering it because they are scratching around trying to pay their bills and provide gainful employment for themselves.

This is not the time to take a hands-off approach; it is the time for a hands-on approach. That is why a forum would be particularly valuable, in addition to the other supports that should be introduced. While there has been a great decrease in drivers' income - as much as 40% or 50% - the costs of paying their car loans, insurance premiums and car maintenance have not stopped. A taxi vehicle's life is ten years but this year has been a write-off. That period could be immediately extended. Maintenance obligations with regard to roadworthiness and licence obligations need to be looked at.

I support the use of bus lanes for buses and taxis. We do need to have a discussion, however, as to how to safely share our road space. We can share this space in a way that works for everyone. It is nonsense to mix double-decker buses and bicycles in the same lane. It is not safe for anyone and is not productive. I should be clear that I am not saying that buses or taxis should be excluded from these lanes but we do need to design our roads differently. In places such as Berlin and Paris, there are segregated arrangements. These make these cities safe places for people to function. We need to free up some surface space in this city. This could be done by developing the interconnector, which would allow the rail system to take great amounts of traffic off the roads thereby providing us with the surface space to design a system that functions in the way it should in a city with the amount of movement Dublin has. I am not, however, speaking about Dublin exclusively. We need to design the roads in all our urban settings so they are safe for public transport vehicles and cyclists to use.

It is absolutely essential that action and a hands-on approach are taken immediately. Some initiatives must be taken to show that Government is listening with regard to these huge challenges. I have no doubt that Government Deputies are hearing exactly the same things that I and other Members are hearing when people contact us. There is a sense of disbelief that, for example, people over 66 who have many outlays are required to work even when there is no income coming in. They are in a catch-22 situation. There is also a sense of disbelief that taxi plates are still being issued. A timeline should be developed, which would include a sunset clause if necessary, during which licences would not be issued to avoid making a bad situation worse.

There are things that could be done quickly. I urge the Government to take a number of initiatives in this respect. It can be done. When Covid is a thing of the past, we will require an economy which includes a functioning public transport system and public service vehicles to allow the tourism sector and the economies of our towns and cities to function. The taxi system will be vital to that.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I will be moving my amendment to the motion. I will be sharing time with Deputy Barry.

I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward its motion. I agree with everything in it and I hope Sinn Féin agrees with the additions I propose to make to it. These include a very specific step-down subsidy for taxi drivers to allow them to return to work without losing their pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, if they earn more than that payment. My additions also include grants to cover the ongoing costs of insurance, car loan repayments, licence renewal and fuel, all of which drivers simply cannot cover, even as these debts and costs accumulate, given that the work now available to drivers has decreased by 60%, 70% or 80% and will remain sparse as a result of public health measures. Taxi drivers understand these measures and have supported them but they are the economic victims of them and need supports for their support for the public health measures.

I have also added that there should be a complete moratorium on the issuing of new licences during the pandemic and that there should be a scheme under which the NTA would buy back the licences of taxi drivers who may, for health or other reasons, wish to exit the industry so that they can cover the investment they made to get into the industry in the first place. These are in addition to the other demands included in the motion.

Yesterday's magnificent taxi protest was the biggest such protest that has ever taken place in this State. It dwarfed the expectations of the organisers. In every sense, it was a brilliant show of solidarity. Men and women, black, white and brown, were united as taxi drivers whose livelihoods have been devastated as a result of public health measures. They are now pleading with the Government but soon they will be demanding that the Government reciprocate the solidarity they have shown with real supports.

I stress to the Minister of State that the taxi drivers' first impulse was not to protest. I know this because, months ago, I met the four groups that organised it to discuss what to do about their plight. They asked us to request that they be allowed appear before the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response and that I bring their demands to that committee, as I had brought them to the current and past Taoiseach, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, and Minister for Finance. They hoped that, if they set out their plight, a reasonable Government would understand and respond. They hoped they would not need to protest and debated long and hard

about doing so at all. It finally became clear that, despite a lot of tea and sympathy from the Government and the Covid-19 committee, absolutely nothing was forthcoming for them in the July stimulus package and there were no clear commitments to give them income subsidies or provide access to the grants they need to cover their costs. The Government was not going to issue a moratorium on licences, extend the ten-year rule for the replacement of their vehicles or, critically, dissolve the Taxi Advisory Committee, which has failed as a representative organisation because it had barely any taxi representatives on it in the first place. It became clear that a genuinely representative national taxi transport forum where the voices of the taxi drivers themselves can be heard and where their representatives put forward their case was not going to be established. The Government has ignored all of this.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Deputy sharing time?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I am taking seven minutes and my colleague is taking three. The Government has ignored all of these issues and the sword of Damocles now hangs over taxi drivers because of the plan to cut the pandemic unemployment payment tomorrow. That will also affect other workers. I have just come from a demonstration of events workers. Some 22,000 taxi drivers and their families and 35,000 events workers, musicians, crew and so on will feel the axe fall upon them. Their incomes are going to be slashed on top of their already devastated livelihoods. They are left between the devil and the deep blue sea. They must decide whether to stay on a reduced payment which will plunge them into poverty or return to work where only 20% or 30% of their usual work is available and be plunged into poverty in that way, while losing access to the payment. What part of “income subsidy” does the Government not understand?

The Government does understand the concept for big business. Billions of euro have been thrown, in double quick time, at big, often profitable corporations with much larger capacities to absorb the costs accumulated during the pandemic because they have big cash reserves. Those sorts of companies get billions of euro but the taxi drivers, events, arts and music people, who have no shock absorbers or buffers, so to speak, get nothing. It is not good enough and I know, because I have been working closely with them, that the taxi groups will be back. This Government must respond to their just and fair demands and show them some respect for what they do.

The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, must learn that taxi drivers are an integral part of the public transport system; he does not seem to understand that. Taxi drivers take us home to our doors late at night. They offer the only door-to-door transport service that exists. They take people from airports, kids to school and disabled and elderly people to places where buses cannot. They work unsociable hours for very little. All they are asking is for a helping hand and some measures that would not cost the Government anything in order to help them through this time and show them a bit of respect. That is what we are asking. We do not need more sympathy or this frankly insulting Government amendment which should be withdrawn because it does not address their concerns. They will be back outside Leinster House, surrounding these buildings, in the next short while if the Government does not show them some respect, give them some support and withdraw the threat of cutting their incomes tomorrow because it will plunge them further onto their knees.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy is, technically speaking, not allowed to move his amendment yet because the first amendment has already been moved by the Minister of State.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Was yesterday's taxi protest the largest in the history of the State? If it was not, it was certainly the largest taxi protest seen in this country this century. Why would it not be? Nearly one taxi driver in four is disqualified from the Covid payment on the grounds of age. The Government has refused to put together a proper package to assist drivers to go back to work.

How many people were at the protest? I am not sure if anyone can say with certainty. The taxi unions originally estimated that there would be 1,500 cars. We can say with certainty that the numbers at the protest were significantly greater than that. Could it have been as many as 5,000 cars? I think it might well have been. When the cars gathered in Conyngham Road, outside the Phoenix Park, the queue stretched back through Chapelizod and all the way to Ballyfermot.

Where did the taxi protest feature on the Nine News on RTÉ last night? It was not the first or second story, which were about the Government's Covid plan and the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. It was not the third, fourth or fifth story. I do not think it featured on the news at all last night, which is incredible.

We have seen this before. In the aftermath of the banking crisis, in 2009 and 2010, workers' protests were downplayed on the RTÉ news and often not reported at all. That was shown most graphically in the biased coverage of protests against the water charges. Are we seeing the same thing again this time?

The struggle of the Debenhams workers is 160 days old but has not received nearly the level of coverage that it deserves from RTÉ. It is a struggle that is a litmus test for how workers are treated during this Covid crisis. The taxi drivers are now being given the same treatment by RTÉ. It is not good enough. Deputies from Solidarity-People Before Profit will be keeping a close eye on all the media coverage, including RTÉ's coverage, of workers' and taxi drivers' struggles over the next while. If there is not the fair, balanced and adequate coverage that it deserves, we will be raising the matter and calling it out on the floor of the Dáil.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta O'Rourke mar gheall ar an rún atá os comhair na Dála agus mar gheall ar an ábhar uafásach tábhachtach seo a chur faoi bhráid na Dála. The taxi driver sector has suffered chronic neglect and abandonment over the past number of years. It has been forgotten about, mistreated and failed by elected representatives. There is no justification or explanation for that Government failure of a sector that is important to society and the economy.

It is not just the taxi sector where the Government shows an aversion to helping. A number of sectors are affected, including the childcare sector, the pub trade, which has got much of the blame for Covid, and trainee nurses throughout the pandemic. It leads me to ask a number of questions. Are there sectors in Irish society that have great influence with the powers-that-be and the media? Are there other sectors in Irish society that because of income, class, or whatever, do not have the necessary influence, pull and ability to communicate and have their voices heard by the Government? It is dangerous if that is the case because if the Government ignores a sector of Irish society that is massively suffering and forgets about them, it is guaranteed that the issue will fester and become more difficult to deal with in the long run. Indeed, it is the Government's inaction that led to the massive strike and protest that was held yesterday.

Thousands of drivers took to the streets because a sector with 22,000 jobs is at stake. Each

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of those 22,000 jobs has a family, children and a household behind it. Those incomes have been so devastated that these individual taxi drivers were forced to take to the streets yesterday. There has been an incredible level of unity within that sector. The National Private Hire and Taxi Association, the Irish Taxi Drivers Federation, the Taxi Alliance of Ireland and Tiománaí Tacsáí na hÉireann were on the streets yesterday. That level of unity and sense of purpose among taxi drivers shows that they mean business.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, demand for taxi services in this State has collapsed, dropping almost 70%. That is a devastating reduction within any market and a devastating reduction in incomes. Several taxi drivers I spoke to said they have barely been able to afford to keep their vehicle on the road never mind take in an income necessary to deal with their families. Is it possible that particular families could have their conversation outside of the Chamber?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputies, please. We are interrupting the speaker.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Almost one in four taxi drivers currently are over the age of 66 and they are being denied income support from the State. They are told it is because they are over the qualifying age. That is incredibly wrong. Anybody whose income has been reduced by such a level should have a situation where the State should be able to help them. There should not be discrimination between different sectors with regard to income falling. What were the thousands of taxi drivers protesting for? When I spoke to them directly, I was absolutely-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will have to ask Deputies to stop, please.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is incredible. There is a door outside.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** If you could speak through the Chair please, Deputy Tóibín. I am apologising. Can I have the other Deputies' co-operation, please? Continue on, Deputy Tóibín.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I have great respect for the Deputies who are making the noise at the moment but telephones are going off in this Chamber regularly. Conversations such as this cause difficulty when people are trying to focus on representing the taxi sector.

I was surprised by how reasonable the demands of the taxi sector were. The taxi drivers know the State is in chaos at the moment. They know that massive difficulties are being experienced by society in general. Their asks are not unreasonable whatsoever. The central demand of taxi drivers is that they receive a financial support package from the Government. That is a completely reasonable response to a sector that has lost massive income. Taxi drivers have seen that income depleted significantly. Drivers have had to fork out massively on hand sanitizer and Perspex and Plexiglas dividers to ensure they can work in a safe manner, that their passengers are kept safe, and that they meet Government guidelines. However, they have had no support from the Government on that. If the Government continues to ignore taxi drivers, then I believe it will be responsible not just for strikes but for the loss of thousands of jobs in this State.

There is a fundamental issue here with regard to representation. I always believe that it should be ensured that any sector, whatever it is, has a voice and is listened to. Quite simply, however, the taxi advisory committee is not fit for purpose. It is not a representative body of taxi drivers' needs. One taxi driver who sat on the committee for two years said to me that literally every time their needs and voices were made on that particular forum they were silenced or outvoted. When grassroots organisations are silence or disempowered, the Minister of State

can bet his bottom dollar he will have a crisis on his hands.

There needs to be a fit-for-purpose transport forum representative of unions and workers throughout the transport sector. We have seen bus, Luas and train drivers having to take to the streets and now it is the turn of the taxi drivers. Any Government worth its salt should have a radar open to see which sectors are in trouble and must be listened to and fixed before it comes to the breaking point of people taking to the streets.

I wish to mention one other issue. Yesterday's crisis in the Dáil is a phenomenal comparator to what is happening in the taxi sector. The taxi sector is basically told to get on with it. Drivers are told to sort it out themselves or take to the street to get their voices heard. They are told to just keep driving even though they may themselves be in difficulty, yet the cosseted political class yesterday literally closed everything down knowing well their incomes will not be touched in any way. A decision was made to close the Chamber down with no discussion between the political parties. The first I heard about it was when RTÉ's correspondent, Deputy Alan Kelly, made a tweet on the television yesterday. It is just not a logical situation that the Dáil can be so cosseted while, at the same time, 22,000 jobs in the taxi sector are under such pressure.

I ask the Government to make sure it gets out of its tunnel vision. We must reduce Covid-19. We must make sure we take precautions and that we are careful and cautious. However, people have to live with this particular illness as well and we must make sure the health service and different sectors can function. The fact that the taxi service is being left to swing in the wind in this time shows amazing tunnel vision by this Government.

I wish to raise several key questions before I finish my contribution. Why did the Government not recognise the particular vulnerability of the taxi industry to the pandemic and Covid-19 guidelines at the start and do more? Why has the Government shown such an aversion to helping struggling sectors directly impacted by Covid-19, the lockdown and the continued Government regulations such as the pub trade, the childcare sector and the taxi industry? Why does the Government consistently let the suffering go on to such a level that people are forced to strike outside Leinster House?

Caithfimid i bhfad níos fearr a dhéanamh don earnáil sin atá timpeall na tíre agus atá ag fulaingt mar gheall ar an ngalar seo agus mar gheall ar easpa suime an Rialtais seo. Ag bun an chairn sa tír seo tá na hearnálacha ina dtuilltear na hioncaim is lú. Níl an tionchar ag na hearnálacha sin agus ba cheart go mbeadh. Níl a fhios agam an bhfuil discrimination ná class taobh thiar den easpa fócais orthu, ach muna bhfuil an Rialtas sásta cabhrú leis an earnáil tacsáí, beidh sé ag cruthú i bhfad níos mó fadhbanna, fadhbanna sóisialta agus fadhbanna do theaghlaigh thart timpeall na tíre san áireamh. Beidh fadhb ollmhór iompair ann freisin mar caithfidh go mbeidh an córas seo ann don tír sa todhcháí.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I compliment the proposer of the motion. I met the taxi drivers yesterday, who were on the streets in their thousands. They are dignified and decent people who just want to make a living, but they have been abandoned by this Government, like many other sectors, especially the people over 66. They have been totally thrown to the wolves. They have not got a shilling from anyone.

Years ago, a person could not get a taxi licence. There was huge lobbying then to loosen up the situation and the regulation was lifted. There are too many taxis now. They came out like

confetti at a wedding and it has flooded the market. This Covid-19 crisis, however, has really threatened to undermine them. Remember, all of them have wives, families and parents as well and some are trying to support them despite the hours they have to work. At times, they are subject to disquieting treatment by occasional members of the public who abuse and threaten them and God knows what else. They have a high-risk job. They have now had to kit out their vehicles with Perspex shielding and disinfectant and do that a couple of times a day. It is a huge onus on them but the Government is not listening.

I should have said in at the first instance that I wish the Minister of State well in his new role. I know he is an understanding man and he will try to make some movement here. However, we cannot keep talking about it. These people cannot keep waiting. They are disappearing. They have loans and they must replace their cars every ten years, get them tested twice yearly and get the taxi test as well. It is an onerous and responsible job and insurance is also difficult. They need to be supported. They cannot wait for the crumbs from the table. They are not even getting the crumbs from the table now, especially those who are over 66.

It is amazing that number of people could turn up last night and not even get a mention on the news channel. It is reserved for the likes of Deputy Alan Kelly who did not tell us first about the adjournment of the Dáil. He told us about it coming back, that he had made a phone call to the Taoiseach, and he claimed he was responsible. That is what he told people in County Tipperary today. Bryan Dobson had better watch out because if Deputy Kelly does badly in the next election, he will be straight into the RTÉ studio for the “Six One News”. That is what he will be doing. It is farcical of RTÉ, which has a duty to cover protests like this and, indeed, the protest last Saturday. People can complain about it but they are entitled to protest. We are threatening now to bring in legislation to stop it. RTÉ, the channel for which we pay a licence, has a duty to cover this but it is not doing so and it is shameful. It has Deputy Alan Kelly for breakfast, dinner and supper. Gabhaim buíochas.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Fleming, on his appointment and wish him well in his new role. It is very hard for ordinary people to grasp what is going on at present. First, it is Government policy to tell us to use public transport. Then it is advertising telling us to use only 50% of it or not to use it at all if we can do so. Taxis are needed and are not being supported. Many taxis in Killarney and Tralee are not working at all; they have no work. Nightclubs are closed and there are no tourists around. They just do not have work and are at their wits' end as to how to continue. Bills are coming in for insurance, licences and different things. Hackneys in rural places like Kilgarvan and Kenmare are vital to people who do not have cars but they are struggling to hold on to their licences. Only for the fact that some of them have some other part-time work or are part-time farmers, they would not survive at all. I am appealing to the Government to do something for them.

The first and the easiest thing to do is to extend the ten-year rule to 15 years. Their cars are tested so much. Taxi and hackney drivers keep their cars well in any event. Can this ten-year rule be lifted and can taxis and hackneys be given another five years because this makes sense? Can some kind of financial support be given to them also? I know that the Government is under pressure. Every other sector is being looked after but hackneys and taxis are not. I am appealing to the Minister of State because they are a vital cog in our communities.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I congratulate the Minister of State on his appointment as this is my first time speaking to him since his appointment.

The plight of taxi drivers affected by the Covid-19 pandemic has been very severe. It is impacting on taxi drivers across the entire country. Clearly, taxi drivers have been forgotten in the response to Covid-19. The Government must step in and establish a taxi Covid-19 response unit in conjunction with the National Transport Authority. These drivers depend on people moving around. They are being squeezed out of business with the closure of pubs, which are only reopening now. We debated this issue for four years in the context of the road traffic Bill, where every effort was made to ensure people used taxis. Now the doors of pubs are shut so people are not getting taxis to go to and from the local pub or wherever. The drivers depend on people moving around but now that people are not doing so in the normal way, business has been enormously affected.

Taxi drivers estimate that up to 20% of self-employed drivers will be out of business within a year. The sector must be supported by Government. This motion comes at a critical time. Additional Government support for the sector is now an urgent necessity. Taxi drivers estimate that their business has dropped by up to 90% overall compared to pre-Covid-19 levels. Mr. Jim Waldron, spokesman for the National Private Hire and Taxi Association, has called for an extension of the age limit of vehicles. This is very important and the Minister of State has to step in here. Some of these vehicles are in meticulous condition but are being taken off the road after ten years.

Unfortunately, many taxi operators across the country have already decided that driving taxis is no longer a viable business. It is important to remember that many taxi operators have substantial debts to service, including mortgages and other loans, together with the many costs associated with raising a family. That applies right across the board, to both hackney and taxi operators. I stood outside with them yesterday during the protest and heard comments from people from my constituency, including Denis Mangan from Kinsale, and from taxi operators who are working tirelessly but are finding it extremely difficult.

I mention also the many taxi drivers who are over 66 years of age who received no pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and had to stay at home. These are people who have paid their taxes for many years. All the fees for these people over 66 years of age should be abolished as it is very unfair to them at this time.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** At the outset I thank the Sinn Féin Party and, in particular, Deputy Darren O'Rourke, for their excellent work in bringing this very important issue to the floor of the House. They deserve to be complimented. This is a very important matter and affects every constituency, town, village, by-road and section of society because our taxi and hackney drivers and bus operators have served us well over many decades. They are suffering and enduring a very difficult time because the supply of business to them has gone down enormously with the absence of night life in our towns and villages. They are still there and we want them to be there in the future.

Yesterday's protest had a particular purpose. I compliment everybody who took part in that protest, including the taxi representatives from County Kerry, the county I represent. Taxi drivers from Cordal, Castleisland, Tralee, Killarney, Kenmare or Kilgarvan and the hackney drivers from all those areas have served us well, including in Dingle town where they have been doing excellent work over many decades. They all came here yesterday to make their voices heard in the Houses of the Oireachtas and they had a very clear message. They want to see a situation where their businesses will survive this crisis and that in the future we will have a taxi service that will be up and running and operating in all the areas I named in my county as well

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as throughout the country. If people are socialising or going to work, whether it is locals or tourists, we want the service to be there.

I dealt with a very large number of taxi drivers who were in real trouble during the height of the lockdown. Many were able to secure payments but many others for different reasons were not or were cut off the payment and now find themselves going off the edge of a cliff in the next couple of days. I want to ensure the Government realises that. I wish the Minister of State well in this role, and I really mean that. It is no good crying about this afterwards. We have to create a situation where the measures that need to be put in place to safeguard the future livelihoods of our hard-working taxi service are put in place. I thank the taxi drivers for coming here yesterday as I know this was not easy-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are going to run out of time and it is important that everybody has an opportunity to speak. I call the Independent Group and Deputies Harkin and Pringle, who are sharing time.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, on his appointment and I wish him well.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this Sinn Féin motion which concerns the specific difficulties and challenges faced by the taxi industry due to Covid-19, and crucially, to agree with many of the proposals which will help the industry to survive in the short term, and importantly, to be sustainable in the longer term. We have already heard the statistics from many Deputies.

It is worth reiterating the fact there are approximately 20,000 small public service vehicles registered with the National Transport Authority, NTA, in 2020 and approximately 26,000 qualified drivers. In the constituency I represent there are 153 taxis and hackneys in Sligo, 52 in Leitrim, 307 in the whole county of Donegal and 105 in the entire county of Roscommon. I ask Deputy Pringle not to worry as I am not suggesting that I represent all of those taxis, just the ones in the south of his county. I quote those figures to emphasise the size of the industry, the number of people who work in it, the number of families who rely on it to pay the mortgage, its importance in providing public transport for all, especially accessible transport, and the contribution it makes to the State in paying taxes, VRT, road tax, licences, etc. A taxi is not just a man or woman with a car for hire, it is an essential service. It is a business to support families and a significant contributor to the economy of the country. The taxi industry virtually collapsed in the period from March to June. It recovered, depending on the part of the country in question, 20% to 30% of its former revenue during the summer. Now, according to many taxi drivers I have spoken to, with summer over and staycations largely over, the business is diminishing again. While I am happy to see the safe reopening of wet pubs, this means people will be able to socialise locally and not have to travel to larger towns to go to a restaurant. This will impact on the taxi business. The chauffeur industry is virtually non-existent. It is down 98% in revenue since 2019 and it represents about 10% of the industry. It relies on corporate, leisure and tourism visitors to Ireland. There is no business. Taxis and cars are locked up and parked up.

The proposals in this motion, if implemented, would make a real difference to the taxi industry. Many Deputies have spoken about the moratorium on issuing new taxi licences during the pandemic. I do not think the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, agreed with this but it makes economic sense. I do not see any downside to this. It would give people in the industry a tiny bit of certainty about their future.

We also ask for a two-year extension for vehicles that would normally have to be replaced in ten years, where the vehicles are assessed as roadworthy. I listened to the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, earlier when he argued against this proposal and I understand there is some flexibility shown by the NTA. However, the losses being incurred by everybody in the taxi business are ongoing and mounting so when the effects of the pandemic are lessened, and we do not know when that will be, they will spend years trying to make up their losses. They are not starting with a clean sheet and, as the Minister of State mentioned, there are loan schemes and credit guarantee schemes and that is great for cash flow. However, surely he realises that those loans have to be repaid. The reality of business is that if one does not make a few pounds, one goes to the wall. A €6 taxi fare here and an €8 taxi fare a few hours later is the reality for many in the business. The Minister of State's idea that a six-month or nine-month extension to the ten-year rule will be sufficient ignores the reality of the crisis this industry faces.

The taxi sector needs sector-specific support. Rates breaks have been given, rightly, to other businesses. Maybe that could be mirrored by a vehicle registration tax rebate, depending on the age of the cars. This motion provides a reasonable and credible template for action and I am happy to support it.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I fully support the motion before the House today because it is reasonable. I also support the amendment proposed by People Before Profit because the motion and the amendment combined would make a huge difference to many working lives across the State and would make very little difference to public finances and to the State. Those should be the criteria used by the Government in deciding whether to go along with the measures.

There was the excuse at the start of the lockdown that this was a knee-jerk reaction and we had to act quickly. The State had to respond quickly and of course mistakes were made but we have done it now. We are now months into it and gearing up for a period of prolonged lockdown. The State should be able to respond now and it is not enough to say the State cannot do it. The State should be able to respond fully and only by that response will the State preserve enough of a functioning economy and business sector to have something to come back to in the future. That needs to happen.

The people left behind in the original changes during the lockdown, such as taxi drivers and arts workers, are the people who should be looked after now. It is by protecting them that the State ensures they carry on into the future. Measures such as the introduction of a moratorium on new taxi licences make perfect sense. For the next year or so, no more licences should be renewed. The work is not there, so why would the Government do it? The extension for vehicles is reasonable as well and makes perfect sense. With the NCT, if a vehicle is deemed roadworthy, it should be roadworthy to be used as a taxi as well. People Before Profit's amendment proposing a taxi buy-back scheme to allow taxi drivers to exit the industry is perfectly reasonable. Those things should be considered and done by the Government straight away to ensure the taxi industry survives and people survive.

It has been mentioned by other Members that we are talking about families and maintaining family incomes into the future. In rural Ireland, very often the people with the taxi or hackney licences also provide school buses and bus transport. They have been hit right across the board in relation to the changes made to transport and having to deal with the uncertainty of that alongside the uncertainty with this business. It is mounting uncertainty across the board for these people and the Government needs to respond in a positive way to ensure they can continue their business with some certainty. These proposals will do that.

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It is pointless asking this but I will ask anyway. I ask the Government to take it on board and have a meaningful motion passed here today, rather than the Government amendment, which is designed just to make the Government look good and have that on the record of the Dáil. This motion has been put forward in a spirit of wanting to do the best for everybody and it is a chance for the Dáil to come together, adopt the measures and ensure this happens to benefit the people who need it. It will also send out a positive signal from the Government, which has had a few hectic days, weeks and months on an ongoing basis, due to bad decisions and not making decisions properly. This is a good decision that the Government can make to make a difference to people's lives.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank Deputy Pringle. I call the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming. Congratulations and the best of luck to him.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming):** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I wish her luck in her position as well. I acknowledge the kind remarks from Deputies on my appointment as Minister of State. I am standing in today for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

I thank the proposers of this motion and all those who have contributed to this important and timely debate on an important issue. I take the point that the protest yesterday was a large and reluctant protest. People have said that a lot of discussion went on over many months and it was the culmination of understandable frustration that brought people onto the streets yesterday. It has been said that these issues cannot get concluded and resolved in one debate here and will have to be watched closely and carefully from here on in as we progress through living with Covid-19. There are sectors of the economy which will be more impacted than others. When I met officials from IDA Ireland yesterday, I was told that some sectors of the economy, such as some of the multinationals, are doing quite well but the other three quarters of the Irish economy, including home-grown businesses, sole traders like taxi drivers and small businesses, are affected more gravely and deeply than some other areas. This is an issue that has to get special attention on an ongoing basis as we work through this crisis.

The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, met the taxi representatives last week to discuss issues and concerns of their members and it was a constructive meeting. He undertook to raise the issues discussed at the meeting with the NTA. This pandemic has drawn into relief the important role of essential workers. Transport is one of those areas and taxi drivers are key workers in the front line who bring people to and from hospitals, schools, airports, businesses and other locations. Many Members have been critical today of the levels of support available to the taxi and SPSV operators, but as my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, outlined earlier, from the very start of the pandemic the NTA has recognised the impact this crisis has had on those operators and has been providing support and assistance accordingly. At the very outset of the pandemic, the NTA extended licences to ensure no licences expired from 13 March until 12 June. It extended the vehicle age limits and waived the licence renewal fees. It worked with the insurance industry to ensure the operators who decided to stop working could suspend their insurance cover, thereby reducing a very large cost which taxi and SPSV operators face on an ongoing basis.

The NTA has been in ongoing contact with everybody in the industry. There have been tens of thousands of emails directly to the operator and there have been 150,000 text messages, so there are a lot of people in the NTA making sure there is good communication with the people directly involved in the sector, and more than 7,000 individual emails have been given to opera-

tors about individual queries. It is fine to issue a broad press release but the individual operator is the person who counts. The NTA handled in excess of 63,000 phone calls from the people concerned, so there is as reasonable a flow of information as could be expected in this pandemic when the restrictions on people being present in the office are considered.

The Government also ensured SPSV operators have been able to access the measures announced under the July stimulus to the fullest extent possible. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, for giving an excellent summary of these to the House earlier. I highlight that as part of the July stimulus, the income tax relief for self-employed individuals allows taxi drivers and other SPSV operators to reduce the income tax payable on last year's profits using losses incurred this year. This is an important measure and should benefit the cash flow of all self-employed individuals, especially taxi drivers. It is also more than that, as it actually allows a refund and a positive cash flow. As such, where a taxi driver, like many people, would have paid his or her preliminary tax last autumn, which would probably have been 90% or nearly 100% of his or her total tax due for this year, and now know that taxi driver is in a loss for this year, he or she can get a refund of some of the money paid last year. Thus it is a real, serious cash flow benefit this year. It also means they do not have to pay tax although they may make a profit this year, because they can use the loss this year against the profits they made and the income tax they paid last year and they can get a refund on that, which is a benefit here specifically.

The cost of PPE equipment, the kitting-out of taxis and whether screens are required has been raised. I again highlight the Covid-19 enterprise support grant. This is a payment from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection which is available to self-employed individuals, including many small service operators, who are not liable for commercial rates. Earlier in the year, most of the reliefs for small business required a person to be a ratepayer. This is a small grant but it is a cash flow grant and it does help people. It can be used against the cost of screens or PPE for taxis and is available through the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and is for people who are not paying rates. We have seen it extended to the bed and breakfast sector in recent days as well. We are looking at how individual sectors have not come into the area of grants to give some assistance, which I accept is small, but it is some assistance and will help people on a short-term basis.

The issue of the moratorium on SPSV licences has been raised by a number of Members. Everyone knows that the Government has not exercised quantitative controls on the number of taxi licences for over two decades. Many of us who are old enough to remember and were in Dublin at the time recall the difficulty of getting taxis at night because the numbers were restricted. It was not fair to the public or to the taxi drivers and it was a bad service at that time. Those controls were removed and I am a little bit surprised that people are saying that it would be a help to reintroduce them. I understand the point because the business is not there for those already in the taxi business and the idea of new people coming in may not seem right, but reintroducing controls is not something the Government would be supportive of. More important, however, and it goes without saying based on what has been said here, there are few or no new applicants for new public service licences in any event. It is an interesting point but a moot one because nobody is rushing to get into the industry, based on what people have said here and the truth of the situation. I understand the point to an extent but it is a moot one when one considers the reality of it.

The issues of taxis and bus lanes was also mentioned. There is absolutely no question of any change to that because they are part of providing public transport 24-7, unlike the trains, buses and the Luas, although some buses around the country operate on a 24-hour basis. There is no

question of changing the rules on the bus lanes.

The issue of the age limits on vehicles was also mentioned. One measure taken by the NTA to reduce the burden on operators was to extend the age limits for vehicle renewals from March until the remainder of this year. As the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, outlined earlier, these limits are in place for sound, well-grounded reasons because everyone knows vehicles of a high standard are needed. That is important and nobody has disputed that here. Nevertheless, the NTA recognises that an operator would be placed in a difficult financial position if he or she was required to replace his or her vehicle right now in the middle of the present pandemic. For this reason, the authority has extended the age limit for vehicles due for renewal this year and it has pledged to continue to monitor the situation and consider the need for any future extension closer to the time. That is fair and practical. We cannot be extending it just like that for a two-year period. We have done it for this year and we will review it, and if necessary it will be looked at and considered next year, but it is not necessary to do so now. Nobody has an immediate issue or difficulty as we speak with that renewal, and when the time comes, it will be looked at again, and if need be I hope that the NTA will repeat the extension it has already done. That is a practical and sensible way to approach this rather than changing the rules for the long term because we will get back onto those issues as well.

I am conscious that it has been stated that 24% of taxi drivers are over 66 years of age, and in that situation they would be on the State pension and would not have got the Covid payment. That is an issue that has been raised but we all know and understand from our daily work that, with the exception of the carer's allowance, a person cannot draw two social protection payments, in this case the State pension and another payment connected with unemployment. That has been the way we have operated and it is a bigger issue if people want to go down that particular route.

The Taoiseach said yesterday that the Government is also considering how the pandemic unemployment payment could be combined with other measures that would enable individuals working in sectors where the level of activity is much lower than it would have been prior to the onset of Covid-19 to earn additional income without losing the basic pandemic unemployment payment. In light of that particular remark, we are not in a position to accept the Sinn Féin motion on behalf of the Government and we call on the House to support the counter-motion proposed by the Government.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State. We await now the commencement of Leaders' Questions.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Sorry?

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** It has to come back to us.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** There are ten minutes left.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There are ten minutes left. Okay.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** Or almost ten minutes.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** May I continue, a Cheann Comhairle? For two and a half minutes.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Leaders' Questions was to be taken at 12 noon. I do not know where this is coming from.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** I fell behind earlier on.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Okay. Deputy Buckley.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** Go raibh maith agat. I will try to cut it down. I congratulate the Minister of State on his appointment. I commend my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, on bringing this motion forward. I am very disappointed the Government is still pushing forward with its countermotion. I have read it and there is very little of substance whereas the Sinn Féin motion deals with what the taxi drivers actually need to exist and to live. As many people have said, this is financial assistance. More than 20,000 families are affected by this. The taxi drivers have been out of work for seven months with no money but still have bank bills and mortgages and they do not know what is happening. I have been in constant discussion with local taxi and hackney drivers. This morning I found out that the taxi drivers are planning phase 2, so it is not going to go away.

The issue of those aged over 66 and 70 has been raised many times. The Minister of State correctly said they are probably getting the State pension and cannot get a second payment.

The reason many of these people work as hackney or taxi drivers is they cannot afford to live on a pension and it makes it very difficult. All these people want is a helping hand to survive. It is mentally affecting the families and drivers and obviously there is a knock-on effect from that.

This is a very straightforward motion that appeals to the Government - for crying out loud - to do the right thing and give these people a hand. Many people have been left behind. We are realists and acknowledge there is a pandemic, but this a vital service. In my constituency of Cork East, there is a rural area and an urban area, and in some parts, there is no rural transport. People, especially the elderly, rely on these taxi and hackney services, even to get to the post office, given that many post offices have left villages so people have to travel to towns. I appeal to the Minister of State and the Government to consider this, to withdraw its countermotion and to do the right thing for the taxi industry. Otherwise, taxi drivers will be back here in a number of weeks. Families are being hurt badly.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I too wish the Minister of State well. If this crisis were to end tomorrow, chances are the Government would carry on as always, as the amendment to the motion shows. I represent a large rural constituency that lacks a proper transport system. Taxi services prove particularly important. Whether to make deliveries or provide transport to elderly people to get their pensions, taxi operators so often go above and beyond what is required of them to make up for the lack of rural bus and delivery services. Deputy O'Rourke's motion offers the opportunity to support this sector through the crisis, but it should also be seen as a package of measures that could pave the way for a more successful taxi model in both urban and rural Ireland.

Taxi drivers and operators have proven to be key operators in the fight against increasing rural isolation, a type of isolation that has only got worse for some people. They have transported our nurses and doctors to hospitals throughout this crisis. Now they are struggling in the face of the pandemic, and the motion outlines how this can be addressed. Many taxi drivers and operators have been excluded from the pandemic unemployment payment. They are the

same people whose businesses have been decimated because of the lack of pubs and nightclubs, and have seen demand fall off. High insurance costs, the costs of upkeep and a range of other fixed costs, which have been said to run to approximately €11,000 per year, have not gone away. The various restart grants excluded so many, as I have pointed out here on several occasions, and our taxi sector is among those forgotten about. It is time to recognise it for the work it has undertaken in the course of this pandemic. Like our pub sector, we need a tailor-made set of supports that are specific to its needs.

It is also time to say we will introduce a temporary moratorium on the issuing of new licences, so that existing operators will not fall victim to opportunists. The financial challenges faced by taxi operators right now mean the acquisition of new or upgraded vehicles is impossible for many of them. We need, therefore, to use common sense and to extend the nine-year rule by two years, as long as the vehicle in question is safe and roadworthy. What also needs to happen, as is outlined in our motion, is for a meaningful dialogue to take place so that our taxi services will be heard properly and so that the challenges they face will be recognised and addressed. Our taxi sector needs to be listened to so that in the future it can make rural Ireland a more connected place, where rural isolation is no longer a problem and where it is easy to travel, do business or just enjoy the benefits of rural living.

The Government needs to take this opportunity to save the sector from the crisis it faces. The motion outlines how this would best be done, but the Government also needs to grab this opportunity to develop the sector so that it can increase its support for rural communities. We need public transport and we need our taxi drivers. I urge the House to support the motion.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank contributors to the debate, which was useful and important. The protest yesterday, along with a number of opportunities during debates in the House yesterday where the issue of taxi drivers was raised, and this debate have brought a focus on the sector. I again commend the four representative groups that organised yesterday's protest and the thousands of taxi drivers who attended. It provided the opportunity for discussion. I thank those speakers who have given voice to the sector, to individual drivers and to how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected it in a very particular way.

I acknowledge the contributions that reflected the impact this is having on mental health and on drivers' sense of themselves and of their contribution to society, the economy and communities more generally. Very valid points were raised and it was very important that we had the debate, but it does not end here. It is important to acknowledge the Government's recognition that taxi drivers are an essential part of the public transport system, the clarification on the matter of high-quality bus corridors and bus lanes, and the acknowledgement that there is a problem with the funding streams available for sectors that have been especially adversely affected by Covid-19, as well as the specific issues relating to taxi drivers.

I turn to the Government's countermotion, which is completely unsatisfactory. It outlines what has happened to date. There would not have been thousands of protestors on the streets yesterday if what had happened to date had been satisfactory or sufficient, and that needs to be recognised and acknowledged. On specific issues such as the nine-year rule, it was a "No" from the Minister of State, with the matter to remain under review.

On the issue of the taxi advisory committee, it is completely unsatisfactory to say the vacancies will be filled. That does not acknowledge that the taxi advisory committee does not have the confidence of ordinary taxi drivers. It is to miss the whole point of the argument. Taxi

drivers are knocking on the door and saying, “Please listen to what we have to say and please acknowledge our concerns.” The Government, however, is saying a committee will do that and that it will fill the couple of vacant places. It should ask itself why there are vacant places on the committee. It is because it does not have the confidence of ordinary taxi drivers.

On the issue of a licence moratorium, there was a “No” from the Government. That needs to be addressed and acknowledged as a potential solution and a reality for the sector. It is not good enough to say nobody is really applying for licences anyway. The Government needs to get ahead of that.

I congratulate the Minister of State on his role at the Department of Finance, but the primary issue is financial and relates to sector-specific supports. It is reflective of others, such as the arts and events industries, which other Deputies mentioned. The taxi industry is a case in point, and these sectors need full support from the Government.

This will be an ongoing issue. It will not go away until it is addressed. As a number of speakers noted, taxi drivers are ready to go again. Sinn Féin will keep the matter on the agenda.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank Deputy O’Rourke. That debate, unfortunately, ran a little over time, but we must now consider the amendment, in the name of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Amendment put.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

I thank Deputies for their co-operation on that matter. We move now, a little later than usual, to Leaders’ Questions. I appeal to Deputies to try to adhere to the allocated time.

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders’ Questions**

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I take this opportunity to offer my sincere condolences to the family and friends of the jockey Pat Smullen. His death has brought deep sadness to the horse-racing community and, indeed, far beyond that. As we all know, Pat fought his own battle with pancreatic cancer but he also raised more than €2.5 million for treatment and research into that disease. It is fair to say that Ireland has lost a champion both on and off the racecourse. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Yesterday was billed as the day to bring clarity and forward planning. Instead what we got was chaos, confusion and very considerable anxiety for people. I am glad the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, tested negative for Covid-19. I am also glad that he got that result within a matter of hours. It has to be said that experience does not tally with people more widely across society. I make that point because 24-hour turnaround of results has to become the universal standard for everyone in society.

Last April, the Taoiseach’s colleagues in government, Deputies Leo Varadkar and Simon Harris, told us that we would reach 100,000 tests per week. The Taoiseach will know that the

Covid committee made a recommendation on the advice of experts that 24-hour turnaround for results would be achieved and observed. Months later, neither of those two important commitments have been met. Disappointingly, the Government's very lengthy plan announced yesterday was very sketchy in respect of testing and tracing. It provides no concrete targets or delivery plans in this area. I emphasise "this area" to amplify the basic public health advice, which is that to deal with this crisis, to get ahead of this virus, to flatten the curve and to keep it flattened we must test, trace and isolate. That is what the World Health Organization tells us and it is correct. In that spirit, when will we get to 100,000 tests per day? What is the target beyond that because 100,000 will not be sufficient? As I said, the all-party committee recommended 24-hour turnaround for results. When will we reach that target? Can the Taoiseach clarify those matters for the Dáil this morning because we need to get this basic central element right.

I am glad that we are back in the Dáil following yesterday's shambles. The public was left with a real sense of unease seeing the Cabinet being unable to work and the Dáil suspended. People have lost confidence in the Government's handling of this emergency, not least here in Dublin, where it has left people hanging in a very cruel limbo. It is not just that people are confused, they are beside themselves. There are people whose businesses are hanging by a thread, people whose jobs are in the balance and people who want to have social contact with friends and family. There is no clarity yet as to whether people can come and go from this city. The message from the press conference was that people should not move outside of Dublin. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, said the opposite and then the Taoiseach was unclear last evening on RTÉ. This morning, again, we had two senior Ministers, Deputies O'Donohoe and Michael McGrath, contradicting each other within a matter of hours. It is an absolute mess. The Taoiseach needs to be straight with the people of Dublin. He needs to tell them what exactly we are facing. We need that clarity and certainty now. Can the Taoiseach provide that clarity? What are the current restrictions and will we be facing further restrictions when NPHEt meets or when the new committee meets? Will the Taoiseach commit, as I have asked, to ramping up seriously, in a concrete way, our testing and tracing capabilities?

**The Taoiseach:** I express my deepest sympathies to Pat Smullen's wife, Frances, and his family. He was an iconic figure in the racing world who is deeply mourned by his family and friends. I salute his absolute courage and commitment to cancer care and in taking on what was the greatest challenge in his life.

Just because Deputy McDonald says things does not mean they are true. The Deputy has a habit of deliberately distorting and undermining genuine and significant efforts in regard to dealing with Covid-19 and in her own commentary and contribution tends to evade the hard questions as well, particularly in regard to Dublin. I look forward to the Deputy's support next week in terms of whatever advice comes from NPHEt. I would appreciate that support as the Government may implement that particular advice.

On testing, today the HSE has surpassed the 1 million test mark in this country. Last week, there was a 70% increase in community testing requests from general practitioners, GPs. The system has managed to deal and cope with that. Obviously the return of our schools has created additional pressures, as is the case all over Europe. Interestingly, the positivity rate for children tested between 0 to 14 is less than 1%. There is a daily capacity of 15,000 for community and acute hospitals. The HSE will say that this is more crucial than the 100,000 weekly figure. Some 11,000 is for community tests where spikes are identified and the remainder is for capacity in our acute hospitals. It is quite significant in terms of what has been achieved to date. This

week, thus far, there have been further increases in testing requests but there is more swabbing capacity in place and testing sites ready to deal with it. On average, there will be 10,000 community swabs per day alongside 3,000 in hospitals. In terms of serial testing, 12,000 tests are expected from nursing homes, 4,000 from meat plants and 3,000 from direct provision. This week, the HSE will reach its highest ever number of swabs taken and tests processed and this will continue to improve. Let us acknowledge the significant ramping up of the testing system. There is road to go yet. The system was set up mid-flight as the pandemic took hold.

Deputy McDonald made the statement that the plan is sketchy. The plan is not sketchy. It is very specific in terms of creating a dedicated workforce for testing in the country. The Deputy would know that if she read the plan. A 3,000 strong workforce is to be employed. That is provided for in the plan. That specific figure is in it. Currently, the HSE is recruiting 700 people to take swabs and 500 contact tracing staff. Those are specific figures that are in the plan. The Deputy knows that yet she chooses deliberately to distort and seek to mislead in regard to it. The plan provides for 30 test centres, a minimum of one test centre per county, six pop-up fleets, a number of dedicated contact tracing centres and the response to clusters as they emerge. The situation on testing is comprehensive. There is a clear plan to expand and ramp up testing further.

On the overall plan, it is a good plan in terms of the five levels. Ireland is one of the first EU member states to come up with a comprehensive plan of this kind. On Dublin, the advice presented to us by NPHET has been adopted by Government and made public. NPHET, as I said yesterday, may come forward with further advice in that regard on Thursday.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach may have heard Dublin-based GPs this morning on the media setting out their concerns around the delays in accessing tests and the further delays in results being returned. He may choose to adopt a defensive posture and to attack me but I am working on the supposition that he will take the word of medical professionals who are not inventing these scenarios. These are doctors who deal with patients who present when they are sick, as I did. I had this experience. They are not in the habit of making up things. The only people engaging in wishful thinking, it seems, is the Taoiseach and his Government.

I want to know when we will get to 100,000 tests per week. I have my app here and it reflects the testing done over the past seven days. We are way short of that number. It was the same last week, the week before and the week before that. The Government made the commitment of 100,000 tests per week so when will it reach that number?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** There is also the matter of the 24-hour turnaround in testing. As for Dublin, the Taoiseach's words today add to the confusion and anxiety across the county.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy. You are way over time.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** NPHET gave information and advice to the Government and it was put into the public domain. All the Taoiseach has achieved is confusion and he has not been on his own, as other Ministers have also caused confusion. The Taoiseach should clarify matters now by precisely and succinctly setting out the travel advice for people in Dublin.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy knows it.

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**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Deputy Martin is the Taoiseach and should set it out. His Ministers do not know it.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy knows it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputies.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The community does not know it. The Taoiseach is the head of the Government so instead of snapping at me he should do his job and set out the information.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have prescribed time for these questions and I do not wish to be at odds or take issue with anyone. Additional time has been allocated to Sinn Féin and we have gone over that allocated time. Could we please, all of us, try to stay-----

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** That additional time is based on our parliamentary numbers by the way. I state that for the record.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is obviously why it is happening. Why else would it happen?

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** That is just to be complete in the explanation.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Mac Lochlainn should calm down.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are not operating on the basis of favouritism.

**The Taoiseach:** In the seven days to 13 September, there were 74,796 Covid-19 tests completed and that is the highest number of tests in a single week since the beginning of the pandemic.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is also not 100,000.

**The Taoiseach:** It is a significant ramping up of testing. There has been quite significant pressure since schools returned, which is normal and to be expected. The system is coping with that. The Deputy knows full well the advice for Dublin. I stated that advice yesterday in the Dáil.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Will he state it again?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy knows full well what is the advice. I will state it again. Those living in Dublin are encouraged to limit travel outside Dublin if possible. When outside the county they should not meet with more than one other household. That is the advice from NPHE that we have endorsed. It is the advice out there right now. There is no regulation or legal restriction but it is the advice. We encourage people not to travel outside Dublin. Of course, the Deputy knows this but she just wanted to come here and say there was confusion, chaos, this and that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, the time is up.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I did not have to. The Government has done it by itself.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy keeps on doing it. It is a mantra. It is what the Opposition does.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** I facilitated a briefing with the HSE on testing and the Deputy was presented with the figures from the HSE chief executive officer. The Deputy is doing a disservice to the work of the HSE in this.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am not.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Members, the time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** I genuinely believe the Deputy is. The Deputy's entire approach to this is not to seek clarity but to undermine; it is not to amplify public health measures but rather to undermine them.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** No. Testing and tracing is the core of this.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Members, please. Do you know what? We can tear up the rule book and do what we like in here if we are not going to adhere to the rules that Members themselves put in place.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Hear, hear.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I plead with Members to adhere to the time limits.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I wish to commence by discussing the rules. Yesterday was one of the most bizarre days we have ever put down here on a number of fronts. As a country, we have a limited Judiciary in operation. Yesterday, the Executive basically went into self-isolation and this Chamber, the Legislature, stopped for a period. These are the three arms of the State.

I would like to know what happened yesterday, so will the Taoiseach write to the leaders in the Opposition detailing how the Dáil ended up being suspended? I asked the Ceann Comhairle to do the same and, in fairness, he has written to me on the matter. I would like the Taoiseach to do the same. I would like to know what happened. I rang the Taoiseach and, in fairness, he returned my call, considered the matter and the Dáil recommenced. I would like to know the detail.

I ask the question because this could happen again and we just need a contingency plan. For example, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, is going through some really detailed negotiations on our future as it is affected by Brexit. We need to know that there is a contingency plan for the Executive and these Houses. Can that be communicated to us?

I will also ask about what was launched yesterday. We need to move on and get the country behind us. The Labour Party and I support the plan. However, I do not understand why the Taoiseach did not come to us all before yesterday to say the Government was not ready but it wanted to align with NPHE advice and slot everything into five levels. There could have been a heat map for every county indicating which stage the county was at instead of having a hybrid position for Dublin. I did not know what to tell people in Dublin yesterday.

I would like clarity on the following matters. I know people who are going to weddings outside Dublin. Should they go? There is a coach operator in my constituency who has 14 people who have been re-employed and who cannot go back to the pandemic unemployment payment.

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The bookings are for the west of Ireland but the majority of customers are from Dublin. Should they go? The Taoiseach should be clear about this. Should those people taking trips down the country, probably people without children who waited until September, go? The Irish people will support the Government if it is just clear.

Will the Taoiseach come out with a communication plan for everybody in the country? We should remember that the majority of infections now are present in people under 45 so how we communicate with them is different from traditional media. Fair play to *The Irish Times* for producing a graphic detailing the plan, although I know the Taoiseach's party tried to jump on the bandwagon. It is the best example of how to communicate the plan. Will the Taoiseach put together a plan to communicate this across social media and into every house in Ireland for the next six months?

**The Taoiseach:** On the first point, I took the phone call from Deputy Kelly.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** He did, in fairness.

**The Taoiseach:** I fully appreciate his concerns, which I believe are genuine. The Dáil was adjourned for two hours.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The Taoiseach has some brass neck on him.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy should remember this is Leaders' Questions.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy should calm down. He is very excitable. He is interrupting non-stop.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The rest of the people of Ireland are very excitable when they listen to the Taoiseach these days.

**The Taoiseach:** When news emerged that the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, was to be tested, the Secretary General of the Department contacted the acting Chief Medical Officer and he, to use his own language, in an "over-abundance of caution", said that Ministers should restrict their movements. The Secretary General was anxious that the Chief Whip would get the message and communicate it to the Clerk of Dáil Éireann. It transpired there were ramifications for the Dáil in that senior Ministers were told it would be unwise to attend, given the substantial number of meetings attended by the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, with other Ministers the day before. If he had tested positive, there could have been a risk involved. The call was made and the people involved did not want to expose any other people to risk. It is as simple as that.

Everybody acted in good faith. When I became aware of the situation, the point was made that Ministers of State could cover for senior Ministers. That said, it could not happen in all cases. I communicated, I think it was with the Clerk of the Dáil, with the Chief Whip present, and said I was of the view that the Dáil should resume, with Ministers of State available to take business. I signed the summons to enable that to happen. That is it.

We are in a Covid-19 pandemic. I had to change an interview with RTÉ, for example, which was due to take place in my office. I contacted the acting Chief Medical Officer and asked if it was advisable to go ahead with the interview. He felt it was not, in that context, so I went outdoors by the fountain and had an interview with RTÉ at a distance.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** The distance you might get in a football stadium.

**The Taoiseach:** Correct. I am just making the point that everybody acted in good faith. The motivation was precaution in trying to prevent risk. There is no big mystery to it.

The next question concerned the plan itself. The plan is fundamentally about protecting lives and livelihoods. That is its ultimate test of its sustainability. It is there for the long haul, that is, the next six to nine months. The National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, advice came in advance of the plan for Dublin and we felt it was better to implement that advice right now. NPHE raised various issues in its advice to the Government, but it was very clear that it did not advise moving to level 3 at this time because the current epidemiological data does not support such a move.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** In the short time I have I call on the Taoiseach, working with the Ceann Comhairle, to put in place a contingency plan for the future of the Executive and the Houses of the Oireachtas.

We are not here to catch the Taoiseach out so he does not have to do so here, but I ask him to please tell the people of Dublin whether they can go to hotels and weddings and whether tour operators can operate. It is a very simple “Yes” or “No” question. I challenge him to answer. People have to make decisions.

Will the Taoiseach take on board my suggestion concerning a communications strategy? Again, this is a simple “Yes” or “No” question. If it has been done, it is a disaster. This document is the best example we have seen.

I have the letter of advice written to the Minister of Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, by NPHE on 11 September. At the time, the 14-day incidence rate was at 42.34%. It is now at 53%. The letter gives different recommendations on some activities, such as sports, the operation of pubs, etc. If the Government is going to follow the advice of NPHE, that is fine. In future, when it deviates from the advice, can the Government publish that advice and outline where it proposes to differ from it?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I do not have an issue with the Government deciding not to follow some of the advice for socioeconomic reasons. In fact, in many cases I would support that decision. However, the Government should at least be clear about what it has been advised to do and what it is actually doing. Those two things are not the same.

**The Taoiseach:** I have made it clear that people should not travel outside of Dublin if possible. That is the NPHE advice. I said it to the Deputy and I am saying it again today. I said it publicly on the “Six One News” and the Tánaiste said it later on “Prime Time”. A leaflet is going out to every household. That had already been decided as part of the communications plan. There has been very extensive planning around the communication of the plan, the significance of the various levels and so on.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What about the new communications company?

**The Taoiseach:** I have outlined the very specific NPHE advice for Dublin, which the Government has decided to follow. There have been differences from the beginning. The original roadmap was not 100% identical to the advice of NPHE. There is a natural interface there.

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Deputy Kelly was among the first to come into the House and say that NPHET was too influential. I do not entirely agree. Public health advice is key to dealing with the pandemic. That was the original position which we all adopted in this House.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The Taoiseach cannot say he is following public health advice.

**The Taoiseach:** When I was in opposition I took a very strong position in support of public health advice from the outset of the pandemic. I did not seek to play politics with it, though I am not saying Deputy Kelly is doing that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will now hear the view from the sunny south east.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I think it is sunny everywhere today except in the Dáil.

I got a very disturbing email yesterday containing photographs of a queue in Dover. The Port of Dover has apparently instituted migrant checks which meant it took commercial traffic three hours to travel 1.8 km. The effects of Brexit are still four months away.

In recent weeks the UK Government introduced the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill 2019-21. By the UK Government's own admission, this breaches Article 4 of the EU-UK withdrawal agreement, an international treaty. In so doing, the UK Government has decided to breach its international obligations under an international treaty in order to safeguard national interests. It has admitted this to the entire world. The UK's reputation for dealing in good faith has been irreparably damaged worldwide, and it does not appear to have taken a feather out of the political leadership.

With this in mind, there is grave concern that the UK will also renege on its commitments to the transit arrangement concerning the UK landbridge. There is no guarantee that the UK will honour the Common Transit Convention, which allows the passage of Irish trucks carrying valuable Irish exports through the network of UK roads and ports to mainland Europe. Every year more than 150,000 trucks come and go from Dublin Port and Rosslare Europort and use the landbridge. This trade has an estimated value of more than €18 billion. Many of these trucks are carrying fresh produce such as beef and lamb from Wexford factories like Slaney Foods International in Clohamon, Irish Country Meats in Camolin and Kavanagh Meats Ireland in Enniscorthy. These three factories employ 1,100 workers, not including farmers, hauliers and service providers. Just a fraction of that cohort has been in touch with me to voice their concern that the UK's actions could signal the end of the landbridge transit arrangement.

Can the Taoiseach tell the House whether this transit arrangement has been secured as part of the withdrawal agreement? Moreover, what preparations has the Government made to safeguard Irish exports, jobs and businesses if the UK reneges on the Common Transit Convention and prevents Irish trucks from using the land bridge?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very important and pertinent issue. Maintaining the UK landbridge as an effective route to market has been a key priority in the Government's Brexit planning. The Irish Maritime Development Office estimates that there are approximately 150,000 landbridge movements annually, with an estimated trade value of €18.2 billion. This is a very important connection. As the Deputy outlined, many of these goods are agri-food products with a short shelf life, such as fresh fish, which makes the landbridge particularly valuable. It is the most viable route to market for many of those goods.

The UK's accession to the Common Transit Convention is welcome. For the information of Members, that allows goods in transit to move through the United Kingdom without undergoing full import or export customs formalities on entry and exit. We have engaged in substantial talks at official and political levels across the European Union to ensure that EU goods in transit via the landbridge will not be subject to additional and unnecessary checks and controls. We have worked especially closely with our French, German, Dutch and Belgian counterparts to understand each other's operations and plans for the post-transition period.

The Deputy has raised the question of the UK Government's commitment to this in light of its introduction of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill 2019-21, which runs counter to and represents a disavowal of the withdrawal agreement, a binding international treaty, and the Northern Ireland protocol. I have spoken to the UK Prime Minister and pointed out in no uncertain terms that this is unacceptable. It breaches an international treaty and raises questions about the UK Government's commitment to any further agreements that might be concluded. We are working with our EU colleagues in that regard.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I asked what preparations have been made.

**The Taoiseach:** I will come to that. I wish to state that in that context, we get no sense from the UK Government that there will be any attempt to undermine such trade. London is still adamant that it wants a comprehensive free trade agreement and does not want disruption. We have had no indication whatsoever of any negativity around the landbridge, or any attempt to undermine its importance to Ireland's exports to mainland Europe.

The Department and those involved in the sector are of the view that we have sufficient capacity to deal with this. Obviously, it is something we will continually monitor. As the Deputy is aware, there is significant investment going into Rosslare Europort, including the €30 million plan and, in terms of Brexit, the 10-acre site that was acquired and developed to provide inspection facilities and so forth.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I did not hear the relevant provisions. There should be a provision for capacity, which is currently on the UK side, to be diverted in the event that the UK carries on in the way it did in the past week and reneges on the common transit convention. The convention means that businesses must put financial guarantees in place just for the privilege of crossing the UK. If it will take three hours to travel 1.8 km, as was the case yesterday, that effectively will mean the drivers' regulation will be kaput and the land bridge will be defunct. I am asking the Taoiseach why we have not invested the necessary €100 million or €150 million in Rosslare Europort to safeguard €18 billion in trade. That investment should be made to put direct ferry services in and build a port of the future at the most strategic port in the country in order to get goods to mainland Europe and circumvent that three-hour delay. It would mean that drivers would have certainty in their planning. As a result of the driving regulations, they must plan every minute of their day from the time they leave the meat factory or fishing port. They have a 15-hour period within which to start and finish driving. The three-hour delay experienced yesterday meant that drivers spent nine or ten extra hours in the UK. That is putting trade and jobs at risk. Rather than supporting businesses, the Government is putting them at risk. By failing to make provision for a daily service, we are putting ourselves in the hands of the UK. It will be able to pull the rug out from under us and tell us we will not be able to use the land bridge. I am asking the Taoiseach to make provision for direct daily services immediately.

**The Taoiseach:** I have discussed Rosslare Europort with the Deputy and she is aware that

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there are issues relating to its capacity to move very quickly or immediately on a €150 million project. Its planning application in terms of the master plan, which involves an investment of more than €30 million in customer facilities, port infrastructure, assets and new technology by the port authority, has already been lodged with Wexford County Council. There will be further resources under the Brexit plan. As far as we are concerned, whatever measures are necessary will be undertaken in relation to-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Daily direct ferry services are needed.

**The Taoiseach:** -----the capacity that is required but-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I am seeking a commitment to daily direct ferry services.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach without interruption.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government will do what is required in terms of our export trade-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Daily direct ferry services are required.

**The Taoiseach:** -----but we need to get what is already planned and initiated done and delivered.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** The Government is leaving us wide open.

**The Taoiseach:** There are issues on the ground there in terms of getting things moving. The planning application has just been lodged.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I know that. The €150 million needed for daily services-----

**The Taoiseach:** It cannot be done overnight.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** One cannot have daily services if-----

**The Taoiseach:** I will take on board the Deputy's comments.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** When the Taoiseach's predecessor and now Cabinet colleague announced a lockdown, we were all clear as to what was required of the public and the public did what was required of it. Hospital capacity was an issue across Europe, even in Germany and Italy which have much better healthcare systems than Ireland does in terms of preparedness. We were told that our capacity was particularly low and, as such, we had to be particularly careful. At the start of the year, this country's permanent adult critical care capacity was 255 beds. Funding was provided in March for an additional 40 adult beds and two paediatric beds. Have those beds and units now been built? Are they ready for this autumn as we face into winter?

As I reminded the previous Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, when he slipped out of the Chamber a few moments ago, in May he accepted that the overcrowding in University Hospital Limerick, UHL, was unacceptable and that, if not addressed, would be a disaster this winter. He accepted that additional procedures would be required to be carried out in the tier 2 hospitals that surround UHL, namely, Ennis Regional Hospital, Nenagh General Hospital and St. John's Hospital. I did not hear any more from the Minister, Deputy Harris, on the issue because he changed portfolios. The Special Committee on Covid-19 Response heard from Dr. Liam Woods, who confirmed that plans were under way to increase the number of procedures.

However, instead of that happening, all surgeries were cancelled a couple of weeks ago at Ennis Regional Hospital. Thankfully, they have since been reinstated. In direct response to overcrowding in UHL, all elective procedures have been cancelled this week. That is putting further pressure on waiting lists and leading to deterioration of quality of life, as well as affecting life expectancy in many cases.

Swabbing and testing is essential, as the Taoiseach and Deputy McDonald have agreed. However, up to now, public health dentists, speech therapists and other trained professionals in our healthcare system have been diverted to testing. I am not saying testing is unimportant. On the contrary, it is extremely important. However, six months into this crisis, those workers need to go back to their normal jobs. It is inexcusable that people have not been trained and put in place to carry out testing such that dentists, speech therapists and so on are not being diverted to testing.

Six months on from the announcement of the lockdown, what is the current permanent adult critical care capacity? What is happening with regard to the UL hospitals group? What is happening with regard to those carrying out testing?

**The Taoiseach:** First, the current number of total adult critical care beds open and staffed is 278. There are 30 paediatric critical care beds open and staffed, 218 occupied adult critical care beds and 23 occupied paediatric critical care beds. There are 13 adult critical care beds reserved for patients and one paediatric critical care bed reserved for patients. The €600 million agreed by the Cabinet this week as part of the winter initiative is essentially a Covid winter initiative to take us through specifically the next six months. It is designed to allocate resources to reduce pressure on emergency departments and innovate around community respiratory clinics, for example, as a preventative mechanism to intervene in order that people do not end up in emergency departments as was the case in the past. It will create more bed capacity in acute facilities, but also in non-acute facilities which will facilitate people coming out of hospital in a timely manner once their treatment is completed. It makes provision in terms of community diagnostics and, where it is possible to continue with elective procedures separate from the trauma hospitals, for that to be done and accelerated. The HSE knows that any capacity it can deliver in the short term and medium term will be funded and resourced. It is probably the largest winter initiative for some time and it is necessarily so because we are anticipating significant challenges on that front.

I agree with the point made by the Deputy with regard to testing. I have been in office for 12 weeks. I believe a permanent workforce is required for testing and tracing and that is what is happening. That is what is detailed in the plan we published yesterday. It sets out that we will have a dedicated testing and tracing team that will work side by side with health service personnel. When the testing and tracing regime was originally established in response to the pandemic, people were drawn from various disciplines within the health service. There was a view that in the initial phase a clinical decision maker was required. There is no doubt that as we expand and ramp up testing and tracing even beyond its current level, a dedicated workforce will be required. A figure of 3,000 personnel to be employed in testing and tracing is identified in the plan. That is a significant number of people, but it is what is necessary.

There are, without question, significant pressures in University Hospital Limerick and the mid west. I have been in contact with the Department of Health, the Minister and the HSE with a view to implementing measures to alleviate the situation in the mid west.

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**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I note what the Taoiseach plans to do over the next six months but my question was more about what was done over the past six months. The public is justifiably sceptical about Ministers with plans. We have been hearing about what is planned for the health service since the Taoiseach was Minister for Health and Children. It begs the question of how many health ministers it takes to change a health service. There are four current or former health ministers in the Cabinet. The shortage of critical care beds was the most significant shortage that we had in this country relative to others. Of the 40 funded six months ago, if I understand the Taoiseach's figures correctly, only 23 have been provided - a little over half. It seems nothing concrete is planned for UHL other than aspirations. I appreciate that the Taoiseach is three months in office, but these were three months when we were looking down the barrel of the gun of a winter crisis which, hopefully, will not arise. If the medics and the predictions by NPHE are incorrect, it will not happen. If they are correct, then we are facing a calamity and we need to move. We do not need to hear much more about plans. We need delivery and the delivery over the past six months does not inspire confidence in what can be delivered over the next six.

**The Taoiseach:** In terms of testing and tracing, the recruitment campaigns are already under way. These are not just plans. This is happening and the staff are being recruited.

Those are the figures open and staffed now. They may not be exactly what is available. The Deputy will be aware that during the pandemic a significant number of acute care beds and critical care beds were made available.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** There was surge capacity. I accept that.

**The Taoiseach:** A surge capacity was created and that applies here as well.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** We do not know what that is.

**The Taoiseach:** I just wanted to give the Deputy the most up-to-date operational details as provided by the HSE for the number of critical beds available. There is ongoing work on procuring additional capacity on an initiative-by-initiative basis in terms of the private sector capacity to make sure we can get some elective procedures done and that elective procedures are not suspended as a result of overcrowding in the emergency departments and trauma departments.

I intend to engage with all concerned, in particular, in the mid-west. If one looks back over the past two years, there have been without question ongoing pressures on the mid-west, and particularly University Hospital Limerick.

### **Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** May I insist here that Members ask one question for no more than one minute and that there be no more than one minute of an answer?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Two weeks ago, I raised the issue of proposed increases in utility prices and I set out for the Taoiseach the considerable pressure that workers and their families are under. I asked the Taoiseach at that time to intervene with Electric Ireland regard-

ing its forthcoming price hike and he stated that he would do so. I also asked the Taoiseach to put a stop to the 100% hike in the public service obligation, PSO, levy levied by the Government because this will also have the effect of increasing prices. I wrote to the Taoiseach seeking an update on what actions he has taken on these matters but I have not received a reply. Will the Taoiseach tell me now whether he has engaged with Electric Ireland as promised, will there be a stop put to the proposed price hikes forthcoming in October, and if he has withdrawn or will withdraw his proposed hike in the public service levy?

**The Taoiseach:** I spoke to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and was also in touch with Electric Ireland. By the way, in terms of energy pricing more generally, the cost over the past six months came down.

In terms of the renewable energy piece, the Government remains committed to that. That is where we have to go as a country. Our over dependence on fossil fuels-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Did Electric Ireland tell the Taoiseach that?

**The Taoiseach:** Our over dependence on fossil fuels will be a continuing catalyst into the future for an increase in prices.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Today, outside the Dáil we met members of the families who have been affected by cyberbullying and online harassment. In my 15 years in politics, it was certainly one of the most emotional scenes I have ever seen. We heard from Jackie Fox, who lost her daughter, Nicole. We heard from the O'Neill family, who lost their daughter and granddaughter, Mia. I knew Mia.

I am asking the Taoiseach genuinely to park the politics and to work with us to implement Deputy Howlin's Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017 in relation to bullying and cyberbullying. Everyone in this House needs to learn about and deal with this. It is called Coco's law in honour of Nicole. Deputy Lawless, from the Taoiseach's own side, has been quite supportive of it and it is in the Government's list for the programme for Government.

We have had this Bill on the Order Paper since 2017. The Government is supportive of it but we have not been able to get Government amendments to the Bill. Can we bring this forward and get it dealt with before Christmas so that no more children, or, indeed, adults, are affected? People cannot be prosecuted for online abuse.

**The Taoiseach:** First, I thank the Deputy for raising what is an important heartbreaking issue for the families he met earlier and on behalf of whom he has spoken. The wider issue of bullying, in particular, cyberbullying, is doing a great deal of damage to people and undermining people's self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of well-being, and we need a far more robust legislative response to that. I certainly will work with the Deputy. I will ask Government to engage with Deputy Howlin on his legislation to see if we can progress it.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Last week, I raised the issue of varying restrictions in maternity hospitals across the country. After an exchange with the Minister of State and the HSE management for the Cork-Kerry region, I am even more unsure about how the decisions are being made. The Minister stated it is based on an individual hospital and the HSE stated it is based on the region the woman is in. I wonder which is it. The programme for Government commits to excellence in maternal healthcare but at present women in some areas are going through labour

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alone. It is a geographical lottery and we have no idea why. We cannot allow anyone else to go through this unless it is absolutely necessary. We urgently need a nationwide review of restrictions in maternity hospitals and the decision-making process needs to be transparent. Will the Taoiseach commit to this before more women have to go through this?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Mattie McGrath on the same matter.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I want to raise this issue. It has been hugely traumatic. There is no mention of this in the Government's five-point plan. Pregnant mothers going to hospital is supposed to be a joyous occasions, involving the scans and everything else. All through their pregnancy, in the vast majority of cases, the partners or husbands have not been allowed in.

We have heard of some harrowing cases where, unfortunately, issues and difficulties have occurred with stillbirth and the loss of a baby. It is hugely traumatic for the mothers concerned to be on their own without having a partner, a mother, a sister, a sibling or anybody with them. It is shocking. There must be some compassion in the Government's roadmap for these mothers who find themselves in that situation. It needs to be dealt with.

**The Taoiseach:** First, I fully empathise with what the Deputies are saying. Obviously, public health advice has been the key influencer of this situation along with risk management in specific hospitals and locations. However, I take the point that the public health advice in this area should apply nationwide.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Is it regional, hospital by hospital or nationwide at present?

**The Taoiseach:** I would instinctively think it should be nationwide but it may be that in different hospitals one has different settings and different risks. In some maternity centres, they may have different practices, etc. I will engage with the acting Chief Medical Officer and HSE on this. It is difficult and traumatic for people. It should be a celebratory moment for many couples. It is a fundamental moment in life.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** When people can attend a wedding with 49 other people, they cannot be with their partner.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We cannot have a conversation.

**The Taoiseach:** As the Deputy will be aware-----

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

**The Taoiseach:** -----in the earlier stages of the pandemic there were significant restrictions on people visiting hospitals which was difficult for them.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** In the upcoming Brexit legislation, how will the Government deal with the Dublin regulation, formally known as the Dublin III Regulation? The reason I ask is that a gentleman, Lehlohonolo Kalele, who is a citizen of Soweto and who is at present studying occupational safety and health in UCD will be deported, as of Saturday, back to Britain. There are other individuals in the same position. If he is deported via Britain, he will be deported back to Soweto. Obviously, this causes a conundrum for the Government in relation to the Brexit legislation, particularly around the Dublin III Regulation. Obviously, Mr. Kalele wants to stay in this country. He wants to contribute, like many people who seek asylum here. How will the Taoiseach tackle that conundrum?

**The Taoiseach:** First, the Deputy might send us the details of the individual case.

There are set processes and procedures for this. It is something that will have to be considered in our overall comprehensive Brexit planning. Invariably the decisions in these asylum cases are what is more fundamentally at issue. The Deputy says this person is due for deportation on Saturday. That clearly arises from consideration of his asylum application, that seems to be the difficulty. I ask the Deputy to forward the details to me.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We cannot have a second bite of the question. I call Deputy Grealish.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** Will changes be considered to the employment wage subsidy scheme as announced in the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) Bill, specifically for businesses involved exclusively in tourism, travel agents, gift shops and the chauffeur industry? These are small niche industries that have been decimated by the pandemic. They urgently need support to survive to the end of 2021. The new employment wage subsidy scheme has been designed for companies that have lost 30% of turnover, but businesses such as travel agencies, gift shops and chauffeur services have reported losses of up 100% of turnover since March. These businesses will not be in a position to top up the employment wage subsidy scheme leaving employees with €203 a week, the same as job seeker's benefit. This is not sustainable or realistic. I ask the Taoiseach to look at tourism in more detail and introduce specific support for companies that are not even trading at 30% of turnover.

**The Taoiseach:** It is a very difficult situation for certain sectors, particularly in hospitality and tourism. Travel agents are one sector which has had a collapse in revenue and income more generally. The Government took a decision to continue and extend the wage subsidy scheme to April of next year and there will be ongoing monitoring of the impact of that extension on certain jobs and enterprises. The Government is also looking at sectors which, because of Government mandate arising from public health advice, are not in a position to keep going now or to be viable. We are looking at those sectors as well.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I raise the matter of matches and games and the capacity of stadiums. I understand that we have to reduce the risk and that it is a balancing act but the rules set out that 100 may attend matches outside Dublin and in a stadium of over 5,000 capacity, up to 200 can attend. That is less than 1% capacity, that is one person seated where there is capacity for 100. At the same time, we allow 50 to 100 people for indoor gatherings. There are stadiums such as O'Moore Park in Portlaoise and O'Connor Park in Tullamore which have capacity of over 25,000. The problem relates to before and after matches, with people congregating and getting people through turnstiles. However, some stadiums have several turnstiles and several ways in and out. I ask that this be revisited, as well as for grounds with smaller capacity.

**The Taoiseach:** I know the situation about sport. Public health advice on this has been consistent from the beginning. They are very concerned about crowds gathering

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** It is a capacity of less than 1% at the moment.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, there is only a minute for a response.

**The Taoiseach:** People have been attacking us all day about confusion, clarity and this that and the other. I know the Deputy is genuine in the position from which he is coming but public health advisors have a very strong view about toing and froing and households mixing in cars

travelling to matches and congregating. The plan is to allow 200 in a stadium with over 5,000 capacity. In very large stadiums there is room for engagement between NPHE and the sporting organisations but that is for more significant events. The figure of 200 represents progress.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The Matt Talbot Services announced the closure of the Cara Lodge in Ahiohill, Clonakilty last week with the loss of 27 jobs in west Cork. As well as the loss of these jobs, a much-needed service for young people in west Cork will close. We have never had such a high incidence of mental health issues and substance abuse among our young people and there has never been such a need for this kind of treatment centre. One would never hear of a methadone clinic being closed in Dublin as it would cause massive problems on the streets. Similarly, the closure of Cara Lodge will have a knock on effect and I guarantee the calamity of suicide will increase. That is my worry.

To the best of my knowledge the Taoiseach opened the centre many years ago. I ask him now to intervene to prevent its closure and get the HSE to release the funds to save the service and the 27 jobs.

**The Taoiseach:** I did not just open it, as Minister for Health I made sure it happened and I worked with the people involved. The Deputy wrote to me and I read the letter last evening, but the reasons for the closure were not spelled out. I would like to engage with the Deputy on that. The original idea was that it was to be an addiction centre. Traditionally health authorities are against residential-type addiction centres. This centre was originally developed by the Matt Talbot centre which has a non-methadone addiction service. They believe in a different methodology to help people with addiction, and this is meant for very young people in particular, to take them out of very difficult environments to give them a chance and opportunity. I confess that I need to be briefed on the current rationale for its closure. I intend to get the HSE's side of the story.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I raise A Vision for Change and Sharing the Vision. When will there be implementation and a full audit of mental health services in the State. We need to examine protocols when people present to services. This is a particular issue in County Louth, in Dundalk. This Sunday, families are holding a vigil to remember those who died tragically from suicide, including some who died very recently. They are looking for a better system. I would like this audit to take into account psychiatric services at Cross Lanes, in Louth and across the State.

**The Taoiseach:** On the local services, the Deputy might forward further details to me. A full audit of mental services is there. Recruitment of personnel at a psychiatric level and in child and adolescent centres is one of the challenges for mental health services.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I referred to the protocols when people present.

**The Taoiseach:** There are protocols there and the Mental Health Commission, which I established way back as Minister for Health, is there to provide oversight in terms of best practice and what is good and not so good in our mental health services.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** Why must everyone with mental health and disabilities fight for everything tooth and nail? The programme for Government says Ireland should aim to become an international leader in support and care for people with mental health challenges. I agree. In 2019, 421 people died by suicide. Some 10% of the population suffers with some sort of mental health problem. At the end of June, there were 350 children in Meath and Westmeath waiting

on appointments to psychology departments, with over 8,000 children awaiting appointments nationally. The services provided for groups caring for these children need more investment. People are three times more likely to die by suicide than road accidents. Of the last budget, the CEO of Mental Health Reform said it was very concerning that the Government had failed to deliver extra services to address the mental health crisis in this country. As the Government prepares the budget, will it put the resources into mental health with the urgency it needs?

**The Taoiseach:** I was not in government for the last budget. We were in Opposition and facilitated the budget under a confidence and supply agreement. Consistently under that agreement, we increased resources for mental health. Notwithstanding that increase in resources, mental health services did not seem to be in a position to convert those resources into recruiting the necessary personnel, both in the child and adolescent centres and more widely across psychiatry. There have been ongoing personnel and staffing issues related to mental health which we intend to tackle under the programme for Government. We also seek to change the narrative about recruitment of qualified personnel to our mental health services and to give stronger supports to non-governmental organisations that are involved in mental health which provide a significant service.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I raise the issue of University Hospital Limerick too. The severe pressure on the hospital from serving the entire mid-west region is evident today. Some 62 patients are lying on trolleys in hospital corridors and management has taken the decision to cancel all elective procedures as a result. That is bad enough in ordinary times but in the Covid scenario that we are now living in, it is utterly unacceptable. I ask that some of the €600 million that was announced yesterday, as we are heading into the winter flu season, would be used to reopen the emergency department in Nenagh for 24 hours a day. This would take pressure off University Hospital Limerick, reducing the overcrowding and decreasing waiting times to be seen by a medical professional. It would allow more efficient operations in the mid-west region. A county the size of ours deserves and needs this.

**The Taoiseach:** The €600 million that has been allocated to health is designed to try to alleviate the pressures which Deputy Cahill has outlined, which I acknowledge, especially in Limerick. He has raised issues regarding funding for Nenagh hospital. I will engage with the Minister for Health about this and with the Department and HSE with a view to what can be done in the short term to alleviate these pressures.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** The programme for legislation was published and lists 30 Bills to be published in this session. That is two a week. It is quite an ambitious target. On 20 July 2015, Review of the Nursing Homes Support Scheme, A Fair Deal, was published. Following that, it was agreed to draw up a Bill, the nursing home support scheme (amendment) Bill. That has been in gestation for five years. It has been promised that it will be published in this session. Can the Taoiseach indicate if that will be in the early or later part of this autumn session of the Dáil in 2020?

**The Taoiseach:** My understanding is that it will be in the later part of this session. I have asked for this Bill to be progressed. It has been committed to for quite a number of years. There seem to be some issues regarding the content and extent of the Bill. I am determined to deal with those issues and get the Bill published and to get it through the House.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Students have been extremely upset in recent days with the downgrading, in many instances, of high-performing students who always had excellent results.

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They have seen their results being downgraded. This has been extremely upsetting. I know that many other people in this House have been contacted by parents and students. What are the Government, Department and Minister going to do about this? Students and their parents really feel that they have been hard done by and that the structures and methodology have detrimentally affected them and their results. I could not express how sorry I am for those students who put their hopes, aims and work into this over the last years. Due to the pandemic and how it has been addressed by the Government, they feel hard done by.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Ten seconds. Students have been left on the side of the road because buses are not taking them to their schools. That is in chaos as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We can only deal with one item.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Ceann Comhairle will excuse my indulgence. Thank you.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** This week, people have contacted my office about issues relating to grading, similar to my colleague, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. They have been downgraded from H1s to H2s. I have asked students to give me their results from third, fifth and sixth year. In all cases that my office has received, those do not reflect the grades they have received for their leaving certificate. They have been downgraded by one or two grades. People have been getting grinds and their teachers have written reports to say that they excel and they have been downgraded. They have lost out. One girl has wanted to teach all her life. She is short by four points for teaching because she was downgraded in two subjects.

**The Taoiseach:** I understand the very difficult situation for individual students, in having a desire to secure a certain course and a target to get the results to secure it. It is heartbreaking when a student does not get the course. This year in particular, due to Covid-19, there was a unique situation with no physical examinations and a calculated grades programme had to be introduced. As part of that calculated grades programme, standardisation was essential. The experts involved were clear that there was significant grade inflation at the school level, which was expected, over and above what happened in previous years, so the standardisation model was trying to be fair to all schools in that situation. Notwithstanding that, I understand that people will be very upset about what has happened to them in individual situations. I have to be clear and honest with Deputies. It is not possible to unthread that because if one pulls a thread in one area, one risks unravelling the entire edifice.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** Page 40 of the programme for Government has a section on supporting our healthcare workers. The Government commits to recruiting additional front-line staff, including speech and language therapists. There are more than 1,000 people waiting for an assessment by a speech and language therapist in Wexford. Some 606 of them have not even had an assessment yet, 460 are awaiting therapy and 179 of them have been waiting for over a year for their therapy. I know that the Covid-19 emergency has slowed down services but this does not excuse people waiting for over a year. We have heard locally that nine speech and language therapists are on maternity leave in Wexford. How will the HSE cover this shortage and when will recruitment start?

**The Taoiseach:** There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government about recruitment of speech therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists, as well as other

disciplines and professions. We hope to do some therapy through the school system by having a greater presence in schools, which is something I have been personally committed to for a long time. I think it is a better model for the development of children in the school setting, working with teachers and other educational professionals. Covid-19 has impacted on our plans and it has clearly drawn staff away from vital services in the early phase of the pandemic to do the testing and tracing that was discussed earlier and to lead that in given locations. That had a consequential negative impact on services.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** What about maternity leave?

**The Taoiseach:** A replacement should be provided for anybody who is on maternity leave and that should be automatic.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Before the recess, I tabled a motion calling on the Government to extend maternity leave for mothers who had babies during the pandemic, a challenging and difficult time. The Government's amendment stated that it would possibly look at extending parental leave and benefit in the next budget at some unknown time next year, a proposal totally irrelevant to the issue at hand. Earlier this week, I was contacted by a mother who had her baby at the end of April. She has since been suffering with post-natal depression. Both she and her husband are on the front line. Their childminder is in the at-risk group and they have been unable to get any childcare at all. They have no family living close by. What am I supposed to say to this mother and other mothers? At the start of this month, the Government introduced additional unpaid leave. Most families cannot afford to take unpaid leave. The Taoiseach said on the floor of the Dáil a number of months ago that he would do the right thing on this issue. He has done nothing on this issue. There are mothers asking for his help.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government has made a clear decision on that in terms of parental leave and will be bringing in measures as per the Government decision.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** This evening at 9.30 p.m. on RTÉ, a programme will be aired that shows incontrovertible evidence that the British state colluded with the killings of hundreds of Irish citizens. It shows in particular the Glenanne gang, some of whom were also members of the security forces. I have spoken to people on the Relatives for Justice committee and they said that the citizens of the North feel abandoned. All the families are asking for is truth and justice with dignity. They are suggesting that the Irish Government needs to do more than just issue statements. They are asking for a visible presence of this State in the North to do much more on legacy issues. They are saying the issue cannot be seen through the prism of party politics. It has to be a human rights issue.

**The Taoiseach:** Successive Irish Governments have been very committed to legacy issues in successive agreements that arose out of the Good Friday Agreement. There have been ongoing issues in terms of getting agreement and clarity on those legacy agreements and getting them progressed. Unfortunately those issues continue, notwithstanding the new arrangements and new commitments that were made on all fronts to progress legacy and also in terms of investigation capacity and so on. This pertains to the activities of the Glenanne gang and so on, which are absolutely reprehensible, but also right across the board. In the earlier phases, the historical inquiries team, according to victims I met, at least did some reasonable work in terms of identifying people involved and so on and gave some answers. I think the situation around legacy generally has been one of those issues on which there has been a regrettable lack of progress across the board.

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**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I want to raise the issue of the TB strategy 2030 which is committed to in the programme for Government. Separately, it seems the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has gone ahead and issued correspondence to livestock owners across the country in recent weeks. Farmers are very concerned about this correspondence. They feel it devalues the status of the entire herd. The unsigned correspondence allows them to identify the TB status of other herd owners if they bought cattle from them and it also points out cattle that were in their herd the last time they had reactors and suggests to them that they should be culled. That is even making a statement of confidence in the Department's own test. Was this approved by any Minister with responsibility for agriculture? Can it be revisited so that farmers can have confidence? They are very concerned at the way this TB plan would be published.

**The Taoiseach:** I will have to discuss that with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I will ask him to make contact with the Deputy. I am not aware whether he sanctioned that or whether it emerged prior to his arrival as Minister. The Deputy is referring to the TB plan, which suggests a very operational plan developed at operational level. I will engage with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Hundreds of small plant hire operators and sole traders all over the Twenty-six Counties are about to lose their livelihoods and jobs following Irish Water's decision to tender out the water and sewerage maintenance work to one contractor or company for each county or multiple counties. This decision will only benefit some large multinational companies and will exclude local operators, families and workers who have given massive service over the years to keep the water flowing in our counties. I want to say as well that I am a director of a plant hire company that on occasion carries out work for Irish Water and that is subject to the same vigorous tendering process as every other company.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Can the Taoiseach cast any light on this matter?

**The Taoiseach:** Irish Water has taken a decision in terms of its procurement policy and tendering out to one per county. I hear what the Deputy is saying. It has been an ongoing issue with the centralisation of procurement. Even nationally, the centralisation of procurement has actually disadvantaged smaller operators in the regions. I do not interfere in the operations of Irish Water, and nor can I, but I do take the general point. I will enquire of them to see the rationale for the policy and why it is being developed. I will articulate the Deputy's concerns and the concerns of others in the sector who would be impacted by such a decision.

### **Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Hare Coursing) Bill 2020: First Stage**

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to prohibit the coursing of hares with dogs and for that purpose to amend the Wildlife Act 1976 and the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, to make consequential and other amendments to the Greyhound Industry Act 1958 and other Acts relating to such coursing and to provide for related matters.

I am very proud to introduce the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Hare Coursing) Bill

2020. This is a Bill to ban hare coursing. Hare coursing means capturing over 5,000 hares from the wild every year. It means holding them in captivity in close confinement despite the fact that they are solitary animals. It means training them and then their being coursed, in other words having them run for their lives as two dogs ten times their size chase the hare to see which dog can turn it first. It means profits for a small few, like the gambling industry which has sponsored events in recent years, while hares are terrorised for a supposed sport. The dogs being muzzled means the number of deaths has been reduced, but over the last four seasons, 75 hares have still been killed. Many more have been seriously injured with almost 600 hares being pinned to the ground in recent years. People should watch the videos online from the Irish Council Against Blood Sports, which show hares being tossed into the air and thrown around by greyhounds.

This is the third time such a Bill has been introduced in the Dáil. The first time was by Tony Gregory in 1993 and the second time was by Maureen O'Sullivan in 2015. I am following in their footsteps and also in the footsteps of the many impressive campaigners who have fought for this ban. I want to thank the National Animal Rights Association, the Irish Council Against Blood Sports, the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Not For Your Entertainment, as well as many individual campaigners including Pauline McLynn, for their support for this Bill. I also want to thank the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisers for its very thorough and quick work in preparing this comprehensive Bill. I also thank the co-signers of the Bill, my Solidarity-People Before Profit colleagues, Deputies Gino Kenny, Mick Barry, Richard Boyd Barrett and Bríd Smith, as well as Deputies Joan Collins and Catherine Connolly.

This is a cruel, barbaric and outdated practice. It has been banned across Britain and Northern Ireland and across all of the EU apart from three countries including Ireland. Sometimes, in defence of hare coursing, it is suggested that it is part of rural culture. That is not the case. The origins of hare coursing are as a diversion of the British aristocracy, part of the gentry's fondness for cruel and unusual entertainment to give them a thrill of power and brutality. The vast majority of people in rural Ireland have absolutely nothing to do with hare coursing. A Red C opinion poll in September 2019 found that 77% of people support a ban on hare coursing, including a majority of both urban and rural dwellers.

We are not introducing this as a symbolic Bill to make a point and then be forgotten about. We are serious about getting this Bill passed. The way we intend to do it is with the same methods by which the ban on wild animals in circuses and the ban on fur farming were won in the last couple of years. Solidarity Deputies introduced Bills to ban these cruel practices. Campaigners outside the Dáil including those supporting this Bill built pressure on political parties and, as a result, the Government moved to ban. When Maureen O'Sullivan's Bill was voted on in 2016, it received 20 votes in favour and 114 against. Even at that time, a majority of people in society opposed hare coursing yet the political parties were wildly out of touch. As well as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, Sinn Féin and the Labour Party voted against it. Progressive Independents, Solidarity-People Before Profit, the Social Democrats and the Green Party voted in favour. We are aware that many Sinn Féin activists were deeply uncomfortable with their vote against former Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan's Bill. Deputy Dessie Ellis and former Deputy Jonathan O'Brien were reprimanded by the party because they refused to turn up to vote against it. We appeal to Sinn Féin to change its policy as quickly as possible. We also appeal to the Labour Party, which voted against it the last time around, to change its position, to support animal welfare and to support a ban on hare coursing.

One of the biggest questions to be posed on this Bill on Second Stage, which it is hoped

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will be in the next months, is how the Green Party will vote. During the first debate on banning hare coursing in this House, former Deputy Trevor Sargent famously played a tape in the Chamber of a hare crying and wailing to demonstrate the reality of hare coursing. The Green Party has a clear policy position of opposing hare coursing, but I know that the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, told a leadership hustings that if Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil were against the Bill, she would vote against it “with the heaviest of hearts”. Bluntly, I do not believe the hares or the animal rights campaigners will care about how heavy the Minister’s heart is if she votes to continue this cruel practice.

I encourage people to get involved in the campaign, to contact the campaigning groups involved, and to contact their Deputies to ask them to support this ban. I put it to the Ceann Comhairle that it is time to ban this cruel practice.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** No.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Since this is a Private Members’ Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members’ time.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

### **Housing (Temporary Provisions regarding Short-term Lettings) Bill 2020: First Stage**

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to temporarily suspend the provision of short-term lettings in certain cases, with the objective of increasing the number of dwellings available for rent; and to provide for related matters.

We do not get too much speaking time here and I ask that maybe we could have the full attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers. I know that people need to be in contact and I know what it is like with everyone on their phones all the time. If we could just get a couple of minutes that would be great.

This Bill is about housing. Everybody knows that housing and the crisis in housing has receded in the attention of the Government and the media at the moment only because of the Covid crisis. It has not receded in real terms in people’s lives whatsoever. That crisis is still phenomenally strong and difficult for many families in the State.

The Housing (Temporary Provisions regarding Short-term Lettings) Bill that we bring forward today seeks to address some of the difficulties in that sector. Housing and apartment prices have radically increased and rents have skyrocketed in the State over recent years. Many families are in major difficulty.

We have this crazy situation in Ireland and everybody must understand that it is a dysfunctional situation. It is an upside-down situation that tourists stay in people's homes and people who are homeless are staying in hotels. There is no way one can manage to turn that idea and those facts around to make it sound plausible or sensible. It is absolutely wrong and has massive repercussions for people's lives, especially on those families and children who grew up in these hotels. It negatively affects their nutrition, it negatively affects their education and their ability to socialise, and it negatively affects their development and growth. It needs to be massively tackled.

In March 2020 something very interesting happened. In March and April there was a significant increase in the number of rentals across the State. The number of homes that became available to rent in the State radically increased in just those couple of months. In Dublin there was a particular spike in the number of rental accommodation that became available. The rise in these properties is understood to be a result of a crash within the tourism sector. Due to Covid-19 the tap of tourists coming into Dublin and other urban areas was literally switched off and these short-term rentals needed, all of a sudden, to find a long-term rent space. *Daft.ie* became flush with pictures of homes that were dressed in pretty towels and other accoutrements for the short-term let sector, but which were now in the long-term let sector. That equated to a jump of 900 homes available to rent in just a couple of months, and rent actually fell during that period due to the increase of supply within the market.

Last year the Fine Gael Government was forced to introduce legislation, due to the pressure that came upon it, to tackle the crazy situation where tourists are in homes and people who are homeless are in hotels. There was a massive outcry and the Government decided it would tackle it. It is clear, however, from the facts and especially from the spike in April and March this year that many of those short-term lets remained in the short-term let sector, either ignoring the Government legislation or finding loopholes where they could get away from adhering to the spirit of that legislation. I did some work three months ago and found that the number of homes for rent on Airbnb across Dublin was enough to house all the people who are homeless in the capital city. The Airbnb capacity equated to the capacity necessary to house all the homeless within the capital, which includes the thousands of people currently living in hotels and hubs. This is an astounding mismatch of those resources.

Rental income from an Airbnb home can be as high as €250,000 per annum, which is an incredible figure, and there is no doubt that this type of financial energy is pushing up rents across the sector. My research showed that in Dublin only 19 people had applied for planning permission for the new short-term letting legislation and only one was granted. I believe it was on Grafton Street. Those figures are replicated across towns and cities in the State. It is clear that in the main the legislation is being ignored. The Aontú Bill simply seeks that for a three-year period a sunset clause provides that Airbnb short-term lets would be illegal in urban areas of more than 10,000 people. The legislation would shut off any ability to seek a loophole or a person's ability to ignore the legislation while advertising on *Daft.ie* and other such websites. I ask the Government and the other parties to support the Aontú Bill.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** No.

Question put and agreed to.

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**An Ceann Comhairle:** Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

## Ceisteanna - Questions

### Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the working groups or initiatives he has established or plans to establish within his Department. [23701/20]

**The Taoiseach:** On its formation the Government established the following Cabinet committees: the Cabinet committee on Covid-19; the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment; the Cabinet committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland; the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change; the Cabinet committee on housing; the Cabinet committee on health; the Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality; the Cabinet committee on education; the Cabinet committee on Europe; and the Cabinet committee on Government co-ordination.

Each of these Cabinet committees will work to advance Government priorities as set out in the programme for Government, particularly where cross-Government collaboration is critical. Cabinet committees, where appropriate, will be supported by a corresponding senior officials' group, which generally is chaired by an assistant secretary general in my Department, and with membership drawn from the relevant Government Departments.

As in previous administrations, supporting Cabinet committees is a core function of the relevant policy division in my Department and is undertaken in addition to other responsibilities of the staff involved. As set out in the programme for Government, a new shared island unit has been established within the Department of An Taoiseach to support a renewed push to use the potential of the Good Friday Agreement to deliver sustained progress for all communities. This unit will work towards a consensus on a shared island and will examine the political, social, economic and cultural considerations underpinning a future in which all traditions are mutually respected. Staffing and further development of the work programme for the unit is well under way, and information on this will be provided over the coming weeks.

A social dialogue unit has also been established as part of the economic division in the Department of An Taoiseach, and this will look to build on existing work and structures already in place to support social dialogue such as the Labour Employer Economic Forum.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I thank the Taoiseach for that response. When the Taoiseach gets to his feet to respond to me, will he clarify what Electric Ireland said to him when he contacted it? He confirmed that he had been in contact with the company and I ask him to set out its response in respect of energy costs.

I asked the Taoiseach in advance of the summer recess about the north inner city initiative, which had been sponsored by a predecessor of his as Taoiseach. I also asked him about community participation in the national drug and alcohol strategy, and in fairness to him, he responded to me fairly comprehensively, so I thank him for that. In his response to me, the Taoiseach states that the HSE and the Department of Health provide funding to support development and facilitate the involvement of communities in the local structures for implementing the national drug and alcohol strategy. This view is very welcome but unfortunately it does not accurately reflect the position of the HSE when these matters have been raised with senior management. The HSE holds the view that while the national drugs strategy makes reference to community participation, which it does, it believes there is no mandate for the HSE or drug and alcohol task forces to fund it. This is a fundamental problem that needs to be corrected. The Taoiseach also notes that the Department of Health is currently reviewing how best to support and promote community participation, and I would ask that the divergence of views between the HSE and the Department on the funding of community participation be fully addressed during this process.

I am disappointed that the Taoiseach has taken a kind of half-in, half-out position on the formal adoption of the north-west inner city into the initiative that I spoke of because that is a missed opportunity. I also asked about a review of the initiative, and I am disappointed that the Taoiseach has decided against that process. Reference is made to a spending review of the initiative and a value assessment. As someone who understands the value of digging into policymaking and of community participation, I am very surprised that the Taoiseach has not even considered a community-based review, which is far more important and would prove far more valuable.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Apologies if I missed it but which Cabinet committee or group, if any, is dealing with arts and culture? I would hate to think that this area has been overlooked, particularly given the really dire plight of performers, musicians, arts workers, crews and events people. The latter group are out protesting because, as with other groups, their incomes and livelihoods have been hammered by the current crisis. Very little support has been forthcoming, especially for the events sector. Are any of the Taoiseach's committees looking at this area because it is urgent?

Does the Taoiseach really think it is a good idea to have a new oversight committee chaired by Mr. Martin Fraser to finesse the public health advice received from NPHE? Is this really the way to deal with the huge inconsistencies and confusion around public health advice? We now have the expert advisory group, NPHE, this new committee and the Government involved. The roadmap says that people should not leave Dublin, the Minister for Health said that they can leave, the Taoiseach said last night that he was not sure and then the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe said this morning that they should not leave the city. Do we really need even further layers of confusion piled on top of that?

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** On the issue of committees, I seek some clarity. The Taoiseach said that there is now a Government co-ordination committee. Is that correct?

**The Taoiseach:** Yes.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Does that deal with communications?

**The Taoiseach:** No.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** May I say that given the last few weeks, months, days, hours and minutes, the Taoiseach should probably include it to bring some clarity. The Taoiseach was very strong in opposition on the unit that was set up by the previous Government, and I shared a lot of his concerns in that regard, to be fair, but there needs to be co-ordination of communications. The work that some of the media did yesterday in helping the Government out by informing people about the roadmap should really have been done by the Government and should have been done more quickly. The Taoiseach can take this or leave it. I have already asked him during Leaders' Questions to deal with this before the weekend and I urge him to do so.

How will the new committee that has been set up to oversee the workings with NPHECT interact with the Cabinet? Will it be like a buffer? The Taoiseach said that it will ensure understanding across Government and gave a couple of examples. How is that going to interact with the Cabinet committees on health and on Covid-19?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I must ask for everyone's co-operation with regard to time because we ran over time leading into Leaders' Questions.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** We started seven or eight minutes late.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I know, but that was because everybody spoke over time this morning. I am trying to be fair to everybody.

**The Taoiseach:** On the national alcohol and drugs strategy and the issue of community participation, I will discuss the matter again with the HSE. On the ground, the HSE clearly has a view and the Deputy is saying that there is a divergence of opinion between the executive and the Department of Health. My own view is that programmes work best when they have strong engagement with the community on the ground and there is significant community buy-in and participation. Again, I will seek to ascertain from the HSE its policy position on this. I sent a comprehensive reply to the Deputy and my position on the north-west inner city is a reasonable one to adopt at this stage. Again, I have no issue with a review of the community participation issue and will tell my officials to do so and arrive at an outcome in that regard.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, there is not a specific Cabinet committee on arts and culture. Indeed, there is not a Cabinet committee for every Department. There are some key areas, including housing, health and climate change, Covid-19, Europe, social affairs and education, as I have outlined.

The issue of the events sector and financial and economic support for different sectors comes under the remit of the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment. That committee approved the wage subsidy scheme and the pandemic unemployment payment, as well as the extension of the latter and its opening up to new entrants. It has also considered the issue of sectors that do not fall readily within the scope of those particular interventions. The restart grant came through that committee, as did the commercial rates relief that was offered to a whole range of businesses. The credit loan guarantee scheme and the microfinancing initiatives also came through that particular committee. It will also be considering what is possible in terms of supporting companies and self-employed individuals in particular sectors, including the arts, events, the taxi industry and others. The Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, is engaging with the arts sector on an ongoing basis in regard to dealing with the impact of Covid on their situation.

The principal focus of the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination is preparation

for Cabinet itself in terms of issues that might arise at Cabinet, various initiatives to make sure everything is agreed and so forth. It performs a very useful function, given it is a three-party coalition, in making sure there is agreement on the issues that go to Cabinet, and that all of those particular amendments have been thought through in all respects.

### **Cabinet Committees**

2. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education will next meet. [22355/20]

3. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if the Cabinet committee on education has met to date in September 2020. [22380/20]

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education will next meet. [23667/20]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 2 to 4, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on education was established by Government decision on 6 July last and the first meeting will take place in the coming weeks. It will oversee implementation of programme for Government commitments in the area of education. In addition to the meetings of full Cabinet and Cabinet committees, I meet with Ministers on an individual basis to focus on particular issues.

Yesterday, I launched our medium-term plan, Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19, which frames Ireland's approach to managing and living with Covid-19 for the coming six to nine months. The Government has identified the reopening of schools and early education and childcare services as a priority. The plan acknowledges the impact of school closures on children and young people's social and emotional development, as well as their academic progress. Childhood education and care is also essential for parents to balance work with family responsibilities. Keeping schools and early education and childcare services open in any escalation of restrictive measures will continue to be a top priority for Government.

Sector-specific guidance has also been prepared and published for the early years sector, schools and further and higher education institutions, and this will be updated to reflect the new framework.

In the context of the schools reopening, I would have had quite a number of meetings with the Minister and the senior officials of the Department in terms of the logistical planning for the reopening and bringing 1 million people back into our schools. The resources required to do that, which were close to €370 million or €400 million, and it will go over that in time, were critical in terms of enabling our schools to come back.

I have also had a series of meetings with the Minister and her officials in regard to the calculated grades, which has been a very significant logistical exercise in itself in a unique year, with Covid-19 and no leaving certificate, as we would have known it, making it very difficult and challenging for the young people involved. If we contrast what has happened in other jurisdictions, to be fair to the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, and to the Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, in terms of the additional places that have been created at third level, those meetings, and that testing through of the various scenarios that were presented by the Department of Edu-

cation and Skills officials around calculated grades, was work well done. Nonetheless, there are clearly difficulties emanating from it, and for many individual students it is very difficult in terms of the standardisation process and how it may have impacted on their own individual results. That said, in a unique and very challenging situation because of Covid-19, it was possible to deliver a calculated grades process and programme, and also to create additional places - more than 4,000 additional places at third level this year - to try to help with the pressures on students and help them to get the courses they obviously desired.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** For the third time, I am asking the Taoiseach to set out what Electric Ireland told him when he contacted them. I raised this issue around energy bills, which is of massive concern.

**The Taoiseach:** I dealt with that earlier.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach told me earlier that he had been in touch with Electric Ireland. This is the third occasion I am asking him to clarify what it said to him, what commitments it made and so on.

I also note that the Ombudsman for Children has published its annual report today. It is raising specific concerns about mental health policy and provision for children and young people. I want to reflect that concern to the Taoiseach. It is the issue of remote education for children who live with a medically vulnerable person that I want to raise with him. I have had a very significant number of contacts from families and from parents who are afraid to send their child to school because one of their children living at home has a significant underlying or life-threatening medical condition. They are terrified to send their children to school because they are afraid of that child bringing the virus into the home. In turn, they cannot keep their children at home as schools have received no direction from the Department on how to manage this specific scenario. Currently, the only option available to them is to register with Tusla for home-schooling, and that is not what they are asking for.

My colleague, Teachta Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, has raised this with the Minister countless times. We are asking that a circular is issued to schools, enabling them to provide remote teaching to pupils who live with the person who has a certified serious medical condition. I am asking the Taoiseach to act on this quickly because it is causing such considerable distress.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Deputy McDonald has raised a real issue, which has also come to my attention, and I am glad she has put it on the record, although I do not want to repeat it.

There are three issues the Taoiseach might look at. As regards testing in schools, we need a plan. In fact, we need a whole session on where we are going with testing. I accept what the Taoiseach said earlier, by the way, and I am coming at this from a different angle. Given the new technologies that are out there in regard to testing, I have had discussions with the Minister, the HSE and others as to how we were going to bring about rapid testing in schools, and how we are going to use and leverage these technologies. Other jurisdictions and other countries have done this, so where are we at in this regard? I accept it has to go through a regulation process. That is the first question.

Second, what are we doing to prepare schools for the eventuality that the leaving certificate next year will go through something similar to this year, which is a strong possibility?

Third, in the roadmap just launched, one of the things the Taoiseach did not say at the press

conference but which was subsequently outlined for Dublin is that higher and third level institutions should consider enhanced protective measures. What does that mean? Third level institutions also have an interest in housing, so it is in their financial interest to bring people up. Could we be at a point in the near future where the Government will be instructing third level institutions to do all their teaching online for a period of time? Those are three reasonable questions.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** To follow on from Deputy McDonald's question, there is not only the issue of pupils who may have underlying conditions but there are also parents who are worried and who have serious underlying conditions. It is not clear to me, and  
*2 o'clock* I have had quite a few calls about this, what those parents should do. They do not know what to do or whether there is a danger in them sending their children to school. We need support and we need advice for people about what they should do in that situation.

The Department and the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, have agreed a plan to monitor school compliance with Covid-19 restrictions but they do not intend to publish the outcome of those inspections or, it seems, share that information with, for example, the teachers themselves, but only with principals and the boards. This does not seem to me to be acceptable.

As well as principals, and this extends to all workplaces but certainly in schools, surely there should be health and safety representatives appointed in every school among the school staff who will also receive the information if there are problems and who can represent the staff in terms of any concerns they have about failure to apply public health guidelines, restrictions, distancing and so forth properly in schools.

**The Taoiseach:** First, I have not personally spoken to Electric Ireland. I told the Deputy that I spoke to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. We have been in touch with Electric Ireland, and when we get a response, I will revert to the Deputy. I also told the Deputy that there was a reduction in utility prices earlier this year and that the presentation she made on the previous occasion in the Dáil was not entirely accurate. Regarding the public service obligation, PSO, I outlined our policy on renewable energy.

As regards arrangements for children with high risk medical conditions who cannot attend school, the education roadmap provides a model of support and guidance to schools for pupils who cannot attend due to Covid-19 public health requirements and their underlying conditions. A key element of that is a two-way link between the school and the home, if at all feasible. Home tuition is an option in a situation where the other siblings might not be able to go to school either, due to a fear of bringing infection into the home. Home tuition is one intervention.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** They do not want it though.

**The Taoiseach:** We are not going to produce optimal solutions left, right and centre.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I have acknowledged that.

**The Taoiseach:** It is an option and some people avail of it. The third option is some other model to be developed which has to be fleshed out.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is the point.

**The Taoiseach:** It has to be fleshed out. It is not as simple as just calling for it. It has to be

developed-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Department needs to do it.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and worked through.

In terms of mental health supports, additional psychologists have been recruited under the roadmap to the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS. In addition, there is full provision for school guidance counsellors. That is something to which I committed during the confidence and supply arrangement and it is now 100% restored because of my commitment to doing it both in opposition and in government. It provides very important supports to students at second level when returning to school. To be fair to the education roadmap, it had a particular focus on the psychological well-being of pupils as they returned to school, given the prolonged lockdown and closure of schools and the impact on their lives. Children and young people are developing, and have developed, significant resilience in the face of the pandemic. It has been particularly challenging for them, but I am of the view that they have responded with a degree of resilience.

Deputy Boyd Barrett's point related to-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The inspections and monitoring.

**The Taoiseach:** Yes. Everything that has been done so far in the reopening of schools has been done in partnership. It is important that the inspections take place and that they are done as a way of ensuring improvement and constructive compliance. I surmise, and I will seek further information on this from the Department, that it wants to bring schools with it and that it does not wish to be naming and shaming, which is how some types of inspections can evolve. Instead, where the inspectors see shortcomings, they would work with the school management, the board and the principals to point to the shortcomings and the need to get them sorted. The board has parent, community and teacher representatives. I am only surmising that this might be one of the rationales. The partners in education will have a say in this as well. However, I will revert to the Deputy in that regard because I read that report this morning as well.

As regards testing in schools, I gave Members figures this morning. The positivity rate is less than 1% for those up to 14 years of age. It is quite comprehensive. A number of schools are getting advice. There has been a great deal of pressure on the testing system since the schools reopened. That was understandable and expected. Testing has increased overall. Today, we passed 1 million tests administered in Ireland. Last week saw the largest number of tests ever recorded in a week. There has been a significant degree of input from the HSE in that regard and it has been working closely with the schools in respect of the situation that pertains to schools, students and children who require testing.

On the leaving certificate, in my meetings with the Department and the Minister for Education and Skills, they have been absolutely determined that there will be a physical leaving certificate examination next year, come what may. We do not want to return to the calculated grades system. They are planning and preparing for how to manage this year's leaving certificate students who were in fifth year last year and lost some months as a result of the lockdown. Some of the ideas being developed include a broader choice in the range of questions that will be offered to students who may be fearful that they did not get the time to cover the entire curriculum. There would be greater choice for students in subjects such as English, history and geography, in fact, in most subjects. I will leave that to the curriculum experts and the people

who set the examinations. It is important we do everything we can to have physical examinations next year.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Agreed.

**The Taoiseach:** The planning for that starts now. The chief inspector was adamant that this is the plan and the commitment.

In terms of higher education and the enhanced protection measures that NPHET has asked the universities and institutes of technology to take, each college is adapting various measures suitable to the campus and location. A number of them are online for many courses. One is looking at blended learning and students being physically on campus for some hours of the week, but much of it is online. Different colleges have different policies.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** That might have to change.

**The Taoiseach:** That is why NPHET has advised. The Minister with responsibility for higher and further education is engaging with the various institutes and universities with a view to enhancing their measures further.

## **Departmental Bodies**

5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the status of the activities of the shared island unit in his Department. [23668/20]

**The Taoiseach:** The programme for Government sets out the Government's commitment to working with all communities and traditions on the island to build consensus on a shared future. This work will be underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement and respect for the principle of consent. I wish to see a renewed push to use the potential of the Good Friday Agreement to deliver sustained progress for all communities on the island.

The Government committed to establishing a shared island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach to work towards a consensus on a shared island. This unit has now been established. The unit will examine the political, social, economic and cultural considerations underpinning a future in which all traditions are mutually respected. Strengthening social, economic and political links on the island and the promotion of all-island approaches to the strategic challenges facing Ireland, North and South, will be key objectives for the unit.

The unit is led by an assistant secretary with two staff appointed and further assignments in train. The work programme for the unit is currently being further developed. The unit will work collaboratively across the Government and with research, civil society and sectoral, business and community organisations on the island, and seek broad-based engagement with political and civil society representatives.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** People Before Profit is an all-Ireland party. We believe we must move to a united Ireland and end partition. A number of groups and parties in the House would say they subscribe to that view in one way or another. This is a very opportune time in view of the Covid-19 pandemic and how it has highlighted the irrationality of partition when we need an all-Ireland approach to health and dealing with the virus. I am from the James Connolly school of fighting for a different republic. Connolly understood that if one was going

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to win people over to the idea of a united Ireland, it had to be a better and different island. It should not just be the pushing together of two states which have been dysfunctional in many ways for most of their history. It has to be a better place.

One of the key areas the Taoiseach's unit should be looking at is an all-Ireland health service. Why would anybody in his or her right mind wish to be part of this State when he or she sees a two-tier, dysfunctional, under-resourced health system with massive waiting lists, where nobody is really in charge because half of it is privatised and another bit of it is run by this or that religious organisation? I wish to give a shout out to the all-Ireland national health service campaign that has been established. I ask the Taoiseach and his unit to examine this. Looking seriously at establishing an all-Ireland national health service that works would take us a considerable way towards convincing people of the argument for a united Ireland.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** James Connolly also accurately predicted the carnival of reaction that partition would give rise to. Tragically, we have seen that play out over generations. We are very fortunate to live in these times as we have a democratic pathway and international agreements that provide a framework for the kinds of things that the Taoiseach has described, such as creating that sense of participation, inclusion and sharing right across our island. We also have a democratic and peaceful pathway to constitutional change. We have seen in recent days the real danger posed by Boris Johnson's Government and the impulse to simply shred international agreements and walk away from them. It is very important that we do not go down that road. Therefore, I ask the Taoiseach to clarify his position on a referendum on Irish unity. We will have our views on the timing of it but I think we are all agreed that it needs to be prepared for. It is part and parcel of the Good Friday Agreement infrastructure - a central part. It is the mechanism by which self-determination is realised and the constitutional question and contested Border issue are resolved. In a recent interview in *The Irish Times*, the Taoiseach gave the impression that the referendum was an optional extra. I know the Taoiseach has a view on the timing of a referendum and so on but this is very important for people across the island. Like Deputy Boyd Barrett's party, my party represents people in the North and they are very clear that the referendum is part and parcel of the Good Friday Agreement settlement. It is very important that the Taoiseach makes that clear too because when it comes to adhering to and respecting our international agreements, it has to be all. It cannot be selective.

**The Taoiseach:** It has to be all but that applies to Sinn Féin as well. Sinn Féin needs to adhere to international agreements, the Good Friday Agreement being one of them. I do not believe Sinn Féin should have collapsed the Executive over a heating initiative but it did. We were without an Assembly and an Executive for three years. This cuts all ways.

I do not believe in or agree with what Boris Johnson or the British Government did. I have made that very clear to him. It is wrong. One should not breach agreements, which were signed up to internationally, in the withdrawal treaty or the Northern Ireland protocol. One should not do that. It is wrong. It undermines credibility and erodes trust. I am working with the European Union leadership in our response to this, which is firm and is carefully calibrated not to play into any particular initiative or ploy that the British Government may be pursuing. We believe the joint committee is where the British Government needs to resolve any issues it may have with the working of the protocol and those issues were being worked out fairly amicably prior to the sudden publication of the Bill and its offending clauses.

I take exception to Deputy McDonald playing politics with this all the time, though that is the nature of her party. For example, she said that I gave the impression that the Good Friday

Agreement was optional extra. I did not give that impression at all. The Deputy threw in the line about me saying a referendum was an optional extra but I never said that.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Then the Taoiseach should clarify his remarks.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not have to, because the Deputy is creating all these straw people.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I ask the Taoiseach to clarify what he said. If I am wrong, put me right.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy is wrong, but worse-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, can we-----

**The Taoiseach:** I am trying to give my political views on this and respond to the question. I am simply saying that these things are deliberately misleading, and are deliberately said in order to be misleading and misrepresent people's positions for the electoral base and electoral advantage. We have had too much of that in the politics of the island, particularly insofar as they relate to a fundamental issue that I have worked hard on all my life, as a public representative, a Deputy and a Minister. I have sought to work with people with different views from mine and assist them to progress. That has always been my commitment and it is regrettable that, week after week, the Deputy's approach is to be divisive, undermine and make suggestions that are not true.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I ask the Taoiseach to clarify his position.

**The Taoiseach:** I am an enthusiastic supporter of the Good Friday Agreement.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Is that in all its parts?

**The Taoiseach:** I only wish Deputy McDonald and Sinn Féin were consistent on the agreement since it was signed. There is provision in the Good Friday Agreement for a referendum. Of course there is. Equally, I have made the point that I believe it would be very divisive to have one in the next number of years because we need to bring people together.

I agree with Deputy Boyd Barrett's points on the health service. That is precisely what the shared unit can do. In the first instance, let us commission research on the respective strengths and weaknesses of both health services, because there is a significant gap between the health services in Northern Ireland and the Republic, in both ways. Both have their challenges and they need to be worked out and thought through. We also need to think about what we can share. On the Northern Executive side, one paediatric centre for cardiac surgery is agreed. An island-based approach to tertiary services in key areas where children require services, such as cancer, trauma, cardiac care and a range of other services is being looked at in the new children's hospital and in Crumlin at the moment. That is very important.

We need to repair and deepen relationships on the island. That is part of what the shared unit will be about as well. It will engage with people of different perspectives, politics and views with a view to getting and developing a consensus on this matter. We are never going to develop a consensus if there is constant sniping, undermining and saying one person is not as pure as someone else on the national question, which is what I am getting repeatedly.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach was asked a question. He is the Head of

Government.

**The Taoiseach:** It is no longer about whether one is the purest on the national question.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** For Christ's sake. Talk about touchy.

**The Taoiseach:** It is about doing something pragmatic and significant on issues such as health, education and work.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Unbelievable.

**The Taoiseach:** The North needs an economic transformation. I have said consistently that the disadvantaged areas in the North, both loyalist and nationalist, need a Marshall plan for school completion and access to third level education. The levels are too low in some communities in the North and have been so for too long. I want the shared unit to delve into those areas because that is ultimately how we build peace and reconciliation on the island and bring together different communities, not through divisive politics.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach is the one being utterly divisive and rude.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Is there time left?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There is very little time left so we cannot go on as the next questions are grouped.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Marc MacSharry - to discuss prioritising the delivery of broadband to schools and business premises in Ballyshannon, south Donegal and north Leitrim; (2) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - to discuss the proposed Garda station for Dublin 13 and Dublin 17; (3) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss the accommodation crisis at the Greystones community college, County Wicklow; (4) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the escalation in use of illegal fireworks across Dublin; (5) Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Barry Cowen - to discuss the need for remedial works in Clifden following a recent flood event; (6) Deputy Patrick Costello - to discuss Ireland's 2018 commitment to bring 36 unaccompanied minors to Ireland from Greece; (7) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the causes and responses to recent floods in Cork South West; (8) Deputy Mark Ward - to discuss curtailments in Dublin Bus routes as a result of anti-social behaviour; (9) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss the upgrading of the R624 access road to Cobh and the Great Island in County Cork; (10) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss the current trolley crisis at University Hospital Limerick; (11) Deputy Mattie McGrath - to discuss timely repair of faults by telecommunications companies for elderly customers; (12) Deputy Cormac Devlin - to discuss the new medium-term roadmap for living with Covid-19, and the recent increase in Covid-19 cases in Dublin; (13) Deputies Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and Jim O'Callaghan - to discuss the calculated grades provided to students and the differential with

school-given grades; (14) Deputy Carol Nolan - to discuss the measures that ESB is taking to address repeat flooding events along the River Shannon; (15) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the Carrigtohill school campus development in Carrigtohill, County Cork; (16) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the ongoing developments for workers at Aer Lingus; (17) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss the devastation caused to the west Cork road network after severe flood events in August; (18) Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - to discuss the impact of Irish Water's one contractor or company tender policy on small plant hire operators and sole traders; (19) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss the European Commission's REACH committee's recent adoption of a regulation on the use of lead gunshot; (20) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss the regeneration of public housing in inner city Dublin; (21) Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - to discuss ongoing challenges experienced by Cork Airport due to Covid-19 travel restrictions; (22) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss access to public liability insurance for the leisure industry, community groups and community facilities; and (23) Deputy Paul Murphy - to discuss the issue of the assault of a protestor outside the Dáil on Saturday, 12 September 2020.

The matters raised by Deputies Paul Murphy, Dessie Ellis, Marc MacSharry and Christopher O'Sullivan have been selected for discussion.

*Sitting suspended at 2.20 p.m. and resumed at 3.20 p.m.*

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Anti-Social Behaviour**

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** The daily and nightly misuse of fireworks is a menace in our communities. Throughout the country and particularly in Dublin, there has been an unprecedented level of use. With Hallowe'en more than a month away and no sign of their use abating, I shudder to think what we are in for. There have been many cases of fireworks having been thrown at people, animals, cars, buses and shops, resulting in injuries and damage. I have been told by vets that they have seen increasing numbers of dogs, cats and other animals having been injured and suffering high levels of stress and anxiety.

Some recent incidents include one in Ballymun, where a rocket was fired into the back garden of a house, which resulted in a pet dog receiving serious injuries, or another in Ringsend, where a number of days ago a young person was hit in the face with a rocket, resulting in her needing hospital treatment. There was still another incident in Finglas, where a firework was directed at the face of a child, who also received serious injuries. These are just a few examples of what has become a daily practice in our communities. It seems to many people that the strength and power of these fireworks is far greater than we experienced in the past. As the Minister of State will be aware, while this is a problem that can be found throughout Dublin, it is most prevalent in mainly working class districts, although it is not exclusive to them.

The sale, possession or use of fireworks is illegal, and the Garda has the powers to confiscate fireworks from anyone who does not have the necessary authorisation or permit to possess them. Their seemingly endless supply, however, suggests this is just not happening. Older

residents who are cocooning feel trapped. They cannot escape the endless grating racket of exploding bangers and rockets. Those who have highly trained service or assistance dogs fear for their dogs' well-being. Autism companion dogs, for example, act as a constant companion to children with autism in their home environment. They give the child a sense of responsibility, reassurance and support, and help to control and improve his or her behaviour. They help to promote calmness and act as a safety aid to the parents. Children with autism are particularly susceptible to noise and any disruption to their already difficult lives, and this causes no end of anxiety and stress.

The number of community gardaí in the Dublin metropolitan region dropped from 508 in 2010 to 278 in July 2020, a 55% drop in numbers. On top of this, since Covid-19 began, community gardaí have been instructed not to work past 7 p.m., which is ridiculous. Operation Tombola has, supposedly, been ongoing since 4 September, despite the clear indicators that this problem has been ongoing since July. At its monthly meeting, Dublin City Council passed an emergency motion urging the Garda to use its full powers to combat this problem, which include laws on the possession of illegal fireworks and their use to commit assault. The council is calling for the Garda Commissioner and the assistant commissioner for the Dublin metropolitan region to release adequate resources, including the removal of the overtime ban, to ensure gardaí respond swiftly and adequately, that a task force involving gardaí, council officials, emergency services and councillors be set up and that transport services also be included, given that bus and rail services have been targeted by this recklessness, for which young people, in the main, are responsible. A public awareness campaign, involving schools, community groups and youth organisations, should be launched to press home the dangers and the possible consequences, particularly as Hallowe'en approaches.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy James Browne):**

On behalf of the Minister for Justice and Equality, I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter. As he will be aware, fireworks, as explosives, are regulated under national and EU legislation. They can only be imported into the country under licence and must be stored and sold in accordance with the explosives laws. Government policy restricts the availability of all hazardous fireworks to the general public. Licences under the Explosives Act are issued by the Department only for the importation of fireworks to be used in organised displays conducted by professional and competent operators. Nevertheless, the Minister is all too conscious of the numerous incidents, and sadly some serious accidents, arising from the use of illegal fireworks.

Every year in the run-up to Hallowe'en, both the Department and An Garda Síochána engage in additional work to try to keep everyone safe and to raise awareness of the dangers associated with the improper use of fireworks. As Hallowe'en approaches, the Department runs a safety campaign, working with various stakeholders and partners, to ensure a message of safety and compliance reaches as wide an audience as possible. Aside from the very important safety aspects of the campaign, it also highlights the serious penalties that people can face, given that breaches of the legislation governing the importation and use of fireworks are, quite rightly, treated as very serious offences.

In addition to this work undertaken by the Department, An Garda Síochána engages in Operation Tombola at this time of the year, which aims to combat the illegal importation, sale and use of fireworks. The Garda Commissioner has informed the Minister that each district puts in place an operational plan to tackle the sale of fireworks, including through combating the importation, sale and distribution of illegal fireworks through intelligence-led operations, visits to local car boot sales, searches and seizures of fireworks; liaising with local authorities and fire

services regarding the provision of official supervised bonfire sites, the policing of these, and the identification and removal of stockpiled bonfire material and abandoned vehicles from other locations; promoting awareness of the dangers associated with the improper use of fireworks and unsupervised bonfires through the media, social media, school visits and information leaflet distribution by Garda members and the crime prevention officer; high-visibility policing of the Hallowe'en night celebrations; and utilising the divisional public order unit on Hallowe'en night. The Deputy will be aware that Operation Tombola also focuses on preventing associated public disorder and antisocial behaviour through the incremental deployment of resources, including Garda public order units to augment local plans, as appropriate.

As for legislation, as well as Part 6 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006, which gives An Garda Síochána the powers to make arrests in respect of the possession of unlicensed fireworks, a number of strong legislative provisions are available to the Garda to combat antisocial behaviour more generally, including the Criminal Damage Act 1991, the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994, the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 2003 and the Intoxicating Liquor Acts 2003 and 2008.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** I am well aware of Operation Tombola and the way it has worked, particularly in Finglas and Ballymun over the years. It has worked well and we have had very few incidents in recent years, but this is different. It has been going on for months, and the number and the strength of the bangers are unprecedented, as is what is happening in our communities. It may be that it is a result of Covid and restlessness, especially among young people, because that certainly seems to have been a factor in the escalation. There may be enough legislation, but the problem is there are not enough resources on the ground. There have been cutbacks on Garda overtime and community gardaí do not work past 7 p.m. I do not get it. This has happened since Covid emerged, as has been confirmed to me. These are problems that we need more resources to deal with. We have to seize fireworks at their sources, whatever they are. There seem to be a massive number of them, day and night and into all hours of the morning. They are everywhere, not just in working class areas. I have experienced it everywhere. Hallowe'en has been a particularly bad time in some areas down through the years. The work of the Garda in Finglas and Ballymun over the last number of years in regard to Hallowe'en has been brilliant. It has prevented many of the problems. Working with the council, we seized various paraphernalia that was being used for bonfires and so on. Great work has been done but we need to get the message out, particularly to the young people. Those involved are, in the main, young people and their behaviour is so reckless. They are throwing fireworks into cars, supermarkets and people's faces. I accept that in some instances no harm is meant but in some cases the fireworks are being directed in a reckless manner. We need action on this issue.

**Deputy James Browne:** I again thank Deputy Ellis for raising this matter. On behalf of the Minister, Deputy McEntee, I assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána remains committed to tackling public disorder and anti-social behaviour through working with communities to reduce this type of behaviour and to enhance community safety. The Garda Commissioner has assured the Minister that appropriate policing plans and measures are being implemented, effective since 4 September 2020, and that Operation Tombola will remain in place in the lead-up to, and over, the Hallowe'en period.

I look forward to the Minister launching the public awareness campaign in the near future, which will feature in print media as well as online, including on social media platforms. The campaign will use a variety of platforms to ensure it reaches as wide an audience as possible with its message of safety and compliance with the law. I appreciate the Deputy's genuine

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concerns on this issue and I will bring them to the attention of the Minister. I stay in Dublin on Monday and Tuesday nights and I hear the fireworks. Year-on-year this is happening earlier. At one time it was early Hallowe'en fireworks but nowadays we are hearing fireworks more randomly throughout the year. As I said, I will bring the Deputy's genuine concerns to the attention of the Minister.

### **National Broadband Plan**

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, for standing in for the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, whom I understand is isolating, and rightly so.

I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could provide an update on the national broadband plan. In response to my Question No. 781 of 16 June 2020 the Minister, Deputy Ryan, said that 115,000 rural premises would be connected by the end of this year, with 70,000 to 100,000 per year connected the following year. Can the Minister of State confirm that a contract has been signed at this stage and that activities are under way?

I raise this issue because in the same response the Minister said that 300 broadband connection points, BCPs, will be prioritised for connection this year, that work was under way and that all remaining connections would be made by the end of the year. I understand locations are colour coded but I do not think we have used a strategic approach in our colour coding. I will give three examples of this in regard to my own constituency.

First, in Ballyshannon, south Donegal, which is one of the oldest towns in Ireland and has had a very difficult time in terms of unemployment, factory closures, shop closures and so on down through the years, there are two industrial estates, the Cornhill Business Park and the Erne Business Park, comprising 18 offices and 12 commercial units and from which Eircom services are just 300 m. Surely, the blue colour coding should be applied to this area and it should be done as a BCP before the end of the year. This could help build employment and assist in remote working in this time of Covid.

Second, Four Masters national school in Kinlough, north County Leitrim, which is not too far from the aforementioned place, caters for 300 pupils. Again, there is high-speed broadband a matter of metres away from it. Could the colour coding not be changed from amber to blue to ensure it is one of the BCPs, and thus the children in that school can benefit from it?

Third, in Strandhill village in County Sligo, where I live, along the entire seafront, there are many businesses that have no broadband coverage while the industrial estate near the airport and much of the village has high-speed broadband. Again, there is only a couple of hundred metres involved.

Surely, these three locations, one in Donegal, one in north Leitrim and one in Sligo - I am sure there are others throughout my own constituency and nationally - from a strategic point of view and for a relatively small cost should be included as broadband connection points and given the connectivity they deserve before the end of this year. This cannot cost a huge amount.

I understand that if contracts are signed the national broadband plan proper will not get under way until January but I stand to be corrected in that regard. In any event, we need to be strategic in regard to services which are only metres away from so many businesses, schools

and premises that could facilitate employment in what is a very uncertain period ahead for many areas that are suffering greatly. My request is in regard to the Cornhill Business Park in Ballyshannon, the Erne Business Park in Ballyshannon, the Four Masters national school in north Leitrim - the Lurganboy community has been similarly ignored - and the proportion of Strandhill village where many business premises, despite the existence of high-speed broadband in the village, are not connected even though they are located only a couple of hundred metres from the village. With strategic focus we could make very fast progress under the BCP delivery project while the national broadband plan continues over the next number of years.

I ask the Minister of State to raise with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Department the possibility of the colour coding being changed to facilitate the delivery of services in these areas under the BCP project which is to be completed by the end of this year, as mentioned by the Minister in the response to Question No. 781 of 16 June last. This would not involve a great deal of work or expense but the upside would be huge in terms of employment creation.

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

The national broadband plan, NBP, contract was signed with National Broadband Ireland, NBI, in November 2019 to roll out a high-speed and future-proofed broadband network within the intervention area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms and 695 schools. The national broadband plan will ensure that citizens throughout the entire country have access to high-speed broadband services and that nobody is left without this vital service. The NBP network will offer users a high-speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500 Mbps from the outset. I should point out that this represents an increase from the 150 Mbps committed to under the contract. The current deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first two years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high-speed broadband within the next four years. NBI has made steady progress to date, with design work complete or ongoing in target townlands across 20 counties, including Leitrim, with over 91,000 premises surveyed to date. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area. Laying fibre should start shortly, with the first fibre-to-home connection expected around December 2020 in Carrigaline, County Cork. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register an interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website, [www.nbi.ie](http://www.nbi.ie).

Broadband connection points, BCPs, are a key element of the NBP, providing high-speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll-out of the fibre-to-home network. Approximately 300 sites in rural areas were identified for connection by the end of 2020, including 75 schools. Over 100 broadband connection point sites have been installed by NBI and the high-speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills for schools. Four schools and four BCPs within the areas referred to by the Deputy have been installed by NBI to date, with a further two BCPs scheduled to be installed in September followed by another eight by the end of the year. I understand that the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment continues to work with the Department of Education and Skills to prioritise the remaining schools to be connected over the term of the NBP. While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this

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impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact as far as possible. The Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the programme for Government where the delivery of the national broadband plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged, particularly around increased levels of remote working.

The programme for Government commits to seeking the accelerated roll-out of the national broadband plan and in this regard my Department continues to engage with National Broadband Ireland, NBI, to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this roll-out to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises currently scheduled in years six and seven of the current plan to an earlier date. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network roll-out is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19.

Bringing connectivity to rural Ireland is central to promoting regional development and the broadband connection points are an important part of that process.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I thank the Minister of State for the response on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I appreciate this is not her direct area of concern but I mentioned specific areas in my earlier contribution. They include Cornhill Business Park and Mr. Philip Rooney, who asked me to raise this matter. They also take in Mr. William Doogan of MCM Spirits and Liquers at Erneside Business Park. Councillor Justin Warnock raised the issue of the Four Masters national school in Kinlough and the Strandhill community development association at Strandhill.

I would like a specific answer on the areas and I am sure officials can go back on the record to note the locations. I ask that these areas be included in the broadband connection points delivery project that would see connectivity this year. The thought of being in years two, three, four, five, six or seven will undermine the potential of these areas to deliver for their communities. The potential is there, there is expertise in local communities and there is willingness and determination to do it. We need to provide these people with the tools they require. There is the potential to do that this year with the broadband connection points project so I formally ask that the Minister of State arrange for the Department to reply to me specifically on those areas. In other words, the colour-coding on the website map referred to by the Minister of State should be changed from amber to blue. This would see the areas prioritised, which would be of great benefit to these communities.

I appreciate the national broadband plan is being implemented. Many of us had difficulties with how the contract was put together as well as its inordinate cost. It is what it is. It is now signed and we all look forward to having these 537,000 premises connected. Naturally, as one of only four Deputies in the House to represent not just two counties but part of two other counties, I am in part of the country in the north west that is on the periphery of the periphery. The area has been undermined by generations of neglect by Governments of all parties and none.

There is now an opportunity and I ask the Minister of State to use her good offices to influence the officials in the Department dealing with communications to respond specifically about the areas I mentioned being included in the broadband connection points delivery project before the end of the year.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** I will pass on those questions to the Minister, Deputy Ryan. We all understand the importance of the roll-out of broadband throughout the country and I understand the Deputy's frustration. We have all felt similar frustration in our constituencies over the years and we know this Government knows the importance of rolling out the broadband plan.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of good and reliable broadband to ensure citizens right across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the programme for Government, where delivery of the national broadband plan will be a key enabler of many of the policies envisaged, particularly around increased levels of remote working. The broadband plan will ensure citizens throughout the entire country will have access to a high-speed broadband service and nobody will be left without such a vital service.

Despite the impact of the pandemic, NBI continues to steadily progress its deployment activities and the current deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first two years and more than 90% of premises in the State having access to high-speed broadband within the next four years. As I mentioned, more than 91,000 premises across 20 counties, including Leitrim, have been surveyed to date. Additionally, four school broadband connection points within the area have been installed, with a further two broadband connection points scheduled for installation in September, followed by another eight by year-end.

The Government has committed to seeking to accelerate the roll-out of the national broadband plan. In this regard, the Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this roll-out and establishing the possibility of bringing forward premises currently scheduled for years six and seven to an earlier date. This process of exploring the potential to accelerate roll-out of the network is being undertaken in parallel with measures required to mitigate delays resulting from Covid-19.

### **Crime Investigation**

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I apologise as I did not realise this matter was down as coming first in the order. The last time I looked, it was third in the order.

I first express my sympathy and solidarity with Izzy, the activist who was beaten on the head outside Leinster House on Saturday. People have seen the horrific pictures of blood streaming down her face. She was hospitalised and had to receive stitches. Izzy is not only an outstanding anti-oppression activist and one of the founders and a former chief steward of Pride but she also personally stood with the Jobstown defendants and supported the Jobstown Not Guilty campaign in defending the right to protest. I was personally and politically appalled seeing what happened to Izzy.

In a way the nature of the attack on her says something about how those at the core of these protests organised by the far right operate. She was beaten on the head with a bar wrapped in an Irish flag. The violence and hatred of these groups is wrapped in fake patriotism. They are consciously taking up matters that they believe they can bring to a broader section of people - it is masks currently - in order to try to develop far right and fascist politics in this State.

The majority of people who went on those protests on Saturday are not consciously far right,

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fascist or anything like that. These are people who have real concerns. They are frustrated by the Government advice around Covid-19 and they do not agree on the use of face masks or social distancing. I disagree with such people on those matters, although I agree with their frustration arising from the Government's incoherence. That incoherence comes because public health is not consistently placed first and instead the interests of private profit stands in the way. This happens most clearly in the case of meat plants.

I disagree with these people and their argument for not wearing masks if they are medically able to do so. I disagree with their argument that people do not need to socially distance. We must do all this as part of a collective effort that is not about individual responsibility but rather society as a whole looking to do what it can to protect the vulnerable, including older people, and stop Covid-19.

The Government has the most important job and should shut meat plants when that is required or send people home from school when necessary. It should carry out at least 100,000 tests and tracing processes per week.

Even if I do not convince these protestors on matters like masks and social distancing, I still appeal to them not to be used by the far right, as that is what is happening. They are taking advantage of people's fear in order to recruit. They should look at who is at the core of these protests.

There were two protests with the far right at their core on Saturday. One had Síol na hÉireann at its centre. It is not a registered party or lobby group and it is technically a private and for-profit company. The leader is a man named Niall McConnell, a Catholic nationalist who is anti-choice. He said at a demonstration that we "should not tolerate LGBTQ+ people". He is a close friend of Britain First founder and loyalist, Jim Dowson, and he has links with the British National Party former leader, Nick Griffin, and other far right people across Europe.

The group at the centre of the other protest at Leinster House was the National Party, led by Justin Barrett of Youth Defence notoriety. He is horrifically anti-woman and anti-abortion, as well as anti-same sex marriage. He also has open relations with extreme fascist and far right groups across Europe and has spoken at openly Nazi rallies in Germany.

**Deputy James Browne:** On behalf of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy McEntee, I thank Deputy Murphy for raising the matter today and I pass on her regrets as she cannot be here in person. The Minister is aware of the protest that took place in Dublin on Saturday afternoon, and as the Taoiseach has stated, it is of course the case that people have the right to protest in a democracy. However, it is important to remind ourselves regularly exactly why it is that the range of health regulations and guidelines currently operating have been put in place. They exist to help curb the spread of Covid-19 and keep each of us safe, particularly the most vulnerable people among us. As well as protecting life, it is essential to keep the virus suppressed to look after our children and keep our schools and businesses open. That is why the Government outlined its plan for Covid-19 resilience and national recovery yesterday. The Minister knows that this is not easy and that people have now spent six months living under circumstances that are very difficult for all of us. She urges all members of the public to act responsibly during this time and to abide by the health regulations that have been put in place.

With regard to Saturday's events, the Minister has been advised by the Garda authorities that the protests were policed by personnel from Garda divisions across the Dublin metropoli-

tan region, supported by two public order units. In view of the size of the protest, Kildare Street was closed off by An Garda and traffic diversions were put in place.

With regard to the alleged assault to which the Deputy refers, the Minister understands that a Garda investigation into this incident is under way. I hope the Deputy will understand that for this reason it would not be appropriate for the Minister or me to comment in any detail on the matter. The Minister would like to emphasise in the strongest terms that violence, confrontation and intimidation have no place in public protests. People can have differing views or opinions, but the degree of aggression displayed by some protestors on Saturday is not acceptable, to put it mildly, and is deeply concerning. The Minister therefore urges all involved to act responsibly and to abide by the public health guidelines and regulations which have been put in place to protect all of us.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** I thank the Minister. I understand that with the agreement of the House, Deputy Murphy will allow a Sinn Féin colleague 30 seconds to comment.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I submitted a similar Topical Issue matter on anti-mask protestors this morning but it was not selected. The truth is that these people are not protestors but agitators. They are Ireland's version of the National Front. What took place on the streets of Dublin last Saturday and on previous occasions is very disturbing. I know Izzy Kamikaze very well. She lives near to me. She is a tremendous, brave person and a wonderful human being who stands up for others. For her to be attacked in that manner is absolutely disgraceful. In politics we must all be able to advocate our own views openly and freely. For these people, who are basically fascists, to behave that way on the streets of Dublin is totally outrageous. We all have a responsibility to stand firmly against it. I thank Deputy Murphy for allowing me to comment.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I thank Deputy Kenny. I wish to make two quick points. First, any idea that the answer to this is to ban or clamp down on protests is completely wrong. Ms Kamikaze has publicly stated that she will be opposed to any ban on protests. I am also opposed to such a ban because I know that it will be used against progressive protestors in the future. We have to defend civil liberties. This measure would be totally counterproductive. Progressive organisations and political parties, trade unions, NGOs, immigrants' rights groups, LGBTQ+ groups and animal rights groups need to come together and build a broad, united front against the growth of fascist and far-right ideas. These people are getting organised, and if they get a foothold in Irish society, the consequences will be quite horrific for immigrants, Muslims, asylum seekers, socialists, trade unionists and anyone who stands against the kind of society they want. We need to mobilise people in a safe, socially distant way to stand against these ideas.

Part of opposing the growth of the far right is giving people a true narrative. Many of these people oppose the Government and I think they are right to oppose the Government. They have been fed the idea that the Government is controlled by George Soros or a Covid-19 conspiracy. This is nonsense. We need to tell people the truth. The Government is influenced by the likes of Mr. Larry Goodman and Mr. Denis O'Brien. That is who holds power in this society. The reason we have a housing crisis is not because of migrants but because the Government allows the interests of landlords and developers to reign. We must build a mass left party in this country which sets out a vision of how society can be different and is therefore able to capture people's real anger and alienation and point it in a progressive direction that will lead us out of the crisis we face.

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**Deputy James Browne:** I thank both Deputies for their contributions. I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this very important matter and I wish to convey the Minister's regrets that she cannot be here to answer in person. It is important to note that the vast majority of people continue to comply with public health guidelines and regulations. The Minister is confident that this compliance will continue. We are only too aware that we can only combat the spread of Covid-19 by continuing to make every effort together. As the Deputy will be aware, An Garda Síochána has implemented a careful and graduated policing response based on a strong tradition of policing by consent. Gardaí engage, explain and encourage members of the public to comply. Only as a last resort do they use their powers of enforcement under the health regulations.

The Deputy will appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me or for the Minister to make any further comment on this incident. An Garda is investigating this incident, and the Minister is satisfied that the appropriate steps will be taken to investigate the matter to its conclusion.

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. I will start by describing three serious flooding events that led to widespread devastation in west Cork in the latter half of August. On 13 August, the town of Rosscarbery was flooded, with several businesses and premises affected. There was widespread devastation of the road network in the hinterland of Rosscarbery, in villages or townlands that may not be familiar to the Minister of State, such as Glandore, Connonagh, Leap, Reenascreena and Rathbarry. Entire roads were completely washed away and most of them remain that way.

On 19 August, Bridge Street in the well-known town of Skibbereen was flooded. Skibbereen has a flood defence, but again premises and homes were flooded. Investigations into why that happened are ongoing. We thought we were over the worst of it, but a few days later the town of Bantry was severely flooded. The town of Bandon, on the eastern side of the constituency, experienced minor flooding affecting businesses and residences.

These three severe events occurred over the course of about 12 days. The initial Government response was quite commendable. The Minister of State with responsibility for dealing with flooding, Deputy O'Donovan, visited on three occasions. The Taoiseach visited Skibbereen after the flooding there, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, visited the area twice. The Government showed commendable seriousness in its response to these events. Moreover, the humanitarian response package extended to businesses and voluntary groups in these situations was made available to these towns and was mostly availed of by businesses. They were able to apply for some humanitarian funding.

However, the road network is still in the shocking condition I have described. Cork County Council has submitted an application for funding for repair works. The estimated cost comes to about €5 million. That damage is almost all confined to west Cork. Because of the damage to roads, residents of the affected area are forced to take detours taking 30 or 40 minutes. Many people find vehicular access to their houses has been cut off because the roads are not passable. The road serving a very popular area of the Wild Atlantic Way between Rosscarbery and Glandore was completely washed away. As a result, one of the most popular tourist attractions in the area, Drombeg stone circle, is closed. The road in the village of Rathbarry was washed

away, exactly replicating an event eight years ago when the entire road ended up at the bottom of the hill.

This is serious, and a range of issues are raised by the increased frequency of these events due to climate change. I am looking for a solid response in the form of funding, with a particular focus on the road network that has been completely washed away. Cork County Council is cash-strapped. It has not been collecting rates for several months and will not be able to foot the bill. I am looking for a firm commitment from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. There will also be housing issues, and I expect the Office of Public Works will be involved too. The engineers who are dealing with the damaged road network are unsure of where they stand at the moment and, above all, the people who live in these areas are very put out by the demolition of their road network. They need answers.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of the relevant local authority in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on these roads are funded from the councils' own resources, supplemented by State road grants.

I thank the Deputy for his clear outlining of the issues relating to the devastating impact of weather conditions in County Cork in August. Unfortunately, such severe weather events are becoming more frequent and highlight the need to focus on measures needed to address climate change.

As part of the recent Government stimulus package, eligible councils were asked to submit proposals to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport under the heading of climate change adaptation repairs by 14 August 2020. Cork County Council submitted proposals for 2020 which amounted to €1.63 million and on 31 August received notification that works to the value of €1.63 million had been approved. As the council's application for funding was received in mid-August, some but not all of the recent damage to roads and bridges caused by severe weather in County Cork is provided for in the August allocation. In that context, as the Deputy outlined, the chief executive of the council wrote to the Department, detailing the severity of the conditions experienced, particularly in west Cork, and requesting funding support from the Department for repairs to the regional and local network. Cork County Council has received its funding allocation under the stimulus package. The Deputy inquired whether the stimulus funding could be rolled over into 2021 to cover repair costs but, as the July stimulus is intended for projects which can be delivered this year, it is not possible for allocations to carry over into 2021. The Department has been engaging with the council about the repairs needed to the regional and local network and will be liaising further about the programme and the timing of the works. In that context, the council has been asked to provide a breakdown of the proposed 2020 and 2021 expenditure. I make the point that local authorities have the flexibility to revise their grant-funded work programmes in response to severe weather events.

On the works which will run into 2021, the Department's ability to provide specific funding for the repair and rehabilitation of roads in west Cork following the recent flood events is dependent on the funding made available for roads as part of the overall Estimates process. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, will be liaising with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, on this issue.

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As regards national roads, under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has overall responsibility for the planning and supervision of works for the construction and maintenance of roads. In this role, TII undertakes maintenance and renewal of roads assets either directly through its contractors or through local authority programmes funded by TII. It has liaised with local authorities regarding damage caused to pavements and structures in counties affected by recent severe weather and funding is being provided for remedial works to be undertaken. Moreover, special inspections will be undertaken at affected bridges in order to ascertain that no structural damage has been caused to those bridge structures.

**Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan:** I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive response. I am not entirely sure whether she indicated “yes” or “no” in terms of the response to the €5 million repairs that are needed after the recent specific flood damage to national, regional and local roads. The Minister of State referenced the climate action response funding that was recently announced, but I am unsure how much of the damage would be covered under that fund. I very much doubt that it would be covered. The bottom line is that there is a €5 million repair bill. The local authority will not be able to foot the entire bill because it is cash strapped as a result of the lack of rates. I take on board and appreciate that the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, led by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, led by the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, will liaise on the issue and I have received similar correspondence from the Minister, Deputy McGrath, but I wish to take this opportunity to underline again the importance of a quick response to the damage because the residents of these areas cannot put up with this for much longer. Images and videos of the road network are available. It is a disaster zone and needs a response.

In the 40 seconds I have left, I wish to point out that when we are responding to such events or building roads, we must take account of the fact that these events are becoming more frequent because of climate change. There is no denying that is the case. As such, we need to look at the way in which local, regional and national roads are built. We need proper culverts and drainage systems in order that the roads can withstand the heavy rainfall we are experiencing.

Lastly, I ask the Minister of State to liaise with her fellow Ministers of State and the OPW regarding the response to the businesses and premises that were damaged in Skibbereen, Bantry and Bandon in particular. The humanitarian support fund covers businesses but there are many homeowners and other residents who are not covered under that fund and I would love to see a specific fund set up in order to address that issue.

**Deputy Hildegard Naughton:** It is the intention of the Department to liaise with Cork County Council regarding the programme and the timing of repair works. The Deputy can rest assured that that engagement is ongoing and will clarify funding requirements in respect of 2020 and 2021 and how that can be accommodated in light of moneys available to the Department and the council. It is important to note that the Department will not have clarity in respect of its available budget for 2021 until the October budget is finalised. In addition, there is ongoing consultation between Cork County Council and TII in respect of repairs to national roads and bridges. I will be highlighting the issues raised by the Deputy in respect of Cork to the Minister, Deputy Ryan.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** I thank the Deputy and the Minister of State. I was recently in Bantry with Deputy Michael Collins and saw the devastation that has been caused.

## **Workers' Rights: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— the failure of the previous Government to legislate to implement the recommendations of the 'Expert Examination and Review of Laws on the Protection of Employee Interests when assets are separated from the operating entity (Duffy-Cahill Report)' which was commissioned following the closure of Clerys' department store, and that this report made six recommendations aimed at protecting the rights of workers made redundant through insolvency;

— that a key recommendation of that report was that the State should have the right to chase up transferred assets and to use them to fund payments due to workers as per collective agreements; and

— workers at Debenhams Ireland are being denied their right to four weeks redundancy pay per year of service as per a collective agreement with their union, Mandate;

further notes the distinct possibility of a large number of closures and insolvencies due to the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which could affect thousands of laid-off workers; and

calls on the Government to:

— introduce emergency legislation to implement the Duffy-Cahill Report recommendations as a matter of urgency; and

— examine the need for a ring-fenced insolvency fund, such as exists in several European Union states, to allow for all payments due to workers laid off by an insolvent company, which could be financed by a levy on employers Pay Related Social Insurance.

I am sharing time with Deputy Harkin. The priorities of a Government are shown not just by what it does, but also by what it does not do. That is precisely what we are dealing with here. When it comes to weighing up workers' rights against the interests of employers and business, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael always know exactly where their priorities lie. In that regard, I am looking at amendment No. 1 tabled by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys. I know how I feel and the workers feel on this issue.

Following the insolvencies at Clerys and Connolly Shoes which left workers high and dry, the then Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Bruton, commissioned an expert review to examine possible changes to company and employment law to protect workers in situations of tactical insolvency. The expert review, known as the Duffy Cahill report, made six important recommendations. The report was welcomed by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Clerys workers but was vehemently resisted in the consultation process by the employers body, IBEC. IBEC recommended no action be taken. Surprise, surprise, that is exactly what happened. As I stated, the priorities of a Government are shown by what it does not do

and its inaction in order to serve certain vested interests.

What precisely was called for in the report? It made six recommendations which essentially relate to employment law. The first recommendation was for the removal of the insolvency exception in regard to an employer notifying the Minister of a collective redundancy, thus allowing all redundant workers access to the 30-day consultation period. This would give unions an opportunity to negotiate and allow employees to be paid for at least 30 days. Second, it recommended the imposition of a *de facto* obligation on a decision maker, that is, a company the actions of which may cause insolvency. The third recommendation was to increase redress for workers for a failure to notify and consult. The fourth and probably most important recommendation proposed that the State be given the power to recover assets or proceeds to cover the cost to the State - the taxpayer - in situations of tactical insolvency. The fifth recommendation related to a statutory power to injunct and the sixth recommended an enhanced redundancy payment where an agreement was in place or there was a reasonable expectation of payment in excess of the statutory two weeks per year allowance.

The recommendation relating to assets is key to the solution to the issue facing the workers laid off by Debenhams Ireland. If the Duffy Cahill recommendations had been implemented, the State would be in a position to pay the four weeks' redundancy due and then chase up Debenhams to recover the €10 million cost. Debenhams workers point out there is stock worth €25 million in all the 11 stores in Ireland. KPMG, the liquidator, has valued the stock at €12.5 million at cost, not sale, price. There is also the asset of Debenhams' online business, which the workers reckon is worth up to €30 million, which was transferred out of Ireland to the UK this summer.

The claim made by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment that Debenhams is not a tactical insolvency does not stand up to the facts, which are that assets were transferred to the UK and debts were transferred from the UK to Ireland. The State must move to legislate and do so as an emergency measure. The Dáil has enacted emergency legislation on numerous occasions over recent years, particularly in bailing out the banks.

The liquidator must be instructed to extend the consultation process while such legislation is being enacted. Indeed, the State, as a gesture of its good intentions, should now pay the Debenhams workers what they are owed from the Social Insurance Fund with the intention to recover the cost from Debenhams at a later date.

This is an issue which will not go away. A tsunami of insolvencies can be expected in the next few months. A total of 69,500 companies are availing of the wage subsidy scheme. Many will not survive as the scheme is reduced and phased out altogether.

Even with the recommendations of Duffy Cahill enacted in law, there will be circumstances whereby there will simply not be liquidity or assets to meet workers' entitlements. That is why I have raised in this motion the need for a special insolvency fund. Such funds exist in many EU countries and are used to pay redundancies, wages due, holiday pay, etc. to laid-off workers. In Germany, this fund is resourced by a 0.6% payroll levy on employers. In Ireland, we have the lowest level of employers' PRSI in the EU, at 10.75% - less than half the EU average. I know there will be a hue and cry from employers about tax on jobs, but this would be a solidarity insolvency fund. We pay our PRSI for health. It means that those workers who are healthy pay into a fund to support those who are sick. The concept is solidarity and this is what should be done here for workers who have been laid off through tactical insolvencies. I note the Govern-

ment amendment states that this is a useful suggestion to be examined. There is no commitment and we can expect no action. Regarding the Government amendment's rejection of the Duffy Cahill recommendations, what we have is a cut-and-paste job from IBEC's submission to the consultation process set up after the report.

Then there is a contradiction in the Government's amendment. After stating clearly there is no need for any change as per the review of the Company Law Review Group, we are promised yet another review. It is clear the Government has no intention of acting on these important issues. Workers' rights, to my mind, are simply not a priority of the Government.

I placed this Private Members' motion on the agenda today because the ex-employees in Debenhams last week took the action of occupying two stores. They raised the issue again and we debated it in the Dáil. I was hoping that the Government would come back with something much more urgent, thought out and detailed in support of these Debenhams workers, the St. Mary's Telford workers where the Sisters of Charity are trying to go into liquidation, and workers in the future. That is what we wanted today. We are not getting it. I am calling on the Dáil to make an exception for once to make workers' rights the priority.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** First, I congratulate my colleague, Deputy Collins, on bringing forward this motion because it lays bare the completely unacceptable and totally disgraceful situation whereby redundant workers are being deprived of agreed redundancy payments due mainly to the transfer of company assets.

The core question that we are asking here today is how the law can protect employees during the redundancy process and help ensure that limited liability and corporate restructuring are not used to avoid a company's obligation to its employees. We have sound reasons to believe that the Duffy Cahill report provides many of the answers to that core question. We know existing provisions do not work. We can see what has happened to the Clerys workers and now the scandalous situation regarding the Debenhams workers. The Duffy Cahill report has as its main objective an examination into ways in which a similar occurrence can be avoided in the future and that, of course, refers to what happened to the Clerys workers. If some or all of those recommendations had been implemented, it is likely that the Debenhams workers would be paid their rightful entitlements. As Duffy Cahill states in regard to the Clerys workers, "While the transaction that produced this result may have been lawful, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it would be preferable if it were not." Amen to that. Ask any of the exhausted Debenhams workers pounding the streets for more than 100 days.

Duffy Cahill looks at the situation where assets are separated from the operation, the operating entity subsequently becomes insolvent and goes into liquidation, and how in those circumstances we can ensure the legitimate interests of employees can be more effectively safeguarded. The report is comprehensive and it does not rush headlong into new legislative proposals. For example, it examines whether more effective use could be made of existing employment legislation. It looks at how employees could negotiate better terms and conditions beyond their statutory entitlements, whether employees' entitlements could be ring-fenced in the event of a transfer of assets, and many other questions. Unfortunately, time does not allow me to go through them in detail. The essential point here is this is a considered and detailed report which puts forward reasonable, credible and workable proposals to help safeguard redundant workers' entitlements.

Deputy English, as Minister of State, and the Government do not want to see Debenhams

workers left without their rightful entitlements. Expressing regret and sympathy is fine as far as it goes but it is utterly useless. It is basically redundant for the redundant workers because it does not solve their problem and it will not solve similar problems in the future. Everybody, no matter which side of the House he or she is on, recognises that we need to amend our legislation and, if nothing else, this report provides a sound basis for doing that.

I was especially interested to look at some of the legislation that we now have in place and its inadequacies to protect workers who are made redundant where companies transfer their assets. Much of this legislation is derived from EU directives. Some protections are in place. For instance, more than 1,500 workers made redundant by Waterford Crystal were able to use EU legislation to vindicate their rights and entitlements and the European Court of Justice, ECJ, ruled in their favour and against the State in the case of underfunding of a company pension scheme. However, it is never easy to take on the power, might and resources of the State. Those workers did and they established those rights not only for themselves but for all Irish workers for which I congratulate them. Nevertheless, the Duffy Cahill report's forensic examination of existing provisions in Irish law that derive from EU legislation shows that these provisions, as we already knew, are inadequate to protect redundant workers in the situation of transfer of assets. Some European countries, including Germany and Austria, have unilaterally established levy funds on private sector employers for this very purpose because EU legislation does not provide the required protections. One of the main reasons for this is the existence of a strong tradition of collective bargaining in these countries, something that is missing in Ireland.

I will take a closer look at some of the relevant legislation. The Protection of Employees Act provides for consultation of workers. However, it is telling that a successful case was taken against Ireland to comply with the requirements of the underlying directive, the Collective Redundancies Directive. Ireland had to rewrite our legislation comprehensively after we lost the case. We had legislation that allowed employers to allow someone else to control the operation and hide behind an assertion that they did not know what was going on, but the ECJ insisted Ireland change that legislation. It is incredible that such a get out clause was there for Irish employers and perhaps it indicates something far deeper about how we sometimes transpose EU legislation. I do not have time to deal with that today, but it is one of several examples I know of where EU legislation was not transposed into Irish law with a view to protecting an individual, the ordinary person or worker, but rather sought to insulate the State in some cases and corporate interests in others from adhering to requirements of specific EU legislation.

I was most interested in the directive on the protection of employees in the transfer of undertakings. Unfortunately neither the directive itself nor our legislation provides any realistic mechanisms for protecting workers in cases where the essential assets of the business, as opposed to the business itself, are transferred. None of our employment law as it stands could be safely relied upon to provide redress in the current situation.

Another area worth examining is the Companies Act. It has some potential where any transfer of assets was conducted with the intention of perpetrating a fraud, such as deliberately to deprive redundant workers of their rights. If this could be proved in a court of law, there could be redress. However, tellingly the Duffy Cahill report states that in regard to any court application the likely complexity and the costs it would entail would make it an unattractive prospect for creditors with limited resources, which surely describes the Debenhams workers. No worker and no trade union could attempt to use the provision in the Companies Act because they could not afford it.

The legislation must be amended to provide protections to redundant workers in the case of transfer of assets. The Duffy Cahill report lists six proposals for this which my colleague, Deputy Joan Collins, has gone through in detail. Taken together they could provide the missing safety net for workers who find themselves in the position in which the Debenhams workers now find themselves. These proposals are credible, well researched and have sound legal basis. I ask the Government to give them the serious consideration that they deserve.

**Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Damien English):** I move amendment No. 1:

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

“acknowledges the difficulties faced by the workers affected by the loss of jobs resulting from Covid-19 and, in particular the liquidation of Debenhams Ireland;

notes that:

— the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste, as well as the relevant Ministers of State have met on a number of occasions, with Debenhams employees and their representatives, to hear directly from them their views and concerns;

— in respect of redundancy entitlements, it is the responsibility of the employer in the first instance to pay statutory redundancy and other wage related entitlements to eligible employees;

— the vast majority of employers act honourably and with full consideration for their workers when experiencing trading difficulties giving rise to redundancies;

— Debenhams Ireland is undergoing a High Court supervised liquidation and that there is no statutory role for Ministers of the Government to interfere with or influence that process;

— there is a clear distinction between the situation that pertained to Clerys and that which pertains to Debenhams – the former involving a significant property asset held in a separate company and not available to discharge obligations to creditors including employees, the latter not known to have any such asset;

— the only asset reported to be in consideration is some stock in the stores and that there may be many other legitimate claims on that asset, including from the suppliers of that stock, as well as public monies due to local authorities and the Revenue Commissioners;

— where, as a result of the insolvency of a company, the employer is unable to pay redundancy entitlements, whether basic statutory entitlements or enhanced redundancy collective agreements, the role of the State is to provide a safety net for former employees by paying statutory redundancy entitlements from the Social Insurance Fund;

— the Redundancy and Insolvency sections of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection is engaged with the High Court appointed liquidator and will ensure that all claims in respect of employees of Debenhams are dealt with expeditiously; and

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— as is proper to the role of Government, the ‘Job Loss Protocol’ has been activated for employees at Debenhams Ireland, putting in place all available supports and information for workers, including on welfare entitlements, job-search assistance and upskilling needs and opportunities;

recalls that the ‘Expert Examination and Review of Laws on the Protection of Employee Interests when assets are separated from the operating entity (Duffy-Cahill Report)’:

— which was commissioned by the Government in the aftermath of the Clerys closure,

made a number of future-orientated recommendations;

— highlighted how the issues raised by that event do not have simple solutions and would require further careful consideration involving consultation with many stakeholders;

— stated that ‘it is not desirable to create a special class of worker with legal rights that go beyond the generality of workers’, and noted the difficulties of determining whether an entitlement to enhanced redundancy would arise; and

— was sent to the Company Law Review Group (CLRG) in 2016 as part of the work of that group in advising the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation on any changes that it considered necessary to company law;

further recalls that:

— in 2017, in parallel with the Duffy-Cahill Report, the CLRG undertook a root and branch review of the Companies Act 2014 to address concerns raised in respect of the protection of employees and unsecured creditors and the report, which emanated from this review by the CLRG, also generally found that the current provisions of the Companies Act 2014 provide a comprehensive framework which strikes a balance between the interests of members of a company and other stakeholders, including employees; and

— The CLRG did not include the implementation of the Duffy-Cahill Report in its recommendations;

considers that the issue of the retrospective application of future legislation is highly problematic and must be subject to legal advice from the Attorney General;

further notes that the Government is committed to, and is determined to, deliver on a number of actions in the Programme for Government, including to:

— review whether the legal provisions surrounding collective redundancies and the liquidation of companies effectively protect the rights of workers;

— review the Companies Acts with a view to addressing the practice of trading entities splitting their operations between trading and property with the result being the trading business (including jobs) go into insolvency and assets are taken out of the original business; and

— examine the legal provision that pertains to any sale to a connected party following insolvency of a company including who can object and allowable grounds of an objection;

agrees that the proposal from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) to examine the need for a ring-fenced insolvency fund is a valuable suggestion, worthy of further consideration and notes that the Government has further committed that it will progress this examination;

emphasises that broad consideration, not only across Government, but also among stakeholders such as employers, will be necessary in respect of such a fund; and

calls on all parties involved in the Debenhams dispute to enter into discussions and engage towards a fair resolution.

I share with Deputies Joan Collins, Connolly, Fitzmaurice, Harkin, McNamara and Pringle and the many other Deputies who contributed to the discussion on this matter this evening and on other occasions in recent months-----

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Where is the Minister?

**Deputy Damien English:** -----the sympathy with the former staff of Debenhams.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Where is the Minister?

**Deputy Damien English:** Is this the way the Deputy wants to go again?

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I want to know where the Minister is. The Debenhams workers would like to know where is the Minister.

**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy will appreciate that this debate was supposed to take place this morning. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, was scheduled to take the debate and to lead off and I was to close it because there is a cross over between our two Departments. The change in today's business meant that there was a conflict and she could not be here this afternoon. Everyone knows what happened yesterday with the result that today's business is completely changed. I cannot keep explaining to the Deputy that everyone makes an effort to be here. Deputy Barry knows that but if he wants to make it an issue, that is his choice. I will try to concentrate on what is helpful to the Debenhams workers.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In fairness to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, her presence in this Chamber has been very regular and frequent. I accept that if she could be here, she would be here.

**Deputy Damien English:** That is absolutely the case and I can confirm that she had planned to be here at 10 a.m. I spoke to her on this issue quite a lot over recent days and met with her on it and other matters last week.

We all share the sympathies. I have met Debenhams workers and their representatives. We have engaged with Mandate and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to try to tease through possible solutions and efforts to try to help them with their campaign. It is a difficult time for them and those who have been out on strike for the last 160 days to campaign for their rights and entitlements. It is a traumatic thing at the best of times and it is a horrible thing for any

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worker to lose his or her job. It is an experience that many workers across Ireland are having as a result of the pandemic which only exacerbates the anxiety which many workers feel as they re-enter a very uncertain jobs market. The timing made it even more difficult for the workers of Debenhams to be able to exercise their rights. I recognise this and it was a point well made to me by ICTU's Patricia King and Gerry Light from Mandate. I commend Mandate and all the representatives and the workers who have tried to champion the workers' cause, to work with them and to negotiate. There were two aims, namely, to realise their collective bargaining entitlements and their hopes and aspirations that they agreed to many years ago, but also to ensure that the system was changed to try to prevent this from happening to others in future and to ensure the position of redundant workers is improved, as Deputy Harkin noted. The Tánaiste, myself, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and the Taoiseach and others have met the representative and we are committed to working with them and working with the House to see how we can strengthen legislation, review the proposals in Duffy Cahill and make those changes if we can get agreement. We cannot commit to other parts of the motion and we have tabled an amendment. I ask Members to agree to our amendment and to work with us on this over the months ahead as we look at whether there are areas to work on with the recommendations we have and whether there could be further recommendations to strengthen the position of employees in future redundancies.

With the notable exception of large grocery outlets, the retail sector has perhaps been particularly affected by the measures that nations around the world have had to take in response to the spread of Covid-19. I have probably spent the last month engaging with every representative body in the retail sector to try to work through the future of the sector and deal with the Covid fallout to save as many jobs as we can. We have been examining how to get back to a growth state in order that we can increase employment in the retail sector and strengthen its capacity to employ more people and develop the skills in this area. We are committed to this as a sector because it is a major employer in Ireland, and we want to build on that.

In the case of Debenhams, it had come through a number of turbulent years and an examinership process, only to be dealt the final, fatal blow in March of this year. Sadly, it is not the only retail outlet to experience a decline due to the changing nature of shopping habits and other external factors. We are concerned that more closures will follow, both at home and abroad. We know Debenhams UK is also in grave danger, battling to avoid liquidation and having to lay off staff. This is a turbulent time for many in the sector.

I applaud the workers, their representatives and the Deputies who have made the case for them. They have campaigned to ensure they get the best possible outcome from this difficult situation. This Government, along with officials in relevant Departments, including the Departments of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and Employment Affairs and Social Protection, has engaged with the workers, with Mandate Trade Union and with ICTU. We have engaged with the Debenhams UK administrator and sought advice from the Attorney General in an effort to assist where we can. We have been doing that over the last couple of months. Unfortunately, there are limits to what we can achieve for these particular workers at the present time. While everyone naturally wants to see their campaign be successful, there is only so much that Ministers are able to do and that we can do as a Government.

Representations had been made by Mandate several months ago to seek ministerial intervention in the consultation process that was ongoing at that time between the employer, the liquidators and the workers and their representatives. This request was in the context of the Protection of Employment Act 1977, which obliges employers to engage in a consultation process

and to notify the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection of potential collective redundancies. That Act, which was drafted in an era before the advanced industrial relations framework of the Workplace Relations Commission and the Labour Court that we now have, provides no Government Minister with the power to influence a particular outcome or to direct a party to take a particular course of action in respect of a redundancy situation. The Attorney General confirmed that this is even more so the case where there is a High Court-appointed liquidator who is in charge rather than the employer. The compliance requirements under the 1977 Act are that a consultation process should be initiated between the employer and the employees' representatives, that specific information should be supplied by the employer to the employees' representatives and that the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection should be notified of the proposed collective redundancy. Officials in that Department have confirmed that all these requirements were complied with in the case of the Debenhams liquidators.

One element of this situation is a clear frustration on the part of the workers and their trade union representatives with the liquidators. Deputies will be aware that the appropriate avenue of redress in that respect with officers appointed by the High Court cannot lie with a Government Minister. In the context of Debenhams Ireland undergoing a court-supervised liquidation, I want to emphasise to the House that a company cannot merely assert that it is insolvent. Many Deputies have commented here today and on previous occasions about the issue of assets, transfer of assets, tactical insolvency and so on. That is not as simple as people portray it in this House and the courts have a judgment call on that. It must apply for an official court liquidation and, as such, the liquidation will be under the supervision of the Irish courts system. It is not the political system that makes that judgment but the courts system. It is not possible or proper that a third party should seek to change the orderly distribution of assets and discharge of debts necessitated by the liquidation given the statutory framework that we currently have. That is why I continue to call on all parties to enter into discussions and engage to get a fair resolution with a clear-eyed understanding of the financial realities of the company.

Many Deputies draw a comparison with the Duffy Cahill report and try to portray it as being as simple as implementing that report to stop this from happening. To be clear, the Duffy Cahill report was done in response to the Clerys situation. Many Deputies consistently make a connection between Debenhams and Clerys, and I am not convinced that they are right to do that because they are different situations. It does not mean that it is as simple as us implementing the recommendations of the Duffy Cahill report. While saying that, we are committed to reviewing it, but Members here draw the conclusion that it is a magic wand because Clerys, in their view, is the same as Debenhams. That does not prove it and does not seem to be the case at all.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** That is not what I said.

**Deputy Damien English:** As we all know with regard to Clerys, there was a substantial and valuable property asset on O'Connell Street that was structured as a separate legal entity to that of the failing retail operations business. The Deputies are, by intimation, making an incorrect comparison between the liquidation of Debenhams, where there is actually no evidence of significant assets still being owned by that company or by a related company, and that of Clerys department store, where an asset was known to exist but shown to be out of reach of the workers for the purposes of redundancy payments. They are different scenarios but that is not always portrayed in debates.

The Clerys workers, in the end, received a discretionary goodwill payment from the owners of the property asset, in addition to their State-paid statutory redundancy, but I am unaware of

any prospects of a similar payment that could be made in the case of Debenhams and certainly not one that I as a Minister of State can facilitate. Other Members have a different view on that and I am happy to take any information they have into that discussion.

In the case of Debenhams, there is no reason to believe the company is in a financial position to pay the workers the collectively bargained “four weeks per year of service” enhanced redundancy package that their trade unions achieved in the past. According to reports, it does not seem possible at this point for the liquidator to pay them the statutory minimum amount. If Deputies have different evidence, we will certainly look at it.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** We have been saying that for months.

**Deputy Damien English:** Regarding the Government’s role, we will make sure that the legal rights of the workers are fully vindicated. That means making sure they get at least two weeks’ payment per year of service, which is the statutory minimum redundancy payment. If the liquidator in the company cannot pay that, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection will pay for it out of the social insurance fund. Officials have been in contact with the liquidators in that respect and are progressing with that.

It also falls to that Department to ensure the workers get whatever welfare payments and income supports they are entitled to. We will make sure they are given opportunities to retrain, get access to adult education where appropriate and get assistance in seeking new jobs. The job loss protocol has been activated for employees at Debenhams, putting in place all available supports and information for workers. Officials have been facilitating the workers with online information sessions and other forms of assistance in recent weeks. Indeed, workers have told me that the job loss protocol has been helpful. It does not provide significant compensation for the difficulty that they are going through, but it will certainly help them on the journey back into the retail sector.

We are dealing with the unions about future solutions. We have committed to doing that quickly to review the recommendations of the Duffy Cahill report and other recommendations and suggestions. I have asked ICTU for more evidence and information, and for its legal opinion, because it might differ from ours in some cases. We are prepared, as a Government, to review this and work on it. That does not mean that we can do it immediately. We have to engage with all stakeholders to see what we can do.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** It has been four years since the report.

**Deputy Damien English:** There are suggestions of levies and such which we are prepared to look at.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** The Minister of State has expressed sympathy with employees who are out of a job and talked about how difficult it is for them. He has talked about drawing parallels or saying that the Clerys situation is the same as this one. I ask him to read the motion because nowhere have we asked for sympathy. I thank my colleague, Deputy Joan Collins, for tabling the motion, and I acknowledge the work to date of Solidarity-People Before Profit and Sinn Féin in raising this matter. If one reads this motion, one sees no reference to Clerys. It points to a report that was carried out four years and six months ago, which I will come back to. It is a little disingenuous of the Minister of State to talk about us on this side of the House making simplistic comparisons. The question for the Minister of State is why he has not acted on the Duffy Cahill report four years and six months later.

I acknowledge the workers who are out in Galway today, trying to prevent the disposal of the one asset that is left, which was valued at approximately €20 million, on Eyre Street. I am not sure what it is valued at now. They have been out for over 162 days and I have proudly stood with them, which was the least I could do. The least the Minister of State might do is stand up here today and tell us why the Duffy Cahill report has not been implemented. Let us look at page 45 of the report. The six modest proposals in the report “taken together aim to ensure that employees are treated with dignity”. Can the Minister of State imagine that? The six proposals arising from this report tell us that employees should be treated with dignity. The report proposes that “if collective redundancies are to occur”, there should be “an opportunity for employees to engage and be consulted”. Can the Minister of State imagine something as basic as engaging and being consulted? I will come back to the reference in the report to being “armed with the leverage of a threat of statutory applications to recover assets”. The report merely hopes that “If effectively enforced, the proposed increased sanctions for failing to respect the rights of employees [would] deter conduct of the type identified”.

I remind the House that the Duffy Cahill report was commissioned in January 2016 by a Minister and a Minister of State who are still Members of this House. At the time, Deputy Bruton was Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation while Deputy Nash was Minister of State with responsibility for business and employment. They commissioned the report and it was done very quickly. It came back in March 2016, which was very good. The terms of reference were extremely restrictive but notwithstanding that, it came up with six recommendations which, as I said already, are very modest. The recommendations are in respect of consultation, obligation to notify, sanctions for failure to consult, a mechanism for the recovery of assets, the use of an injunction and a mechanism to ensure payments of enhanced redundancy. I think they had a twin-track approach, looking at the existing legislation to see if it could be used better and also looking at amendments to employment legislation.

It jumped out at me and, I am sure, at everyone who read it that in respect of existing legislation the report found the Companies Act 2014 needs not amendment but more use: “It is striking that many of the provisions of the Companies Act which may be of assistance are not frequently invoked (such as section 608) or are not invoked at all (such as section 599).” The report tells us that among the reasons for that are the cost implications and there is a specific recommendation that the Minister might be able to do something there and as to what he might do. The Minister of State stands here today and not once has he addressed why there has been a failure to implement those six recommendations. It is a matter of legislation that already exists but is under-used or not used at all, in addition to very basic amendments to ensure employees can be treated with dignity and have a minimum of consultation.

The Minister of State stands here today and tells us that this is distinctly different from Clerys. The answer is that is not correct. Yes, there was certainly more than a sleight of hand but a deliberate action to separate the business into the operations section and another company so as to avoid having any assets that would have to be shared out with the employees. That is different from now but there are many other similarities. The Government’s failure to act on the Duffy Cahill report is just not acceptable. I have asked before for plain and simple language. I ask the Minister of State to, please, tell us why the Government has not acted on it and when it is going to act on it. That is very simple. Are we just going to shred it, throw it in the bin and start all over again? If that is the answer, let us do that but let us stop all this double-talk and double-language. The least the Debenhams workers deserve after 162 days of standing in all sorts of weather and facing arrest by An Garda Síochána simply for drawing attention to their plight

is a certain measure of honesty. None of us aspires to being a saint but plain language that we all understand is the least they deserve. If the Duffy Cahill report had been implemented there would have been a statutory entitlement to a 30-day consultation. There would have been access to various statutory measures if it had been implemented, without a doubt. There would have been a better enforcement of the enhanced redundancy payments at a minimum.

If we look at the sector we are talking about, we see that the Debenhams protestors are mostly women. The Oireachtas Library & Research Service has written a very interesting article, *Anticipating the Gendered Impacts of Covid-19*. It found that women disproportionately make up sectors such as retail and hospitality that were entirely shut down due to Covid and are therefore more likely to lose earnings. A study by the fiscal institute showed at the time of the lockdown that 17% of female employees were in a sector that is now shut down in comparison to 13% of male employees. The same position applies across Europe. Research by McKinsey showed that women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to the Covid crisis than men's because of existing gender inequalities. I refer also to research from the ESRI and so on in respect of the gender pay gap. The burden of unpaid work has become more pronounced during the pandemic, negatively impacting many women's ability to work from home and deepening existing economic inequalities. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, women make up 82% of all cashiers in the EU. While there are many other cases, the two high-profile cases of Clerys and Debenhams, to which the Duffy Cahill report is particularly relevant, relate to the retail sector in which substantially more women are employed than men. I do not ask for any different treatment for men and women but it is important to realise the gender imbalance and to realise how women have suffered disproportionately as a result of various Governments' failure to bring in proper legislation to protect all employees' rights but particularly women's rights.

I am going to finish up on the loan and indebtedness of Debenhams in England. The Irish retail outlet was used as a co-guarantor of that indebtedness, which in itself raises questions. Let us look at the entities that triggered the insolvency. We have our own Bank of Ireland, which we partly own, as well as Barclays and hedge funds from America triggering the insolvency process. One has to ask how Debenhams Ireland came to be used as a co-guarantor in respect of loans in England with all that ensued. I am simply raising that aspect for the Minister of State to look at. In my last 15 seconds I ask him to read the motion and, when he is giving his concluding few words, to tell us why the report has not been implemented and if the Government is going to shred it.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I am looking at a letter that was sent to the Minister of State from Patricia King and is dated 31 August. It is addressed to the Minister of State with responsibility for business, employment and retail and to the Department of employment and enterprise. Are we not terribly lucky in that we would have had two Ministers to choose from? I fully respect that the schedule was changed but neither senior Minister is now available. That sends a very clear message to the Debenhams workers in particular. I do not mean that disrespectfully to the Minister of State and I am sure he will not take it like that. It is very instructive of the attitude this Government has to workers and workers' rights that neither senior Minister, when it could have been either of them, could make themselves available. We are all busy and sometimes in politics as in life it is about priorities. They have not prioritised the Debenhams workers.

I looked at the legislative programme. It does not prioritise workers' rights. There is nothing in it to prevent tactical insolvencies, nothing about a statutory pay scheme although we are in the middle of a global pandemic, nothing about strengthening workers' rights to organise and nothing about making Covid-19 a notifiable disease. There is nothing at all, actually, that would

speak to workers. This absence speaks volumes as far as the workers are concerned. They see it and they know it. They know exactly what is going on. It is exactly the same as when the man who is now Tánaiste was running for the leadership of Fine Gael and tried to run on a platform of implementing a good old-fashioned Thatcherite strike ban, which is exactly what it was. That might appeal to Fine Gael's base but it does not go down well with workers at all. They see Fine Gael and they know the attitude that it has.

The programme for Government, which was published on 15 June, includes a commitment to "Review whether the legal provisions surrounding collective redundancies and the liquidation of companies effectively protect the rights of workers." That was 93 days ago. I just saw a tweet from Mandate outlining this. The Government has had 93 days.

The Minister of State might use his concluding remarks to advise the House exactly what stage that review is at. I could save the Minister of State a lot of trouble, I could save his Department staff an awful lot of trouble, and indeed I could save a lot of headaches for the two Ministers with responsibility. The legal provisions do not protect the rights of workers. The Mandate workers would not be in dispute if the legal provisions existed to protect their rights and their collective agreement. Those workers are on the streets because the legal provisions do not exist. Patricia King is writing to the Government because the legal provisions do not exist. The general secretary of Mandate is also writing to the Government because the legal provisions do not exist. That is the review done.

The Government has had 93 days and nothing has been done on this. Nothing has been done that is of any use to those workers. I pay tribute to them; of course I do. I have stood with them. I have nothing but admiration for their determination. It is very important that we do not lose sight of this: while they are fighting for a redundancy claim at the end of this, there will be no job for them. They will be jobless. They will be unemployed as we head into a period of sustained high unemployment. These men and women have given decades of loyal service to their employer under a collective agreement, and I have negotiated plenty of them, which anyone would know always involves a bit of give and take. Around the negotiating table the workers would have something to give and something they wanted from the employer, which goes into the collective agreement. This employer, however, has walked away and the Government has said that is grand, it cannot do anything about it, and when the Opposition raises the issue in the Dáil the Government says it is not that simple, that it is actually quite complicated. The Government has had 93 days to get it done since it put the matter into its programme for Government. Nothing has been done for the workers. They hear the message very clearly. They are sick of the tea and sympathy. They want some action.

The general secretary of congress has written to the Government outlining what she believes is a solution. It is echoed in the motion, and I commend the Deputies on bringing the motion forward today. The question is actually a very simple one, much and all as the Minister of State wishes it to be complicated. It is a very simple question: what has the Government done for the past 93 days in bringing this forward and reviewing it? Will the Minister of State show us where the protections are? If the protections exist, those workers will want to see them. They want to invoke those protections. It is very simple. It is about which side one is on. It is about who the Minister of State comes in here to protect and what he prioritises. I put it to the Minister of State that the Debenhams workers and every other worker in the State sees very clearly whose side he is on and they see very clearly who he comes in here to protect. We will not stand for that and they will not stand for that. The time is right now for action on this. The Minister of State cannot say that he will work with us over the coming months. That is not fair.

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**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I met with Debenhams workers in my constituency on Monday. I have also met with them on a number of previous occasions. They are a fantastic group of people. They remain strong. They are unbowed and unbroken. If anybody thinks they will wait this out and expect the workers to give up their protest, it is not going to happen. They would be very much mistaken. The workers' passion and commitment to their cause is as strong now as it was in April when Debenhams, using the cover of Covid, closed its shops throughout the State. Today marks 160 days since the start of the pickets outside the shops. The workers did this, as the Minister of State is aware, to make sure the assets were not taken out and so the workers could keep some chance of getting some sort of fair redundancy, to which they are entitled. Many of the workers have worked for Debenhams for decades, as Deputy O'Reilly has said. One man I met in Limerick had worked in the company for 40 years. They have ended up outside their own stores and the workers never thought they would be doing that.

It must also be remembered that when this is over, even if they get what they are looking for, their jobs are gone. The workers were offered nothing by the company. The workers, Sinn Féin and other Opposition Members have lobbied the Government for changes to legislation since April and in previous Dáileanna. I spoke on this on a number of occasions in a previous Dáil with other Ministers. We were told that the Duffy Cahill report would be reviewed, would be looked at and would be implemented. I also received the letter from ICTU. There is no legislation to protect the workers here. It does not exist. As Deputy O'Reilly has said, the Minister of State can save himself from going through all the reviews. The protection does not exist and is simply not there.

A specific issue was raised with me by a striker on Monday about online sales. I was contacted by a postal worker who claimed that the number of packages being sent by post from Debenhams online stores remains very strong and consistent. The packages continue to flow into Ireland without interruption while the workers picket through rain, hail and sunshine to get their just settlements. I put it to the Minister of State that this is simply not acceptable and is not fair.

The Taoiseach met with some of the workers recently and, by all accounts, he had some very nice words to say to them. Will he now follow up this lip service by supporting the motion and by assuring the House that the recommendations of the Duffy Cahill report will be implemented? The time for platitudes and kind words has passed. The strike action has passed 160 days now. Action is needed as the workers have campaigned for 160 days already. It is simply not fair. There is no doubt that they are not going away if they do not get what they are entitled to.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Ag 6.30 a.m., i mo chathair féin, cathair na Gaillimhe, sheas iaroibrithé Debenhams taobh amuigh den fhoirgneamh ina mbíodh siad ag obair agus iad ag éileamh a gcuid cearta bunúsacha. Tá siad tar éis seasamh taobh amuigh de na siopaí seo ar feadh os cionn 160 lá anois agus tá sé thar am dúinn seasamh leo.

At 6.30 a.m., workers of Debenhams in my home city of Galway started their picket outside their former employer. They have waited, protested, engaged for 161 days for a just exit package. They continue to stand outside the Debenhams stores as we debate this, to demand basic respect from an employer they gave so many years to. They feel abandoned and they have absolutely been abandoned. They have been abandoned by an employer they gave years of service to and they have been abandoned by this Government.

Before the Government says how was it to know, I say that we all knew. We saw what happened to the Clerys workers, and we have the recommendations from the Duffy Cahill report,

which was released four years ago. This report needs to be implemented now. The time for hemming and hawing is long over. These workers are in a crisis right at this moment and we need to do this to protect them as well as many other workers who may face this same situation. It has happened before, it is happening now and we sure as hell cannot let it happen again.

We need legislation to protect workers and we need it urgently. This is not an Opposition idea. This idea is coming directly from the workers. They are not picketing for the sake of picketing. They have been forced to stand out on the picket line to fight for justice, a justice that we must ensure is delivered. This is only one of the many failings we continue to have in this State in relation to workers' rights. It is high time that we had protections in place for workers.

One hundred and forty jobs were lost in Galway. Some of these people had given more than 30 years' service. Collectively, the Galway workers have given more than 300 years of service to the company. Tá dualgas orainn seasamh leis na hoibrithe seo, tacú leo agus cinntiú nach féidir leis seo tarlú arís.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Over recent months I have got to know many of the women who, for the past 160 days, have maintained a vigil at the Debenhams store in Tralee. While I accept that the Tánaiste is not in the Chamber today, the workers are upset with him. They disagree with his comments that this is not a technical redundancy. They disagree with his insistence on differentiating between the Clerys situation and their situation. The workers fought successfully and insisted that the €20 million of stock belongs to the Irish company. The workers continue to be denied a fair and just settlement.

The Government amendment is full of excuses but short on ideas. What talks have taken place and what efforts has the Government made to discuss this with Debenhams to ensure a just and fair settlement for the workers? Legislation is required, if not for these workers then to protect workers in the future and to prevent this reoccurring. Two reviews and an examination are not enough. These women, Trish, Geraldine, Amy and all the other workers in Tralee and the thousand workers around the State, deserve better.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** Táim an-bhuíoch don Teachta Joan Collins as an rún seo a chur os comhair an Tí. Five months ago more than 1,000 Debenhams workers in 11 stores across the Republic of Ireland were told the company was going into liquidation and they were to lose their jobs. Rather than set aside funds to pay the workers a proper redundancy package, the company transferred assets to the UK parent company and tried to claim the stock held in Irish stores as British stock. The treatment of its loyal and dedicated workforce is nothing short of scandalous, especially as many workers had given valuable service to the company for more than two decades. The workers did not take this shoddy treatment sitting down. They have stood up for their rights to fight back to claim what is rightfully theirs, and for justice.

What the Debenhams workers are asking for is not unreasonable. They just want a proper redundancy package to be put in place. Funds from the disposal of stock held in Irish stores, worth approximately €23 million, should be ringfenced to fund the workers redundancy package. Additionally, what they want and what everyone with workers' interests at heart wants is the implementation of the Duffy Cahill recommendations from 2016. The report compiled after the Clerys scandal has lain virtually dormant since then. Clearly this Government wants to protect big business. This new Government could have included in its programme for Government a commitment to address the issue of companies transferring assets from one business

to another in order to evade their responsibilities to their workers. Deputy Micheál Martin was appointed Taoiseach on 27 June

Debenhams so members of the new Government would have been fully aware of the issues and the demands of the Debenhams workers when the Government was formed. The Government said that it would conduct a review of the issues relating to collective redundancies and the liquidation of companies but we already have a report that says everything that needs to be said about such matters. A review was conducted four years ago, resulting in the Duffy Cahill report. We do not need another report or a time-wasting review. All the workers want at this time is for the Debenhams management to abide by its own collective agreement on redundancies. The way these workers have been treated should never have been allowed to happen. It is the responsibility of this Government to make sure that it does not happen to any other workers in the future. It is not too late for this Government to act to ensure that the Debenhams workers get justice.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I commend the Deputies who tabled this Private Members' motion this evening. We were in the House earlier today talking about taxi drivers. Many of the partners, husbands and wives of the Debenhams workers are taxi drivers so they will not be rushing down to the bank to take out loans to go on holidays when the Government lifts the travel restrictions. The Duffy Cahill report has been mentioned already. When there were emergencies in this country in the past, including the bank bailout, the Government was quick enough to introduce emergency legislation. We are talking about real lives and real people here. The Debenhams workers have been let down. When one goes to work, one provides a service. One expects that when one gives goodness, one will get goodness back but this company has crapped them. That is as polite as I can be. I have been dealing with the workers in my office, as have my two Sinn Féin colleagues from Cork and the families are broken. I am not just talking about families close to the city where the Debenhams stores are located. The workers are well spread out and they are absolutely broken. We have a Taoiseach from Cork at the moment. Everyone from Cork is praising him but he cannot even look after his own in Cork.

Sometimes we come in here and score political points and throw insults across the floor but what we should be doing here is punishing the people who are crapping on our own. These are our own people, our own citizens who were working and paying tax into the Exchequer. What are we doing? We are giving them a pat on the back. A pat on the back is a foot and a half from a kick in the backside. That is what I was always told. It does not wear well with people when they cannot put food on the table. They are stressed out of their heads. We have problems at the moment with public transport and school buses, not to mention people who cannot get to work and who are trying to get their children to school. The taxi industry is probably tied into this. Nothing is working for them. All they want is fairness and respect. Even if the Government stood up and had a fight with Debenhams and the liquidators and said "No, we are not taking this; this is our country, these are our rules and these are our people and we are going to stand up for them" then some credit could be garnered from this. It is so disheartening to come in here, 160 days later, when a Debenhams worker is in Cork on a 12-hour fast. It is getting serious and I am appealing to the Government to support this motion, support the Debenhams workers and give them the respect they should have garnered when they got up early every morning to go to work, to earn a few bob, to send the gag to school, to pay their mortgage, pay for their car and so on. All of a sudden, that has been taken away from them and all we have is excuses from the Government. It claims that we cannot do this or that but we are supposed to be the legislators. We are supposed to be the people who write the rules. How many times have I come into this

House and said that we were trying to fix something that was not broken? Today the system is broken and we should be putting it right. I cannot overstate the social and mental impact of this and the anguish that has been caused. The bravery of the workers and their families who are supporting them must be commended. If there is anything the Government can do in terms of doing the right thing and standing by the workers, standing by our own people, it should do it.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I congratulate Deputy Joan Collins on tabling this motion which is about justice and fairness for those who have, through no fault of their own, been impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. When any business shuts down it is the workers' families who suffer but the reasons for businesses closing their doors are varied. There are questions over the purpose of the closure of Debenhams. There is a history of this type of action that impacts workers the most. For some, a workforce is just entries on a spreadsheet, numbers to move around a screen until they fit with the desired profit margin of the company concerned. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case with the matter we are discussing today and we have also seen it with TalkTalk, Clerys and a number of others in recent times.

There seems to be an ongoing failure of the authorities to address the ability of large companies to exploit loopholes at the expense of the average person but it is always the worker who suffers. We now have workers who remain in a precarious situation while Debenhams exploits the system. It is claiming that stock in Irish stores is its own and attempting to leave the workers with nothing other than their statutory entitlements, to be provided from the State's purse. This is despite the collective agreement reached by the Mandate union with Debenhams that stated that if workers were made redundant they would receive four weeks' pay per year of service. The Taoiseach himself recently spoke some fine words about the contemptible way in which the workers were treated but that is as far as he went; just another soundbite from our Taoiseach. The Government has stood by while the workers demonstrate on the streets for their entitlements to be realised and for some notice to be taken by those in power. As Deputy Buckley said, that is us in here. Unfortunately that was not forthcoming and we find ourselves here today supporting a motion quite rightly tabled by Solidarity-People Before Profit.

Sinn Féin has given the workers its staunch support throughout this process and as such we will be supporting this motion which demands, among other measures, that the State forgo its priority status as a creditor and for the liquidator to use those funds to pay the enhanced redundancy payments agreed between Debenhams workers and the company. It also seeks to ensure that where agreements for enhanced redundancies have been negotiated with workers, those are honoured as preferential creditors in any subsequent liquidation process. This motion calls for a fundamental change in how companies are allowed to operate to prevent them from leaving their workers high and dry. Sinn Féin will be supporting this motion. It is outrageous that we are in a situation whereby Members of this House are left with no alternative but to table such a motion because those who could change the system choose not to do so, namely, Members on the Government benches.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I congratulate Deputy Joan Collins and the Independent Group for tabling this motion. Quite a number of motions have been put before this House on workers' rights. Unfortunately, and I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State, it is a common theme of the debates on these motions that a senior Minister is not in attendance. The Minister of State may consider that to be a political jibe and an unfair political criticism but it is the truth. The last time we discussed a motion of this nature a number of months ago the very same comments were made and it was reported upon. Whether it is the Minister with responsibility for social protection, Deputy Humphreys or the Tánaiste and Minister with responsibility for busi-

ness, their absence gives the sense to those who are deeply affected by these issues, the workers, that they are absent from the thought processes of the Cabinet, as Deputy Barry rightly pointed out. My frustration is that we seem to be going from one industrial dispute to another, dealing with the individual issues that arise in each individual case and not looking at the entirety of the industrial relations architecture of the State which is clearly deficient. Myself and Deputy Ged Nash proposed legislation to deal with this situation but it was dismissed by the Tánaiste as “virtue signalling”. That was a remarkable statement for the Tánaiste to make, when we try to be as constructive as possible and we try not to make personalised political jibes. It is a legislative body and we come here to propose legislation. As noted, Deputy Nash was the one who commissioned the Duffy Cahill report and he is somebody who knows this area intimately. He brought forward legislation, which is the appropriate thing to do, rather than trying to engage in any other type of political activity. However, our reasoned contribution was dismissed as virtue signalling by somebody who has done nothing.

It is also not good enough for the Tánaiste to say the Duffy Cahill report would not deal with the Debenhams situation. We might be willing to argue that over and back if the recommendations of Duffy Cahill had been actually implemented to the letter and then were found to be deficient. However, as has been stated, the Duffy Cahill report has been sitting somewhere in government since March 2016. To give my own party a level of credit, I do not think that would have happened if the Labour Party was still in government and I feel more weight would have been given to the importance of the issue. However, it is stuck on a shelf somewhere, not taken seriously by Government and certainly not taken seriously by the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, who has a history of watering down rhetoric around the rights of workers. He stood on a platform in order to become Fine Gael leader and Taoiseach, saying that essential workers should have restricted access to collective bargaining rights and the right to strike - it is in black and white in his literature. Again, as others have said, it is all very well to applaud these essential workers when they come to the country’s aid at a time of national crisis, but his instinct is that collective bargaining rights and strike rights are secondary to the great national endeavour about which he feels so strongly.

My point to the Minister is that this is about whether people feel the Government and the Legislature have their back or not. Is industrial relations in Ireland about conflict after conflict, or is it about having protections from within this body? I am glad I do not play golf and recent experiences have taught me I should never take up golf. Nonetheless, the industrial relations architecture of this State has been described as being like a golf club where somebody can become a member but they cannot play - they can join the golf club but they cannot play golf. In other words, the employer has a veto. Regardless of the efforts of many people in government and outside government who have put down legislation and tried to lobby in this area, we have probably some of the weakest industrial relations and collective bargaining legislation in Europe because the employer has a veto and there is no requirement on an employer to engage with a representative body which represents workers.

This is an economy in which, before Covid, 23% of workers were statistically on low pay, one of the highest rates of low-paid employment in the OECD, and some 40% of young people under 30 were in insecure work. These things happen only in economies which have weak industrial relations legislation and weak collective bargaining legislation.

What has happened before when a piece of legislation was brought to the Seanad or the Dáil is that the Attorney General has facilitated the Government by saying it is anti-constitutional. What we in the Labour Party would say is that it may be time to challenge that and to strengthen

our Constitution by means of a constitutional amendment to enshrine workers' rights in the Constitution. Therefore, no longer would we have the fallback position from Government that says, "We would love to help you and we really care deeply about this case or that case, but the Attorney General says it is unconstitutional, so what can we do?" If we can take on some of the thorniest, most difficult and divisive issues in Irish society, bring them to the people and have them resolved by means of a referendum, then why can we not do it for workers' rights? If it means we have to require an employer to engage with the representative body of the workers, let us do it, because then we will not have an economy which is underpinned by low pay. I am quite sure it is an insult to people's sense of morality or decency, no matter what their background, where they live or what their income bracket is, that this economy has been propped up by low-paid work. This affects 23% of workers and, as was said earlier by Deputy Connolly, these are disproportionately women, migrant workers and young people.

I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, to tell the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, to stop with the jibes, to engage with the responsibility he has, to implement the Duffy Cahill report and to maybe investigate the entire infrastructure through which we are operating. What is he so afraid of and what is the Government so afraid of? We need to even up the imbalance. If it takes a constitutional referendum, I am sure Deputies around this House and the people of Ireland would support such a referendum. It may take 18 months or two years, but I believe if we had that, we would not have this situation with the Debenhams workers, who have been courageously fighting for so long and inspiring so many people across the country with their battle, and we would not have poverty pay, insecure work and the level of unemployment that has been caused by Covid, which is directly connected with the way our economy has been constructed.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I thank Deputy Joan Collins and the Independent group for bringing forward this very appropriate and apt motion. The motion is five paragraphs long and within those five paragraphs is a very clear roadmap for how we can make better the lives of workers throughout this country who are experiencing an anxiety that is being accelerated by the fact there does not seem to be a sense the Government has their back. Both Ministers have been present during this debate. This is the fourth time in the past few months we have got together and somebody from the Opposition has brought forward a motion in regard to workers' rights, and we have had many of the same conversations we are having today. This is the fourth motion since June. We do not do that to be a nuisance or because we want to get on the Ministers' nerves. The reason there have been four motions since June, three of which pertained specifically to Debenhams, is that there is a genuine absence in the law of protections for workers. We are trying our best to keep on the record of this House, where we create laws, the fact that people's lives are being impacted detrimentally and that we can, through the mechanisms at our disposal in this House, make them better. I believe we can do that.

I want to acknowledge once again the role played by the workers of Debenhams in the 11 stores across the country who, through their courage and determination, have been incredibly inspiring. They have inspired me, and I am sure they have inspired other workers who may be feeling a sense of insecurity in their own positions, to believe it is imperative that we fight back, that we hold power and vested interests to account and that, through our collaborative efforts, we can make things better.

There is a reason it is essential we make this better. I want to imagine one of our high streets, for example, Henry Street, which I have the pleasure of representing. Some 100 yd up the road from the Debenhams store, which is now lying empty, is Clerys, which is going to be something very different. Within those 100 yd on that street there are probably five or six relatively large

high street stores which are at risk of closing down. As they close down, they will vacate our city and the workers, who have been predominantly low paid but, through their efforts have made them relevant, will find themselves in very precarious circumstances. That is all ahead of us. I have strongly argued that for several years, even in my role as a Dublin city councillor. The trends we are seeing now, such as what we are seeing in high streets and in Debenhams, have been accelerated by Covid-19, but were not necessarily caused by it. Over the past couple of years, Dublin city - I can speak about Dublin city because I know it best - has experienced a loss of commercial footfall. We have seen the M50 shopping centres and shopping centres on motorways taking most of the footfall out of the city. There has been the emergence of online retail shopping, which is again taking people out of our high streets. Stores recognise that. They have used these tactical insolvencies to remove the responsibility of paying redundancy and fulfilling the entitlements they should provide for the workers who created those stores. They are using our current existence under the pandemic to accelerate the arrival of a reality they knew was going to happen. If we do not step in and re-imagine how we can protect their workers and rejuvenate those streets that are not commercially focused, cities throughout the country will lie bare, with the people who built them up left behind. That is essential.

I wish to discuss the Duffy Cahill report which features in the motion. I had to re-read that report today. It is my third reading of it since I was elected in February and probably my fourth since it emerged in 2016. This is a very moderate document. It is quite conservative in its approach. Such is the fear Fine Gael has of it, I was expecting something like Mao's *Little Red Book* to be in it. It is not. It is quite a conservative document that contains a number of very moderate recommendations. I disagree with the Minister of State that the Duffy Cahill report was commissioned solely on the basis of what happened in Clerys. Clearly, Clerys was the impetus for it, but there had been Vita Cortex, the Paris Bakery and any number of instances before that in which workers were left behind and their statutory rights were not protected by the State. With regard to the Duffy Cahill report, how are we prioritising when a report that is so moderate in its approach has simply not been implemented four years later?

The Minister of State said in his opening statement that we can get together and talk about it. It has been 93 days since this was first brought to the attention of the Dáil. When the Minister of State says that, is it just a way of fobbing us off? Does he have a date in mind, and is it next week or the week after? When can we all get around a table and discuss the implications of that? Anything else is simply fobbing us off and is unacceptable. The five paragraphs presented by the Independent Group are very reasonable. The proposed amendment is a great deal longer, says nothing and is quite insulting. In terms of how we collaborate, there are many instances when the Opposition and Government will disagree. This should not be one of them. Across the Opposition and the Government, be it the Taoiseach or the Tánaiste, everyone was out standing with the workers and talking about how we would like to collaborate to improve their lives, yet this is the third occasion a motion has been brought forward by the Opposition and it is simply being removed with the stroke of a pen. Did anybody even have a conversation with the proponents of the motion? Did anyone sit down and say the Government did not agree with one part but perhaps it could collaborate and implement another aspect of it, or was it just a case of bringing forward the load of ridiculous nonsense here that means nothing?

Let us be truthful here. This amounts to nothing. The language in it is quite dismissive. It says: "the only asset reported to be in consideration is some stock in the stores...". Some stock in the stores amounts to €25 million. It also amounts to the only access to recourse. Debenhams workers are sleeping outside those stores at present to ensure that stock cannot be removed. It is

the only access to potential justice they have. That is not “some stock”; it is quite valuable. It is very valuable in terms of the rights the workers have at present, and it is valuable as an asset in terms of what they can be afforded.

These motions will continue to be tabled. What we are discussing, fundamentally, is the role and protections of employed workers in this country and the value we place on their trade unions and trade union representatives. It cannot go unsaid again that an agreement was reached with the trade union on four weeks’ redundancy and it has just been dismissed. The workers have absolutely nothing, other than to sleep outside the stores. It is incredibly courageous, but they should not have to do it. One of the lamentable sights of this pandemic period is working class women being led into police stations. It is a sickening sight and every Member of this House owes those women an apology. All they are seeking is four weeks’ entitlement. They will not have a job after this, despite the fact that they built up the business. At Christmas they would have been working hard to look after people in the store. Seeing them being led into police stations is beyond lamentable.

The fact that we are still saying we cannot do anything, effectively saying “tough luck”, is a disservice. It undermines the role of this House in terms of drafting legislation and enacting laws that reflect the type of country in which we want to live. If we really valued those workers, and not just used mealy-mouthed words, we would be sitting around a table discussing the laws we could enact that could improve their lives now. The Duffy Cahill report is definitely a start in that regard.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I will not rehearse the despicable treatment of more than 1,000 Debenhams workers by Debenhams. It has been well rehearsed in the House. I thank the Independent Group for tabling this motion. We also put forward a motion before the summer recess. All agree that what Debenhams has done to its workers is absolutely shocking, but what we must discuss is the unwillingness of the Government to do anything to rectify that injustice. The amendment from the Government is just an insult. It uses technicalities and jargon to hide from its responsibilities.

I will cut a long story short. The reason this and previous Governments did not legislate for the Duffy Cahill report and to close down the loopholes that allow Debenhams to treat workers in this despicable way is that company law is designed in such a way as to make it attractive for companies that wish to behave in this way. It is even linked to the way in which those same companies avoid paying tax. It is all about subsidiaries and hiding assets and profits so they do not have to pay tax and have no obligations to workers. That is how things are set up in this country. This and successive Governments did not want to do anything about it because, effectively, the IDA goes around the world and tells companies they should come to Ireland because they can get away with murder on tax and in how they treat workers. To cut a long story short, that is what is happening.

Then the Government hides behind nonsense. It claims that this is not the same as Clerys. It is not exactly the same, but there is a similar point in that Clerys also tried to hide the asset it had. It had a trading company and a property company. It used the same technique as Debenhams is using now, by taking over bits of the assets of the company and giving them to other businesses even though the real activity is here. The Government says it only has small bits of assets, or whatever the phrase is. There are assets of approximately €25 million, for a start. That is not small. It would cost approximately €10 million to give the workers the two plus two they deserve. Then one can go after the €25 million in assets. It is not true that nothing can be

done. The liquidator offered them an insulting €1 million, but the fact that the liquidator could offer them €1 million proves that it can do it. If it can offer them €1 million, it can offer them €10 million against the assets. Let us not forget that in 2018 the online trading company, all from business done here, made approximately €30 million and the estimated figure at present is approximately €40 million.

There are plenty of assets if the Government is willing to do something about the accounting tricks these companies operate to hide their assets and then dump workers on the scrap heap. The Revenue Commissioners could do that. Let us also not forget an important point made by the workers. They have paid multiples of the €10 million they are seeking for justice in tax to the Revenue Commissioners over the ten, 20 or 30 years they have been working. They deserve some support from the Government now. It should step in, give them the two plus two and then chase the assets of Debenhams which we know exist.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** The Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Mandate trade union recently made a proposal to the Government. It was a proposal which had the potential to resolve the five-month long Debenhams dispute. The gist of it was one, increasing employer social insurance contributions and two, making a pool of money available to the State from which enhanced redundancy agreements could be honoured in cases of liquidation. It was suggested that were this to be agreed in principle, an advance payment of €10 million could be made from such a fund to meet the Debenhams workers' demand of two plus two, that is, four weeks per year of service. Yesterday afternoon in the Dáil, the Taoiseach himself poured cold water all over that proposal to resolve the Debenhams dispute. Today, the Minister of State has in effect done the same thing by putting down an amendment which tears the guts out of Deputy Joan Collins's motion. It states: "retrospective application of future legislation is highly problematic", thus pouring cold water over the proposal. Insult has been added to injury by neither of the senior Ministers involved coming into the House to debate this issue. Two conclusions arise from this. First, the Government is part of the problem here and is an obstacle to achieving a just settlement. Second, the workers now have no option but to escalate. I am confident that they will act appropriately and I strongly appeal to both the Mandate trade union and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, to respond to the Government's double rebuff by taking the gloves off and putting in place strong action in support of the Debenhams workers' struggle.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I listened to the Tánaiste talking about Debenhams workers on RTÉ Radio the other day. During the interview he basically acted as an attorney or lobbyist for Debenhams and made excuses for it. In particular, he said that the situation is not like that of Clerys because there are no assets, which outraged the workers and ignores the €25 million in stock in its Irish shops. He also spoke about it in the context of Britain and Ireland and ignored the close to €100 million in bank accounts in the UK. I thought to myself that this encapsulates the difference between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael because every time the Taoiseach is asked about this, he uses a particular form of words. He says the workers have been very shoddily and badly treated. He expresses his sympathy with the workers and says it is terrible what Debenhams has done. The Tánaiste, on the other hand, expresses no sympathy for the workers and advocates for Debenhams. That is as much as the difference is because the bottom line is that neither of them does anything to support the workers or force Debenhams to pay up. That is encapsulated in the Government's amendment. It has the same line dismissing the existence of assets of Debenhams and now the Government is walking away. The impression the Taoiseach has given over the past number of months is that this would not be happening if we had only implemented the Duffy Cahill report, but unfortunately it has not been implemented, he says

we cannot do it retrospectively and there is nothing we can do. However, the Government's amendment does not even commit to implementing the Duffy Cahill report. The reality is that the Government is saying there is nothing we can do for these workers. The workers should not be disheartened by that. I am sure they are not. They have seen this time and again, but they know their actions are telling. That is why an offer was made a number of weeks ago, completely inadequate as it was. They should keep up the action, the strike and the protests. Concessions can be won.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I thank the Independent Group for bringing this motion before the House. The issue of protecting workers' rights in the event of a business folding has taken on a whole new urgency in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Huge losses have been suffered by Ireland's SME sector over the past six months or so, running into billions of euro. Many small businesses have already been forced to close. Genuine fears have been expressed that some of the big retail chains, large employers with headquarters in other countries, may use the cover of the pandemic to up sticks and leave Ireland. If they see the likes of Debenhams getting away with not living up to its commitments and responsibilities, there is every chance that they will try to take the same path.

The Duffy Cahill report, which was completed in March 2016, proposed a series of protections for Irish workers made redundant through insolvency. It aimed to avoid a repeat of the situation faced by the staff of Clerys in Dublin, who were left high and dry after that company collapsed, leaving the State to pick up the pieces. Around the same time, Debenhams agreed, following negotiations with staff representatives, to a deal promising four weeks' pay per year of service to any staff made redundant. Yet, four years later that deal has been thrown out the window and the dust is still gathering on the Duffy Cahill report with none of its many recommendations brought into law.

To say the 1,000 or so Irish Debenhams workers have been badly treated is an understatement. The offer of an average payment of €1,000 per worker on top of their legal minimum entitlement of two weeks' pay per year of service was by any yardstick an insult to the workers. The payment of the equivalent of an extra one day of pay per year of service was never going to be acceptable to staff who only four years ago agreed in good faith to a redundancy deal promising them four weeks' pay per year worked. That offer only served to inflame passions further and widen the great gap that exists between the two sides. After withdrawing that paltry offer, the liquidators, KPMG, further rubbed salt in the wound by announcing that no further settlement agreements would be negotiated by it with the employees.

The staff picketing outside the Debenhams store in Galway and others around the country are not asking for anything extraordinary, just the entitlement they were promised. I compliment the staff in Debenhams in Galway who are protesting outside and peacefully in all sorts of weather. The Taoiseach himself has described the treatment of Debenhams staff as "shabby and shoddy and unacceptable". Words alone will not improve their lot or the situation potentially facing thousands more employees of large retail chains in the months ahead. We need the protections suggested by the Duffy Cahill report to be put in place as a matter of urgency to ensure that if workers lose their jobs, they can at least be guaranteed a fair settlement after many years of loyal and dedicated service.

While I support this motion, I am concerned that the establishment of a ring-fenced insolvency fund might result in employers being asked to foot the bill for it. Too many small and medium-sized businesses are on their knees right now, desperately struggling to stay afloat.

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Between them they lost up to €10 billion from March to June alone, according to a study by the ESRI. The effects of the pandemic are likely to hit my home city of Galway more than any other major urban area in the country according to a report from the Northern and Western Regional Assembly. That report found that more than 46% of Galway's commercial businesses were operating in the sector set to feel the greatest economic impact of the pandemic, which is a higher proportion than in Dublin, Cork, Limerick or Waterford. The last thing those businesses need is a further levy on top of everything else that could tip them over the edge of survival.

A new levy imposed on employers' PRSI would result in the opposite of what this proposal hopes to achieve. It could be the last straw that could send a business to the wall, resulting in job losses and further hardship for the very people this motion aims to assist. I am fully supportive of the call to legislate for the implementation of the Duffy Cahill report recommendations and I call on the Government to act on this as a matter of urgency.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad of the opportunity to speak and thank the Independent Group for organising this motion relating to Debenhams workers. As has been pointed out, Debenhams has assets in other places and it was supported very well in Tralee by the people who used to buy its wares. The people of Tralee did not let the Debenhams workers down. Likewise, the people in Dublin did not let Debenhams down. They are, however, being let down by this very wealthy company. Seeing as the company is not for caving in, the Government should take some action to ensure the workers will get fair compensation. What has been offered is only paltry and it is not acceptable or fair. Having seen the workers out on the picket line day after day, we know the horrible way in which they have been treated.

I thank the Independent Group for bringing forward this very important motion and giving us in Dáil Éireann the opportunity to support the Debenhams workers, which I and the rest of our group will gladly do.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank most sincerely Deputy Joan Collins and the Independent Group for bringing this motion before the House. It is only right and just, after the enormous campaign that these workers have put in, that it is rightfully acknowledged in the House and I appreciate that.

I wish to relay one story to Deputy Collins and everybody else about the other night in Tralee and I know that she will appreciate this very much. As we know, these days thankfully are not too bad but the nights can be pretty cold. At 12.30 a.m. or perhaps 12.45 a.m. last Tuesday, a number of Debenhams workers were maintaining their vigil and protesting through the night. I could not believe it. I stopped to say a few words of support and encouragement and relayed the fact that the motion would be coming before the House, tabled by Deputy Collins's group, which they appreciated. It is only right and proper that we all support it.

I understand if a business or a company goes broke, if there is no money in the kitty, if the whole thing goes wallop, if staff cannot be paid and if the well is just dry, that is a different story. We know, however, there are enormous amounts of valuable stock in those shops and as far as I am concerned those goods that the good workers ensured were not removed is the property of the Debenhams workers. It is the property of the people who served and gave their years of genuine service to that company and have been treated so badly. What I cannot believe is how the company is being so stubborn in spite of the massive swell of support for the workers and why it is doing this. I cannot get my head around that.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank Deputy Joan Collins and the rest of the Independent Group for tabling the motion. Former Debenhams workers in Cork are carrying out a 12-hour fast while on a picket line today to raise funds for Marymount hospice in the city. They feel that the people of Cork have been so good to them that it is time they paid them back. Tomorrow will mark 161 days of industrial action taken by Debenhams workers, which brings us in line with the Vita Cortex workers, who ended their action after 161 days. The former Vita Cortex workers say they are fully behind the Debenhams employees as they continue to fight for their entitlements. They have said they support Debenhams workers in their fight for fair treatment. Workers should not have to go to such lengths to secure a just outcome.

We call on the Government to listen to the requests of the Debenhams workers, many of whom I know, given that some of them travel from all the way down in Castletownbere to Debenhams in Cork. The members of the Government who stood with Debenhams workers on the picket line and pledged their support but have disappeared need to come out and support this call and ensure that proper redundancy will finally be given to these workers. This dispute has put tremendous pressure on these workers. It is time for the Government to step up and finally give these workers what they are owed. They are involved in what is now the longest running industrial action the State has ever seen. It is time for the Government to intervene, put an end to this and give the Debenhams workers what they are entitled to. The workers are giving up dozens of hours every week standing outside the stores nationwide to prevent stock from being removed from the site. It is understood that the stock in the various Debenhams stores nationwide is worth in the region of €20 million. The workers believe that the liquidated stock and the cash in the stores should go into the Irish redundancy pot. Instead, 2,000 workers in 11 shops face receiving only the statutory redundancy.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** The Debenhams workers are not looking for anything over the top. After their years of hard work, and after what they have given to the community, they are looking for fair play but Debenhams is not playing ball. The workers are protecting assets in this country belonging to Debenhams to try to ensure they will get a fair deal. The Irish have always been known as “the fighting Irish”, for fighting for the people of Ireland. It is about time that the whole of Ireland regrouped and fought for the Debenhams workers.

We see people every day trying to live on what they have at the moment while dealing with Covid-19 and then a disgraceful company such as Debenhams has put us to one side and said, “We do not care.” We look at social media and at what Debenhams has sent out, saying that if customers have Debenhams vouchers, they can use them online. I ask the people to send a clear message to Debenhams and to the Government that we want Debenhams to be held to account. If an Irish company was doing this, the State would seize its assets and hold it to account. The Government should find a way to hold Debenhams to account and to make it look after its workers. They have paid tax in this country. They have clothed us and looked after the community. Debenhams has nothing but disrespect for Ireland. It is about time that Ireland turned around and said, “We are going to be disrespectful now to you and make you pay”, and that it hurt it in the pocket until it looks after our Debenhams workers.

I congratulate the Independent Group for bringing forward the motion, which I fully support. I thank the Debenhams workers for keeping up the fight. We will send a clear message to Debenhams that it will not stand on the Irish because we will stand for it.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I fully support the motion. I pay tribute to Deputy Joan Collins for the work she has done on behalf of the Debenhams workers and for bringing forward the

motion. It is vital for all the workers to ensure they will get some compensation when they are made redundant. The implementation of what the motion outlines and the recommendations of the Duffy Cahill report would do that, sending out a strong signal that the State respects its citizens. It would be a sea change for a Government in this country to support workers and workers' rights and it would send a signal that the State thinks as much about citizens and workers as it does about companies. That would be significant progress for workers.

For too long we have protected businesses that have no interest in protecting or respecting their staff and, in this case, no interest in respecting the State either as a defender of businesses. It must be a real shock for the Government to realise that. Sadly, it is happy to bend over for companies and businesses. The reality is that businesses and companies do not, in the main, have any interest in citizens or workers. They do not have any interest in the Government either, other than in what it will do for them and that is it. For too long, Governments have argued that companies supply jobs and that, therefore, we should do everything for companies. It is workers, however, who supply the labour and who make companies viable. What we should be doing is looking after workers and companies side by side and then we would see progress and perhaps an economy that works properly on behalf of all our citizens. I listened earlier to the Minister of State, Deputy English, make the argument on behalf of Debenhams and I was very disappointed. He then went on to make the case for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party as well, wringing his hands and saying there is nothing he can do. The Government, through its spokespeople, is offering sympathy to the workers but they deserve better than that. The Debenhams workers, and workers who in the future find themselves in the same situation that the Debenhams workers are in now, are being let down by the delay in implementing the Duffy Cahill report. There is a possibility that if the Government acted and implemented the report now, the workers could apply under Duffy Cahill for payment of the redundancy that the company agreed to in the past. That is what this motions calls for.

Every day the Government delays makes it more difficult for the workers to have their rights vindicated. The Minister said that the Government will review the Duffy Cahill report to see what can be done, but the Government response to the motion states it has already done that and ruled it out. Which is it? The Government has ruled it out on the basis of the Company Law Review Group review, although it is not possible to access its consideration of the report on its website.

The Duffy Cahill report was commissioned by two Ministers in the previous Government, which is basically the same Government we have now. If that report had been acted on, the situation that has arisen for the Debenhams workers would not have arisen. If the conditions of it had not applied then, so be it, but we cannot know that. The only thing we can say, sadly, is that it has not been implemented. This State does not care about workers. The Government will do what it can for companies but not for workers. There is nothing radical in what is being called for in this motion. It has been already done in a number of European countries such as Germany, which is hardly a bastion of socialist principles, but it does acknowledge that business needs survive better when workers are respected and treated fairly. That is all that is called for in this motion. The Debenhams workers on the picket line, the former Clerys workers and so on are only asking that they be treated fairly and with respect. The least citizens of this country could expect is that the Government would think about them as well and act on their behalf.

The Government says it cannot intervene in the law, which is fair enough, but it can implement the Duffy Cahill report. It can stop being hypocritical in terms of the manner in which it is dealing with this issue. Earlier, the Minister said that a review can be done, but the Government

response to the motion says that has been already ruled out. The least the Government could do is treat people with respect. People need clarity and a response in terms of a review. I call on the Government to give them a review and we can see where we go from there. I do not think it is too much to ask for anybody to be treated fairly. It is time that the State and the Government acted on behalf of Irish citizens. The Government will vote against this motion next week and its amended version of the motion will be on the record of the Dáil for all to see. It will show that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party care more about companies than citizens. That is all it will show. It will be a sorry memento of this Government on the record of the Dáil.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Robert Troy):** I have listened carefully for the past hour or so to the concerns expressed by Deputies. I share their frustrations on behalf of the Debenhams workers and all those facing job losses at this time. It is clear that any proposal to progress requires careful consideration involving further consultation with many stakeholders on the recommendations in the Duffy Cahill report.

I would note that the Companies Act 2014 already provides for a court power to order the return of assets improperly transferred in appropriate cases. That provision already exists on the Statute Book. The Duffy Cahill report refers to an entirely different situation from that faced by Debenhams workers today. The matter at hand is a court-supervised liquidation of a failed company with, as far as any of us know, no other significant assets to dispose of apart from certain stock, the value of which is still under dispute, and a range of creditors who also have legitimate claims upon it.

The intention of this Government, as set out in the programme for Government commitments regarding employee protections, is to review whether the current legal provisions surrounding collective redundancies and the liquidation of companies effectively protect the rights of workers; review the companies Acts with a view to addressing the practice of trading entities splitting their operations between trading and property, with the result being the trading business, including the jobs, go into insolvency and the assets are taken out of the original business; and to examine the legal provision that pertains to any sale to a connected party following the insolvency of a company, including who can object and the allowable grounds of an objection. This is what we will do in terms of future legislation. The Duffy Cahill report is part of that work but not the whole of it. As Minister of State with responsibility for company law, I do not want to wait any longer for this work to be conducted.

I note specifically the Deputies' motion to "examine the need for a ring-fenced insolvency fund, such as exists in several European Union states, to allow for all payments due to workers laid off by an insolvent company, which could be financed by a levy on employers Pay Related Social Insurance". This is an interesting proposal and the Government considers it worthy of detailed and serious consideration. A similar proposal was made recently by ICTU to the Minister of State, Deputy English. I look forward to Government considering the proposal with the input of ICTU and that of other informed parties. This debate, too, will feed into it. It has to be acknowledged that the proposal will have some obvious challenges which would necessitate wider consideration not only across Government but among stakeholders such as employers who would be asked to pay into the fund. We would be asking employers to pay into this fund at a serious and challenging time in the context of Covid and Brexit. Business failure does not help businesses and it certainly does not help employees.

As I understand it, the proposal is essentially that a levy on private sector employers would be established, with contribution rates in the order of 0.35% to 0.66% of wages, which would

be used in situations such as this where an employer defaults on a collective agreement due to insolvency. Such a levy would potentially alleviate the extreme pressure being imposed on the Social Insurance Fund and might offer a tailored solution to this particular scenario should it happen again in the future. Currently, the only non-social insurance fund charge collected with employer social insurance is the 1% National Training Fund levy which is returned under the PAYE system to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and is subsequently transferred to the National Training Fund administered by the Department of Education and Skills. I am engaging with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy English, on how to progress consideration of the proposal, on revisiting the Duffy Cahill report, and on establishing the best way to do so in consultation with stakeholders. Engagement is key.

I met the Debenhams workers with the Tánaiste and I also met them with my party colleague, Deputy McAuliffe. I have also engaged with Deputy Lahart on this matter. Together with the Minister of State, Deputy English, I will finalise a multi-stakeholder forum to ensure appropriate recommendations are carried forward and put on a statutory footing. This will necessitate the engagement of all stakeholders, including union representatives. In my negotiations and discussions with some of the unions, I informed of this. The Duffy Cahill report will be foundational in this regard and will be utilised to realise the commitments made in the programme for Government without further delay.

I again extend my sympathies to the employees of Debenhams Ireland who have lost their jobs and I acknowledge the distress and worry that this is causing for them and their families. The workers will receive their statutory entitlements. However, additional payments can only  
*6 o'clock* be secured through negotiations between the unions and the liquidators consulting in good faith with one another. I have heard from many Deputies on the Opposition benches of the need and right of employees to have access to union representation, and rightly so. These workers do have access to union representation. The union has entered into consultation on behalf of the workers.

We continue to encourage this and we hope for a successful outcome. However, we cannot dictate that outcome and neither should anybody on the other side of the House. It should be left to the unions representing the workers. There are other avenues that may be used by unions and workers. The Workplace Relations Commission stands ready and available should the unions representing the workers wish to use that arm of the State.

The Deputies are seeking an immediate emergency legislative solution that would apply to these cases retrospectively in a special way, over and above many other workers who have been made redundant. This approach is on shaky legal and policy grounds. Retrospective action brings obvious legal concerns and I also question the wisdom of setting one class of worker over another.

The reality of the Government's position is there is no statutory role or power for it to intervene in the distribution of assets currently under a court-supervised liquidation, and to suggest otherwise would be misleading. The Government does not have the luxuries enjoyed by Members in the Opposition, who can make promises knowing they will not have to deliver on them. The Government must operate within the confines of existing law.

The Government's role in respect of the Debenhams workers is to ensure redundancy payments are made from the Social Insurance Fund and the workers are supported with jobseeker supports, including retraining, with in-depth consideration given to company law and employ-

ment rights law issues set out in the programme for Government.

As I have said, the Minister of State, Deputy English, and I will continue to pursue the relevant programme for Government commitments and revisit the Duffy Cahill report, assessing which elements could help to address the shortfall that arose with Clerys. We will consider the proposal for a levy and engage with the stakeholders on this. As I have said, we are finalising a multi-stakeholder forum and it is my intention for this to commence within weeks and not months. I am determined to ensure we can pursue policies for the protection of workers in the not too distant future.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** With all due respect to the Ministers of State, Deputies English and Troy, the fact that the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, is not in the Chamber does not just show contempt for the Opposition and the left - we are well used to it at this stage - but also shows contempt for the 1,000 former Debenhams workers. That has not gone unnoticed. He is also showing disrespect for the workers at St. Mary's nursing home on Merrion Road, which is facing possible liquidation by the Sisters of Charity, which is using the argument that if it had to pay redundancy, it would be bankrupt. It is not at that point yet.

These people are watching to see exactly what other companies have done. We know what happened in the past with companies like HMV, La Senza, Connolly Shoes, Game, Paris Bakery and Pastry Limited, TalkTalk, Clerys and now Debenhams and St. Mary's nursing home. We know there will be future cases as well. As has been said, there are 69,500 companies using the emergency wage schemes and they will be affected very badly when those schemes are cut.

Fianna Fáil is at 10% in the polls and would normally have its finger on the pulse with such matters, as the Debenhams workers enjoy huge support from the people in this country. The public support is absolutely massive. The party would normally have its finger on the pulse but clearly it does not.

The programme for Government was published 93 days ago but I will read instead from the terms of reference of the Duffy Cahill report. It states:

Hence, the focus of the examination is on how the legitimate interests of employees could more effectively be safeguarded in situations in which collective redundancies arise from the liquidation of an employer following corporate restructuring in which assets that might otherwise have been available to protect those interests are transferred to a related person.

The mealy amendment states:

further notes that the Government is committed to, and is determined to, deliver on a number of actions in the programme for Government, including to:

- review whether the legal provisions surrounding collective redundancies and the liquidation of companies effectively protect the rights of workers;

This was done four years ago with the Duffy Cahill report. The programme for Government came out 93 days ago and we still have nothing to protect the workers facing technical insolvencies. The Government should be ashamed of itself when it states it will review what has already been reviewed in the Duffy Cahill report and which has been rejected. The Gov-

ernment also intends to review the companies legislation, indicating in the amendment that the Company Law Review Group, CLRG, did not include the implementation of the Duffy Cahill report in its recommendations. It did not do it because it was not in the group's terms of reference to look at it.

The doublespeak of the Government is horrendous. There are workers on the picket line whose lives have been disrupted for over 160 days because the law allows companies to technically make their companies insolvent while taking any moneys away on which the workers could call. It is absolutely reprehensible behaviour. The Minister of State mentions a review of the Duffy Cahill report but it has been there for four years. The Government should really be ashamed of itself.

The Debenhams national shop stewards' committee has unanimously endorsed a Mandate-ICTU campaign to secure urgent legislation relating to the Duffy Cahill report and the suggestion in our motion for ring-fencing an insolvency fund like the funds that exist in several other European countries. The Debenhams workers have put their names to this campaign. They want the Government to introduce legislation urgently to enact the recommendations of the Duffy Cahill report. They want the Government to pay the extra two weeks of redundancy they should get, with Debenhams to be pursued under that legislation.

The Government could ask the liquidator to extend the length of time for the liquidation to allow all the legislation to be enacted. That is what the workers are looking for, along with Mandate and ICTU. That is what they have said to the Ministers of State, Deputies English and Troy, as well as the senior Minister, Deputy Varadkar. They want to walk away from the picket lines. They do not want to be there at Christmas. I spoke to the shop steward on Henry Street earlier and she said if the recommendations of the Duffy Cahill report had been implemented, these people would not be contemplating having their Christmas dinner on the picket line. That is how strongly they feel about this. They are not going to walk away from the picket line or the assets in those shops. These people know these assets could potentially be pursued by the Government so they could be paid.

I read the CLRG report and it is over 120 pages. It considered issues covered by the Duffy Cahill report relating to company law. Deputy Connolly raised relevant sections of the Companies Act 2014, including sections 599 and 608. The Government had the audacity to state in its amendment that "The CLRG did not include the implementation of the Duffy-Cahill Report in its recommendations". There was not one mention of the Duffy Cahill report in that publication from the CLRG because it was not asked to consider it. It dealt specifically with companies law and there were no new recommendations, despite ICTU disagreeing. There was no recommendation to change the law as it said companies legislation could be affected, with costs being key. This is not about Deputy Joan Collins passing a Private Members' motion. Workers wanted this issue brought into the Dáil for discussion, debate and a response from the Government. They want this legislation. They want their jobs and conditions and the contracts they have signed with companies in good faith to be protected. These companies can easily afford to pay their wages.

As I said earlier, I was hoping that the Tánaiste could appear and provide assurances that the Government is seriously looking at how to speed things up, in full awareness that these workers could be left with only the statutory payment of two weeks per year. I hoped to hear about the Government's desire to secure these workers' holiday pay and everything to which they are entitled. I hoped to hear that the Government was looking at the Duffy Cahill report and how

to implement it immediately and would get its officials to prepare the necessary legislation in the next two weeks.

The point has been made. We brought massive legislation through this Dáil overnight to bail out the banks. We sat here until 5 a.m. to pass that legislation. In contrast, some 93 days have passed since the programme for Government was adopted and for 160 days these workers have been on the picket line, fighting for their rights.

I ask the Minister to go back to his own party. Yesterday I heard one of its members on radio saying he was saddened that Fianna Fáil seems to be losing contact with its roots. He said it is an older party that is not recruiting young people. Why would they join when Fianna Fáil does not represent them by enforcing their contracts? I appeal to the Government to take this more seriously and to implement the changes the workers, Mandate and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions is asking for.

Amendment put.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 17 September 2020.

*Sitting suspended at 6.15 p.m. and resumed at 6.35 p.m.*

### **Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to announce for the information of the House that the following members have been nominated to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response: Deputies Cormac Devlin, Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Pádraig O'Sullivan, Paul McAuliffe and Neasa Hourigan.

The following members have been nominated to the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Deputies Denise Mitchell and Marc Ó Cathasaigh.

### **Protecting Jobs and Supporting Business: Statements**

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I welcome this opportunity to update the House on the Government's work to protect jobs and support business during this pandemic. This is precisely my focus as Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment: to lead our country through the economic crisis and to help people to get back to work. There are no rules and no manual for this crisis. It is a public health and economic crisis like no other we have seen in our lifetime. Until a vaccine or treatment is widely available, physical distancing, testing and isolating will be the main instruments to fight the spread of the virus.

The Government yesterday published Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19. It sets out how we plan to keep the virus under control, how we can anticipate

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and understand the virus and how to live our lives for the next six to nine months. It is designed to protect our families, friends, communities, jobs and businesses. I know that many people are feeling frustrated, but we must remain vigilant.

Irish businesses have shown remarkable grit and the Government will do everything it can to help businesses to open and to stay open and to keep people in employment. We have sought to protect jobs and back business by pumping billions of euro into the economy through wage subsidies, the pandemic unemployment payment, cash grants for businesses, low-cost loans, targeted tax cuts and commercial rates waivers, as well as increased Government spending on public services generally and public infrastructure specifically. The €9.5 billion deficit recorded at the end of August demonstrates the extraordinary nature and scale of this Government intervention.

The economic hit has been severe. GDP contracted by 6.1% in quarter 2 of 2020, but this masks a much more severe impact on the domestic economy, with modified domestic demand falling by 15% year on year. However, the economic figures that matter most are those relating to people staying in work or returning to work and these are now starting to go in the right direction, with the number claiming the pandemic unemployment payment falling every week. The monthly unemployment rate, adjusted to include those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, has fallen from 28.5% in May 2020 to 15.4% in August.

We are under no illusions that the recovery will be smooth. There may be multiple hits to the economy, matching the multiple waves of the pandemic over a protracted period, which makes responding to the crisis all the more difficult. We know that the economic impact of Covid-19 has not been the same across all sectors of the economy. For those sectors where remote working had been already part of their operation, making the transition to remote working has been much easier. For other sectors, especially those that require personal contact with customers, it has been more difficult to adapt to distancing requirements.

The July jobs stimulus was, as promised, a financial package of a scale that demonstrated the Government's commitment to save enterprises, limit the damage to our economy and get people back to work. Indeed, it was bigger in scale than most annual budgets. It is being deployed at speed and is monitored by the Cabinet subcommittee on the economy which I chair. Building on the extensive enterprise and employment schemes that have been already deployed, the additional €7.4 billion announced in the July jobs stimulus will have a wide reach across the economy, resolve some of the limitations of existing schemes and be of sufficient scale and longevity to help our businesses and economy through the worst of this pandemic.

The temporary wage subsidy scheme and its successor, the employment wage subsidy scheme, have provided critical assistance to impacted businesses across the economy. For the most heavily impacted sectors such as hospitality, the schemes have given businesses a chance to resume activity and operate under the constraints demanded by public health requirements by heavily subsidising their largest variable cost, that is, labour. Without this support, it is likely that many businesses in this sector would have remained closed.

We have introduced a temporary reduction in VAT from 23% to 21% to boost employment and encourage spending. This tax cut will assist the retail sector in particular, but also benefit many other sectors of the economy, including fuel and personal services. The stay and spend initiative which will take effect in October will see consumers benefit by up to €125 each for expenditure on hospitality during the traditional off-peak season for this sector. We also al-

located €10 million to a restart fund for the tourism sector. We have waived commercial rates for six months for many impacted businesses and, again, this waiver helps those business most in need. We will examine extending the rates waiver in the context of the budget in October.

Although these schemes are wide-ranging, they will, by their nature, be of most assistance to the most severely affected firms and sectors. We have provided substantial restart grants of up to €25,000 to a broad category of businesses such as hairdressers, sports clubs, cafes, restaurants, bed and breakfast accommodation, and independent hotels. This grant is helping businesses cover the other fixed costs which continued throughout their enforced closure and, importantly, provides funding to help cover the cost of steps taken to ensure a safe environment for staff and customers on reopening. By Friday last, approvals to the value of €156 million were approved under the restart grant and €145 million under the restart grant plus. A total of 62,700 approvals have been made under the two schemes to date in every county in Ireland.

Last week, we announced the opening of the new €2 billion Covid-19 credit guarantee scheme to provide businesses with access to low-cost loans over a five or six year term as they respond to Covid-19. It is the biggest ever State-backed loan guarantee in Irish economic history.

A large number of non-bank finance providers, including some credit unions, have also applied to participate in the scheme as part of an open-call process. These applications are currently under assessment by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, and my Department. I welcome the demand from finance providers to be part of the scheme, as it will mean more choice for Irish SMEs in being able to borrow from institutions other than the traditional banks.

The Microfinance Ireland Covid-19 loan scheme also recently reopened. Under the first phase of this scheme, 687 loans were approved to a value of nearly €19 million. This represents three years of normal lending volumes for MFI in a period of just over four months.

Importantly, with 80% of the businesses receiving the loans based outside of Dublin, MFI provides an essential assistance for businesses that are hoping to boost their economic activity over the coming weeks and months in every county in Ireland. I expect this new tranche of funding will provide a lifeline to even more micro-enterprises enabling them to reopen, stay afloat or expand. It is worth bearing in mind that in Ireland nearly 60% of small and medium-sized enterprises carry no debt at all and have the capacity to borrow if they choose to do so.

The Government has also expanded the future growth loan scheme to make €800 million in lending available for terms of seven to ten years. Funding under this scheme helps businesses as they seek to make long-term strategic investment. This includes businesses that have been or will be impacted by Covid-19 and Brexit. Demand for this scheme has been high and has continued throughout the pandemic. As of the most recent report on 4 September, there have been 1,372 loans approved under the scheme, to a total value of almost €300 million.

We have also devoted some funds to specific sectors in order to take advantage of particular opportunities. One good example of this is the Covid life sciences fund which will see us set aside an initial €25 million of a potential €200 million in the form of state aid to enable enterprises, primarily in the pharmaceutical sector, to significantly and immediately ramp up production to help the EU efforts to Covid-19. The opportunity being presented to those firms by this funding will generate a significant return to the State in due course in the form of additional

jobs and taxes.

One must remember, as we all do in this House, that a job provides more than an income. It can provide a sense of self-worth and well-being. While we will continue to help our businesses, we are also assisting those who have lost their jobs as a result of Covid-19 or whose jobs continue to be in a precarious position, getting staff back to work and creating new opportunities for those unable to return to their old jobs.

A €200 million investment in education and training was announced in July. A new apprenticeship incentivisation scheme has also been announced to assist employers to continue to recruit apprentices during the immediate Covid-19 period. This is in addition to 60,000 places in further and higher education, skills training, and work placement and experience schemes that will be funded. In fact, this autumn more people than ever before will enter higher education in Ireland.

A clear timeline as announced for the continuation of the pandemic unemployment payment will provide assurances to those who lost their jobs. While the headline figures are being reduced, it will continue in place at least until April and will remain open for new entrants. It is in marked contrast to the payments made north of the Border, for example, with the universal credit, which is close to one third of what is paid in this jurisdiction.

Young people have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 and we must ensure they are not left behind. The JobsPlus scheme provides subsidies to encourage employers to take people on if they are under the age of 30 and they are on the live register or receiving the pandemic unemployment payment.

Many people who have lost their jobs in some of the sectors living with the long-term effects of closures and other restrictions, such as aviation and events, have moved into other sectors where they have additional or transferable skill sets. This shows the importance of continuing upskilling and reskilling for all workers, especially as the transition to a digital and low-carbon economy, which we know is likely to significantly change and in some cases even make obsolete certain roles, is still ahead of us. The advantages of a dual-qualification cannot be underestimated.

While we cannot keep every firm and job alive, I believe our emphasis should still be to preserve these insofar as we can within the fiscal constraints. We need to ensure that firms that can survive do.

We also need to examine why those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment are disproportionately young, from migrant backgrounds and work in the private sector. These are people whom we relied on during the pandemic - shop workers, delivery drivers and cleaners. They tend not to be well paid or well protected. In the future, we need to value their work more and do better by them.

The next steps in our recovery journey will be mapped out in the October budget and the subsequent national economic plan. The national economic plan will set out a vision for what our post-Covid economy will look like. While the focus of Government action up to now has been on protecting workers, households and firms, the plan will look to the future and show how our economy can be positioned to exploit opportunities for growth in emerging sectors and in areas such as new ways of working, while also addressing how we will prepare for the transitioning of enterprises and workers in response to technology and climate change developments.

Unlike the response to the recession ten years ago when we lost the confidence of the European institutions and the international markets, we will be in a position to continue to borrow in the near future and that will allow us to continue to increase capital budgets and spending on public infrastructure in the coming years under Project Ireland 2040. We will be able to go ahead with the planned €1 billion increase in capital spending on public infrastructure next year - an increase of more than 12%. This, in itself, will generate employment and economic activity when we need it most. We can afford to borrow cheaply to invest in infrastructure and we will do so.

Covid-19 has forced us to take a step back and think about the way we live our lives. We do not want to return to the same society we had before. It gives us an opportunity to make fundamental changes for the better – for a better quality of life, a better economy and a better environment.

**Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Robert Troy):** Protecting jobs and supporting business is fundamental to our economy and society. The Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation has spoken about the challenges facing our businesses and the unprecedented levels of financial supports which the Government has made available. We also have to ensure that the right conditions exist for our businesses to flourish.

As Minister of State with responsibility for trade promotion, digital and company regulation, my focus is on protecting jobs and supporting businesses by ensuring company law supports jobs and business, ensuring the responsible behaviour of companies through effective enforcement, ensuring a competitive and fair marketplace and helping to drive insurance reform, increasing consumer protection, especially online, and driving the digital agenda and creating opportunities for our businesses through trade promotion and digital opportunities.

Company regulation puts the legal framework in place for doing business in Ireland. It enables entrepreneurs to take risks, enterprises to grow and jobs to be created. Our regulatory regime is intended to ensure that business is conducted with probity and integrity but without undue administrative burdens, and the rights of investors, consumers, employees and creditors are protected, transparent and enforced. Already, I have steered legislation through the Houses to assist in the running and survival of companies during Covid-19. The Companies (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Covid-19) Act makes necessary temporary amendments to the Companies Act 2014 and related legislation. This work is part of a sustained Government plan to ensure that company law is fit for purpose and protects not only companies but also the workers for which hundreds of thousands of Irish and Irish-based companies provide employment.

I will continue to review the Companies Acts and make necessary changes to simplify and improve receivership, examinership and liquidation laws in response to the Covid-19 crisis. The programme for Government has important commitments in this regard. Small businesses, the backbone of the Irish economy, are at a distinct disadvantage in availing of supports afforded by examinerships for the rescue and return to health of ailing but potentially viable companies. The current process of examinerships are beyond the means of many SMEs which are thus deprived of the opportunity to restructure and remain viable, and instead face closure.

With responsibility for company regulation, I will advocate for better processes for businesses in Ireland and work with colleagues and stakeholders to bring effective change. At the Tánaiste's request, the company law review group, CLRG, will report in October on its review

of a rescue process for small companies. It is also undertaking an expedited review of commitments on insolvency, assets and redundancies.

A programme for Government commitment and a legislative priority this autumn is to progress the legislation to establish a new corporate enforcement authority. By establishing the office of the director of corporate enforcement as a stand-alone agency, the new body will be better equipped to investigate increasingly complex breaches of company law. I look forward to working with Deputies shortly to deliver on this, which is a priority shared by many in this House.

Competition policy is about ensuring a competitive and fair marketplace. I will ensure the transposition of the European directive commonly known as the European Competition Network, ECN+. The directive empowers the competition authority of member states to be more effective enforcers and to ensure the proper functioning of the internal market. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, Comreg, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Irish courts are national competition authorities for the purposes of EU competition law. Officials in my Department are working towards the transposition of this important directive and, subject to Government approval, additional competition enforcement powers will be included in the legislation which I hope to bring before the House in the coming months.

We have a competitive insurance sector. The cost and availability of insurance is a major issue for consumers, business and community groups across the country. Insurance is one of my top priorities as Minister of State with responsibility for the Personal Injury Assessment Board, PIAB. As one of the first bodies I met on taking office, I am committed to seeing through substantial change in personal injury processes. I requested a report from PIAB on how its role could be enhanced and reformed to improve the functioning of the insurance market in Ireland. I have received this report and met with officials to discuss its suggested measures. I look forward to progressing and engaging with stakeholders to bring about effective change to the current unsustainable solution. The high cost of insurance is a top priority to me as Minister of State and to the Government. Its impact on business has consequences for the economy and jobs and we will address it.

Other matters are important to consumers especially when many are buying online. Work is underway on a major consumer rights Bill that will set out rights and remedies in contracts for sales of goods, the supply of digital content and services and the supply of non-digital services. The Bill will also provide for stronger consumer protection in online contracts and against unfair terms in consumer contracts. The scheme of the Bill should be finalised for pre-legislative scrutiny before the end of the year.

The Tánaiste and I, subject to Government approval, also intend to introduce legislation shortly to prohibit the resale of event tickets above their original sale price. I am particularly mindful that a resumption of sporting and entertainment events with very restricted attendances will create obvious potential for the resale of scarce tickets at inflated prices. I want to ensure that there is fair access to tickets for events both during and after Covid-19.

Covid-19 and its impact are not the only challenges ahead. Concerns grow regarding Brexit and we must not lose any focus in our preparations. As part of the Government's work to ensure business is Brexit ready, we are working to facilitate the operation of an EU regulated security settlement system in respect of the Irish market as the current UK CREST system will no longer be authorised under EU law. This will be achieved through the upcoming withdrawal

of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Consequential Provisions) Bill 2020 to be introduced by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Bill will address all the foreseen legislative needs which arise at the end of the transition period regardless of the outcome of the EU-UK future partnership negotiations.

Brexit repeatedly reminds us of the importance of trade. As a small open economy, trade and its promotion are key. Ireland relies on external demand and international markets for sustainable and continued growth. International trade has been central to our progress in the past half century and will continue to be central to our progress in the years ahead, though there will be challenges. Given this priority, diversifying our markets is a necessity.

The OECD SME and entrepreneur policy review found only 6.3% SMEs were trading internationally. Our ambition is to increase that to 9.6% by 2024 and while the Covid-19 crisis has adversely affected our ability to travel overseas on trade missions this year, I am determined to bring forward policies to support this aim.

On Covid-19 measures that impact business, I will continue to advocate for and address the concerns of business owners and SMEs whose ability to trade has been curtailed by the pandemic. Matters that need to be examined include travel restrictions for essential workers, Enterprise Ireland companies and extending moratoriums for performing loans.

In recent weeks I have advocated the adoption of an integrated travel policy. I welcome the announcement earlier in the week that that will be the way forward. It will bring certainty to those in trade, tourism and other impacted sectors.

As the Covid-19 crisis evolves we must consider the impact of extended closure on given sectors. Moratoriums for normally performing loans should be extended. We must show flexibility and take account of the extraordinary pressures placed on businesses in sectors adversely affected. We must engage with the ECB on these matters, determine the levels of flexibility that can be afforded and develop national guidelines.

Promotion of our companies abroad continues through the work of our State agencies and in particular their offices located on the ground internationally. I will work closely with the enterprise agencies and key stakeholders to ensure that we can continue to highlight

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the benefits which existing EU free trade agreements provide for Irish exporters. In the next three weeks, I will undertake a programme of engagement across the country, looking at all aspects of Ireland's exporting ecosystem and meeting with Irish companies at all stages of their exporting journey.

One of the areas affording some of the greatest opportunities for Ireland in the road ahead is in the digital space. We have benefited from the presence of large technology firms that have based themselves in Ireland, but it is also important to ensure that we do not become complacent. The Covid-19 crisis has further highlighted the reliance that individuals and businesses alike have on digital platforms for personal and business matters. We need a whole-of-Government approach to bring forward a national digital strategy that is actionable, responsive and agile with regard to the pace of change in this space. I will work with colleagues to ensure continued stakeholder engagement in this process.

The new EU platform to business regulation on online platforms has just come into force and I look forward to building on this through the future digital policy initiatives planned at EU level. These include the development of a digital services act package and work on artificial

intelligence policy. I will bring forward Ireland's first strategy on artificial intelligence. It will provide high level direction to the design, development and adoption of artificial intelligence in Ireland. The work at EU and national levels are major opportunities for enhanced productivity and innovation in our enterprise base and we must remain an attractive place for digital businesses to grow and prosper. I look forward to working with my team in the Department under the stewardship of the Tánaiste, to listen to businesses and employees and to put the right policies and legislation in place to protect jobs and support businesses. These are just some steps that I am taking to ensure that businesses and workers are not only protected in these challenging times, but also enabled and supported in their ambitions.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent public health measures implemented to reduce the spread of this virus have created unprecedented challenges for small and medium enterprises, SMEs, microbusinesses and the workers that they employ. These public health measures have required businesses across several sectors to close or to implement physical distancing measures that have significantly reduced their capacity to operate. This has had a negative effect on consumption and their trading opportunities. The subsequent losses experienced by SMEs threaten their survival.

Employing more than 1 million people, with extensive linkages throughout the domestic supply chain, the survival of our small to medium enterprises is crucial to getting people back to work and will play a central role in any recovery that might follow. Put simply, without a recovery for small to medium enterprises and family businesses, there will be no real recovery. Investing in SMEs and microbusinesses to rescue jobs and protect our communities is a priority for Sinn Féin but equally important is delivering on workers' rights. The economic recovery from Covid-19 cannot be built on the back of low pay and precarious work, nor on the exploitation of workers. Some of the most negatively impacted sectors of our economy are those with the lowest pay and worst conditions.

The recovery for those affected sectors cannot be a simple reconstitution of the past. This means that from now on, the State must play a central role in supporting our microbusinesses, our SME sector and our family-run businesses and the State and business must also play a central role in delivering on workers' rights, decent jobs and decent pay. IBEC reinforced this today in its submission for budget 2021, stating "The goal of measures introduced to promote economic recovery should not be simply a return to business as usual but rather should be taken as an opportunity to improve quality of life in Ireland." Many other groups have said this since the onset of this crisis, including the trade union movement, the community and voluntary sector, those in the health service and many more. Sinn Féin believes that the central plank of the economic recovery from the Covid-19 crisis must be a real commitment to our microbusinesses, SME sector and family businesses, as well as a steadfast commitment to workers' rights embedded in legislation and the creation of decent jobs with decent pay and conditions. The State must protect workers and support businesses, which should be taken as a given. An analysis of the current situation for workers, SMEs and the broader economy has shown that the vast majority of the Government's actions have been too little, too late, or more often than not, both. My colleague, Deputy Doherty, will delve into this in detail in a few minutes.

The experience of the last financial crisis left most SMEs and microbusinesses unwilling to take on additional external debt through loans. They pleaded with the Government for injections of liquidity through grants. Instead of listening to the sector, the Government proposed a 4:1 debt:grant ratio in the July stimulus, with a focus on loans rather than grant aid. The paltry and often inaccessible nature of some of these grants has meant that many businesses are still in

an extremely perilous position. I was speaking with a businessperson in Kildare and have written to the Tánaiste about this person. He informed me that phase 1 of the restart grant scheme had its closure date changed and that meant that countless businesses that had applied for or were waiting to apply for grants lost out. Instead of being entitled to and receiving the restart grant and the restart grant plus, he instead only qualifies for one. That does not seem fair or right.

What supports are there for wet pubs, the live entertainment sector and artists? All of these sectors were essentially ignored. The wet pubs were essentially ignored. One pub worker I spoke to at the weekend said that they were kicked around by the Government. Their reopening has been put back countless times. Instead of coming up with a plan for these pubs to reopen in a safe and secure manner with set guidelines and sanctions, they were ignored. I know many have correctly stated that this particularly penalised rural areas and rural pubs, but it also penalised many pubs in urban working class areas that do not have recourse to kitchen and cooking facilities. Additional supports for workers in these businesses when they reopened were continuously put back. They did not get a thing. Instead of engaging meaningfully with affected sectors and working to protect the jobs, livelihoods and businesses, the main supports for those affected, the pandemic unemployment payment and the temporary wage subsidy scheme, have been put back. Such moves threaten to undermine investment in these affected sectors since the beginning of the crisis. The State either ensures that the workers in these sectors are protected through wage supports and that the businesses are helped through grant aid or help with debt, or jobs will be lost and businesses will fold.

We have seen in the north of England and Scotland how communities were destroyed through the Thatcher years because of the failure of the state to invest in communities, protect businesses and protect jobs. The failure has cost demonstrably more in the long run through funding for social protection measures and the destruction wrought on these communities. We know that leveraging through debt is often necessary for growth. That principle applies in our current circumstances. We need to borrow and invest in workers, jobs and small businesses to stabilise them and help them grow. This is the only way forward.

We can and should use this period to reset the economy and rectify the mistakes of the past. While Covid-19 has created instability in our economy, it has also laid bare an insecure economic base that is centred on low wages, low growth and low productivity. If we are to create a truly progressive economy and a happy society, we need to have substantial economic change. Unfortunately after the last economic crash, the conservative political parties and their corporate affiliates came together to ensure that the old economic order, which was responsible for the most catastrophic domestic elements of the crash, was repaired and put back together the same as before.

In a post-Covid-19 world, we cannot go back to business as usual and have a reconstitution of the economy as it was. We need to propose and advocate for how we can build a robust, socialist, progressive, sustainable and green economy. We must eradicate precarious low wage work, which has been a feature of our economy, and we need to see a serious move towards a living wage. This cannot be done in a vacuum. There must be a whole-of-government response to tackle the high cost of housing, insurance, education and the crippling cost of living.

Sinn Féin is committed, as the lead party in Opposition in the Dáil, to be constructive and robust. We will work with all parties and all political groupings to support workers' rights and micro, small, medium and family businesses.

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When it comes to protecting jobs and workers, the Covid-19 global health emergency has put a necessary focus on the need for high standards of health and safety at work. In a time of a global pandemic, access to paid sick leave becomes an important instrument of public health. This State remains one of the few in Europe not to have paid sick leave for all workers. When we talk about what workers want and need, then give them a round of applause and a pat on the back, we have to think about what would be a meaningful legacy after what was done to some workers during this crisis. A really meaningful legacy for those workers would be a State-backed sick pay scheme that would ensure that they could take time off from work. I am not naive enough to believe that this could be done overnight. I know it cannot simply be done with a flick of a switch. I know it would require much detailed consultation. I know the difference between a sound bite and a decent sick pay scheme. What I am saying to the Tánaiste is that we need to use this time to build that into the system. It is going to take some time. That is why Sinn Féin has proposed an extension to the *force majeure* scheme to ensure that people who cannot be in work have the capacity not to be in work and not to lose out in terms of money because of Covid, but also that we use this time to build a decent State-backed sick pay scheme which will bring us into line with the rest of Europe. Many employers went above and beyond to save their businesses and protect the jobs of their staff. Some employers and businesses saw this as cover for poor treatment of their workforce. The behaviour of Debenhams is one such example. The Tánaiste and I have spoken about this previously. We know about the need to immediately implement the Duffy Cahill report immediately. Successive Governments have failed to learn the lesson from Clerys, TalkTalk, the Paris Bakery, La Senza and the myriad others. We know them all and can rhyme them all off.

The Tánaiste has a proposal on his desk from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. It is backed by the workers in Debenhams and Mandate Trade Union. I ask him to give it serious consideration, not over the course of months as the Minister of State, Deputy English, has said but over the course of the next couple of weeks. They have put a lot of effort into this proposal. It reflects the Duffy Cahill report. It is not by any manner or means radical. It is something that is done in other countries. It would make a real and meaningful difference in the lives of those workers and would ensure we do not keep coming back to the same place again, to the same problems and issues, and to the same shrug of the shoulders and “let us not let this happen again.” We need to make sure when we say we do not want it to happen again that we actually put measures in place to ensure it cannot. As a State, we need to move towards a much more robust and progressive economic base. We have to move towards a recovery that is built on the back of decent pay and decent work, and we have to fix that which has been exposed by this pandemic.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Since the public health emergency began, and in order to contain the spread of the virus, sectors of our economy have been entirely closed while others have suffered severely reduced activity as a result of restrictions which were necessary at that time. As a result, thousands of workers have lost jobs and their incomes. With trading brought to a halt, many businesses are currently fighting for their very survival. Chruthaigh an pandemic seo agus na srianta sláinte a tháinig léi deacrachtaí móra dár gcomhlachtaí, idir beag agus mór, go háirithe comhlachtaí beaga agus na hoibrithe atá fostaithe acu. The statistics, which I know the Tánaiste values, reveal the stark reality facing workers and businesses across the State and also the failure of his Government and Department to act fast and do whatever it takes to support them. The numbers speak for themselves. Figures published by the European Commission on 8 September showed Ireland suffering the second highest level of job losses in the second quarter of this year. That is more than twice the European average. Figures published the fol-

lowing day by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, found the rate of unemployment for August stood at 15.4%. That is higher than the unemployment rate in the United States of America under President Trump. These figures cannot be disputed.

The real reasons for the scale of job losses which are out of kilter with our European competitors are quite clear. I will briefly mention two of them before discussing the third in greater detail. First, we know that the greatest level of job losses has been felt among low-paid workers in the sectors most affected by the public health measures, including hospitality and tourism. This has been repeatedly confirmed by monthly Exchequer figures, the most recent of which have shown that despite unemployment in the month of July being 17%, income tax receipts were only down 0.7% on the previous year. These sectors make up a large proportion of our economy and jobs market, more so than in other European countries, resulting in heavier losses.

Second, the level of job losses is directly related to the severity of the public health measures that needed to be implemented to contain the spread of the virus. One of the reasons these were necessary was the simple fact that we have among the lowest hospital capacity and the highest levels of hospital occupancy in the OECD, after a decade of Fine Gael mismanagement of our health services. That is the reality and we need to be clear. A decade of underinvestment and mismanagement has left the State more vulnerable to the virus. That is one of the reasons such stringent public health measures have been required, which in turn have damaged the economy and cost jobs.

Third, the Government and the Tánaiste's Department have been slow to support businesses and jobs. Bhí an Rialtas ró-mhall ag cuidiú le comhlachtaí agus ní raibh na tacaíochtaí a cuireadh ar fáil do chomhlachtaí láidir go leor. Chuir sé seo leis an méid ard daoine a chaill a bpoist le cúpla mí anuas. Despite a sharp reduction in income, non-payroll costs for SMEs have remained the same. With the accumulation of rents, utilities, debt repayments and insurance to pay, these businesses are building up unsustainable debts. Research published by the ESRI just yesterday estimated that SMEs suffered a revenue shortfall of between €6 billion and €10 billion from March to June this year. By the end of this year, the ESRI estimates that these firms will suffer a revenue shortfall of between €8 billion and €15 billion. The question is how has the Tánaiste's Government performed in supporting the SME sector which, crucially, employs over 1 million workers. In this regard, what matters is not announcements or press releases but the release of funding. SMEs will not survive on press releases but on real financial support.

The credit guarantee is a case in point. On 7 September, the Government finally opened its €2 billion credit guarantee scheme. This is better late than never, no doubt, but it comes five months after similar schemes were opened in other jurisdictions such as Germany, Britain and France. As of Friday, not a cent of this scheme has been lent out by participating banks. There were changes made to the scheme which I welcomed, for example the removal of the portfolio gap which will increase the level of guarantee and facilitate lending to SMEs. I proposed this very change to the Minister back in May. It was rejected then but I welcome the fact that Sinn Féin policy has now been adopted by the Government on this issue. It comes five months later than similar schemes in other advanced economies and no doubt this delay has cost jobs and is threatening the viability of businesses. In terms of grant support, again, the Government has moved too slow. By last Friday, €299 million had been released to businesses across the two restart grant schemes with only 50% of the overall funding available dispersed and 30% of applications at this late stage in September still awaiting approval. By the end of March, five months ago, grants of £10,000 or £25,000 depending on the size of the company, with a total value of £300 million, had been provided to SMEs in the North, providing rapid liquidity to

businesses that needed it and jobs that depended on it. In Germany it took them 24 hours to get the money into the accounts of businesses in payments of €25,000, yet this Government has delayed and delayed. The reality is that this is costing jobs.

I welcome other measures announced in the July stimulus such as the commercial rates waiver and a number of tax measures which will offer real relief to businesses, such as the warehousing of tax liabilities and income tax loss relief for the self-employed. However, the Government's stay and spend initiative is badly designed and unfairly distributed. It took a good idea that we presented to it and butchered it. As the tax strategy papers published on Monday show, 30% of earners will not be eligible for this scheme. Nearly 1 million taxpayer units are not eligible for it. Furthermore, with any claims made in 2021 not being refunded by Revenue until 2022 it is really questionable whether this initiative will drive the level of spending required in this sector. It would have been of more benefit to small businesses in the hospitality sector if the Government had adopted our position of reducing VAT from 13.5% to 9%, providing them with real flexibility to pass on this reduction to their customers or to improve their balance sheets. I urge the Tánaiste and the Government to look at this issue again and consider it in the budget.

On the employment wage subsidy scheme, the temporary wage subsidy scheme was a crucial policy measure that Sinn Féin supported having submitted our own proposals to the Minister back on 23 March, before any announcement was made. We worked constructively to address the deficiencies in that scheme, successfully arguing for an increase in the subsidy for the lower paid and also the inclusion of women returning from maternity leave. By the end of August, the scheme provided €2.8 billion, supporting 663 employers and over 65,000 employers. As of 1 September, this scheme is now replaced with a new scheme which is going to run until the end of March. I have serious concerns about the design of the employment wage subsidy scheme. I have raised them in the Dáil and with the Minister for Finance. It provides no support whatsoever for an employee who earns less than €151.50 per week. That locks out 153,000 workers across the economy. Given that it is the low-paid workers who have been most affected and most likely to lose their jobs, it is a policy choice by Fine Gael that I see no sense in. I cannot understand it. The new scheme also cuts the level of wage support for workers by as much as 50%. There are things that can be done to improve the flaws in this, and we have given solutions.

The Tánaiste and his Government need to do better in terms of protecting jobs. We can look to the pandemic and we know it has caused huge disruption, some of which is outside of our control, but in no way should the State have twice the level of unemployment as that across the EU. It is simply unacceptable. The reasons for this must be looked at in the Tánaiste's own Department, and in the Government's slow, lethargic and not big enough response to supporting workers and small and medium enterprises.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** Yesterday's announcement will have offered very little in the way of comfort or clarity for those working in the tourism and hospitality industry. Those representing the sector had hoped to see additional sector-specific support, but unfortunately it was not forthcoming. The tourism season is now over and hundreds of thousands of people who work in the sector are staring into the abyss. The Irish Hotels Federation has said that 100,000 people working in tourism have already lost their jobs and another 100,000 jobs are now at risk.

The tax rebate solution provided by the Government is woefully inadequate to deal with this situation. We have told the Government this umpteen times. The rebate is not due to come

out until October, a time when most people cannot or will not go on holiday. It offers a limited rebate next year for those who can afford to go on holiday. Worst of all, the scheme excludes more than 700,000 people who are on low pay, those who are carers, the vast majority of pensioners, and people who have lost their work or their job due to the pandemic. All of these people are excluded. It is a shambles, but a cleverly drafted shambles to exclude the maximum number of people.

Sinn Féin put forward a plan that would have given vouchers during the summer, when families were in a position to take a holiday. Our plan would have seen each adult receive a voucher worth €200 and every child in the State being entitled to a voucher worth €100. Schemes of this type are in place in other jurisdictions. It would have put money directly into the pockets of every adult and child in the country, regardless of their tax or socioeconomic status, which would then have been spent in the Irish domestic tourism and hospitality sector. Instead we have a €105 tax rebate for the very small cohort who are eligible and which is available for holidays from October and in November.

Another sector brought to its knees by the pandemic is the entertainment sector. This comprises 35,000 full-time and part-time highly skilled workers, who have been almost entirely out of work since 12 March. The industry has been completely shut down by the Government due to the pandemic. There are no job opportunities for these workers and there is, literally, no end in sight for them. The sector needs specific and long-term support if workers and their families are to survive the next few months. Now is not the time to make cuts to Covid-19 payments.

Some months ago Sinn Féin called for the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and the temporary wage subsidy scheme to be extended to the end of the year and at the original rates for all the sectors still shut out of work due to the pandemic. We need specific grant funding for 2021 for this industry or until such time that it can reopen and resume work to make sure the people in it are in a position to do so when the industry is reopened. Sinn Féin put forward three substantial grant schemes of between €12,000 and €25,000 for SMEs and microbusinesses, as well as sole trader grants of €5,000, similar to what was done in the North and in other European Union countries. The €5 million live performance support scheme is welcome but it is clearly too little, too late. The allocation of €1 million for the music industry is a drop in the ocean. Again, a whole swathe of musicians are excluded because only professional musicians will qualify. Sinn Féin also brought forward solutions this morning for the taxi industry and practical measures that would help the taxi drivers to make a sustainable living in the next few months. I have only had a few minutes to speak this evening but one would need a few hours to go through the whole list of sectors the Government has let down.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** We had a debate earlier on workers' rights. I know the Tánaiste will have an interest in what was said and in the nature of the economy we are trying to grapple with, even since before Covid arrived, which is a low-pay economy. The Tánaiste spoke about this in his remarks also. We have spoken before about the disproportionate number of young people and migrant workers who are on low pay and the huge numbers of young people in insecure work.

I will give context to the debate and what we are facing. This is not a debate on building an economy after Covid. We are very much in the thick of this. Professor Philip Nolan has stated that having seen the statistics tonight, he is more concerned than he has been at any stage of the pandemic since late April.

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Without trying to rehash a debate about yesterday, I put it to the Tánaiste that there is a level of confusion about what is happening in Dublin. Perhaps the Tánaiste will confirm to the House the situation with household restrictions. Only two households, regardless of their size, and a limit of six people can meet and socialise together. I understand that this also means bars and restaurants but I am not sure if this has been communicated, or if it is as well known throughout Dublin that restrictions are that no more than six people from two households can socialise. People cannot, therefore, socialise in a bar or in a restaurant beyond two households either. I am not sure if this has been clearly communicated. The Tánaiste might clarify this in his concluding remarks. This would have an economic impact on the city. It would have an impact on those who are booking tables and hoping to sell their wares in bars and restaurants.

The point is well made for having a sector-by-sector response. I appreciate the efforts the Government has made. I am aware that it is difficult and that the Government has tried to keep as many people as possible on the standard of living they had been used to. The Tánaiste will appreciate that it can be frustrating for sectors that are not getting the same amount of media attention when they hear certain lobby groups in certain industries getting a huge amount of airtime. Other sectors may not be getting as much attention, which is frustrating.

Some industries are clinging on but others may not survive as a total industry. I will refer to two, one of which is the travel agent industry. My office met with representatives of the travel agencies yesterday. The industry supports 3,500 workers. The industry has been through a lot, as one might imagine, such as ash clouds, wars and 9/11. The industry has survived but it cannot just close its doors and then hope to reopen after a period of time. The agencies must try to recoup refunds for people they deal with, and they provide a particular service because there is a callback or a guarantee that is a friendly Irish voice for those who depend on travel agents. The industry has told me that if specific sectoral supports are not put in place now, there will not be an Irish travel agent industry after Covid. It could be run from abroad or from the UK. We need to be mindful of this when formulating responses to Covid and when formulating budgets. How do we decide sector by sector and how do we formulate responses to protect jobs? The Tánaiste will know that it is much easier to protect or maintain a job than to create one. The travel agent representatives have some very practical suggestions as to how this might be done and I wanted to flag this with the Tánaiste.

While the travel agents industry represents 3,500 jobs, another group that makes the case for 35,000 jobs is the live events industry.

I have to say this is absolutely remarkable. I would not walk out in the middle of a Deputy's contribution in this Chamber. I have stayed to the end when other Deputies were making their contributions and then I have left. The previous contribution I made in this House was on the matter of workers' rights and we did not have a senior Minister for the debate. I did not make that point again when the Tánaiste was here. I thought I had made my point on that and that I would leave it. He sat there, listened to half of my contribution and then he left. I find that incredibly disrespectful to what we are trying to achieve here. Honestly, I walked into the House thinking that the time for party political point scoring was over. I thought let us have some practical solutions here and let us talk about the travel agents I talked to yesterday and about the live events industry that supports 35,000 jobs but in the middle of my contribution the Tánaiste decides to walk out. He could not wait, literally, for five minutes. Is there any point in me continuing my contribution?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The point is made Deputy.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** My point is made but I want it to be recorded. The Minister of State, with respect, is here and he made a contribution which was well put together and was appreciated, but the Government cannot go on the airwaves and in the media and suggest that the Opposition is not being constructive, that the Opposition is part of the problem or that the Opposition is trying to sow confusion when in the middle of a contribution by the Opposition the Tánaiste decides to leave. He left halfway through it.

We are all in this together. We are all doing our best. We are all trying to show leadership in our communities and to say to the people we represent that we can get through this, that we will get through this, that there will come a day when we can hug our grandparents again, meet our friends again, walk to the shop again, not have to wear a mask again, go to a football match again and that there will come a time when we do not have to be worried about this virus again. That day will come and we will celebrate that day. Hopefully, when that day does come we will have an economy and a country of which we can be proud. So many things have been ripped open and exposed by this virus, including the inequality, the housing problems, the issues of low pay that I mentioned already, with 23% of Irish workers on low pay - I am sick of saying it - and large numbers of young people in insecure work. All of these issues have been ripped open, including the issues in education with overcrowded classrooms but we can work together on these things. We can find solutions together on these issues. We can actually prove to the people of this country that when it comes down to it, Irish politicians are better than what is happening in the UK or the US right now. We are a collective that, when it comes down to it, has the Irish nation at its heart. We should be able to say, on examining the Irish nation, how it is formulated, the economy, society and all of the rest of it, that when we went through a pandemic, we came out the other side of it and we actually decided to repair what was wrong - the disadvantage, the housing, the inequality, the way that our systems and our Parliament are formulated. We can work on a huge amount of that together. I have spoken to the Minister with responsibility for higher education, Deputy Harris, about his belief in doing something about adult literacy. I have spoken to the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Foley, about her belief in doing something on free schoolbooks. We have spoken across this Chamber about things we can achieve together and we actually have achieved an awful lot together on a cross-party basis. That is what the people of this country want. They want to see us working together.

It is perfectly legitimate for the Opposition if it sees something that is wrong or inherently contradictory in a presentation by the Government to point it out. Two minutes ago, before the Tánaiste walked out, I said that there seems to be some confusion about the number of people who can meet together in their own family home compared to in a pub or a restaurant. I raised a legitimate point and sought clarity because we are all getting phone calls from our constituents who are asking what they can and cannot do in the context of the regulations. Can I leave the county or not? Is the Government serious about not leaving the county or is it only half serious? To go back to my earlier point, midway through my contribution, the Tánaiste decided to get up and leave in some kind of mock protest. I wonder if there is any point in me engaging with the Tánaiste on this level because he seems to find it tedious when people decide to raise such issues with him.

I have already referred to the live events industry which employs 35,000 workers. It is at a very serious point. It absolutely accepts why the restrictions were introduced and the rationale behind the Government's decisions. It has suggested that the Government reinstates a support payment of €410, the previous level of the temporary wage subsidy scheme and €350, the previous level of the pandemic unemployment payment which is vital for the skilled workforce in

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the sector until it fully recovers. The sector is unique in that it is almost entirely closed under Government mandate, with no opportunity to trade. This is the real issue here. This is not about it trying to re-establish a relationship with its consumer base; it is mandated by the Government not to operate. A sector by sector, strategic investigation by the Government as to how we can recover certain elements of the economy would be beneficial to us all. Issues concerning workers' rights, low pay and representation rights for workers were dealt with in the previous debate this evening, so I will leave it there for now.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I am sharing time with Deputies Carey and Bruton. It is good to see the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, in the Chamber taking questions. I congratulate him on his new portfolio.

The past number of months have been extremely difficult for everyone in this country but there are certain industries and sectors that have been disproportionately hit. At the moment there are 5,809 people on the live register in County Clare and a further 12,000 people in receipt of Covid income supports. The live register figures are alarmingly higher than the figures for this time last year, with in the region of 1,200 additional people unemployed in our county. That is a real testament to the economic ravages of Covid-19.

I would like to raise a number of pertinent topical issues in the Chamber this evening. Last year the High Court ordered that Avara Pharmaceutical Services in Shannon be wound down after it emerged that it had annual losses in the region of €9.5 million and was insolvent. The plant when fully operational employed 115 people but many of these have been made redundant over the past few months and now only a skeletal staff remains on site. Avara was once owned by UCB Pharma SA, a French company. As part of its corporate social responsibility, that company has offered to make a redundancy payment to its former employees on top of the payment being offered by Avara. This is unprecedented. I looked but could not find any examples of former company owners wanting to pay more out of a sense of social responsibility. The offer is being examined by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation but has been delayed. A spurt is needed so that those who are losing jobs and incomes can get the money owed to them. The IDA is engaged in talks to find a buyer for the Avara site and I would like to hear how those talks are progressing. I believe a Swiss company was interested at one point and I would love to hear where that is going because it has the potential to breathe new certainty and confidence into the Shannon area.

The events and live entertainment industry has been heavily lobbying all Deputies in recent days. Nationally this sector employs 35,000 people and includes theatres, clubs, festivals, musicians, comedians and many other performers and people involved in the cultural sector. It is worth €3.5 billion annually to the economy. On the basis that arts and entertainment may not return to normal operations for many months to come, I hope the Government will consider various supports to help workers and the industry overall to be resilient and to financially survive the current crisis.

Earlier this week I received some positive clarification from my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, concerning a fund of €2.6 million that his Department has made available to keep key Shannon Heritage sites in the mid-west open over the autumn and winter months. I found out that this money will be ring-fenced for Bunratty Castle and Folk Park and King John's Castle and will not be spent, as many had feared, on sites that the group also owns in Dublin. Job losses at Shannon Heritage were averted by this injection of capital but it is important when we get to the end of 2020 that the Government

looks at ways of priming that unit with more money so that job losses are avoided and the sites remain open in the new year.

The aviation task force does not fall under the Minister of State's brief but it is essential to jobs in the mid-west. Many elements have been adopted and enacted, and I was very pleased to see that due to the mid-term plan the Government announced yesterday, there is a real prospect of aeroplanes returning to the skies and people flying once more.

There is one key element, which is priming the airports and the sector with money. That has not happened yet and it has to happen to ensure they do not become insolvent. Last week, employees directly employed at the airport by Shannon Group had to take a 20% pay cut without a ballot or without what I would consider normal procedures being followed, and the matter is in dispute. I want to mention that in the Chamber because it was a real hammer blow to people who have worked in the airport for a long time, although it is not something the Government can intervene in when the dispute is ongoing. We certainly need a sector primed with money.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I want to speak today about three sectors that have been badly affected by this pandemic and the need for us to make plans to ensure their recovery. The three sectors are: aviation, including Shannon Airport and the related industries associated with the mid-west; the tourism sector, not only in Clare but right along the Wild Atlantic Way; and the entertainment and hospitality industry.

Shannon Airport is the key driver of the economy in the mid-west region. I am aware the Government is formulating an assistance package for the airlines. This package must ensure that strategic routes are maintained and that vital connectivity to Heathrow and to North America is retained.

In terms of jobs, Aer Lingus has more than 150 people working at that base and the airport itself has 230 direct employees. Outside of that, there are 80 different aviation companies in and around Shannon and many more businesses have chosen the Shannon region for its connectivity and airport facilities. In addition, more than 10,000 people work in the Shannon industrial zone and a multitude of industries and companies are based in and around Shannon Airport. These companies depend on connectivity and the vital links to all corners of the globe. Some 40% of foreign direct investment companies in Ireland are based in the Shannon region. We need to examine the options available for pre-departure and arrival testing, including temperature testing, to be incorporated in our travel plans, especially for the transatlantic routes. The essential element of Shannon's recovery is connectivity, that is, connectivity with the vital links to Heathrow, to Boston and to New York.

Aer Lingus has invested in six new planes which meet tighter environmental controls. These aircraft can play a vital role in Shannon's recovery. Any assistance package provided by the Government must guarantee that at least two of these are based in Shannon as part of a transatlantic hub, while also servicing Heathrow.

In view of the very limited time available to us today, I ask that the Minister of State would arrange a suitable time for statements on aviation policy and a debate on these vital issues in the coming weeks.

The tourism sector has seen a drastic reduction in the income of both business and employees in County Clare. Prior to Covid-19, tourism across County Clare supported 12,000 jobs and generated €266 million in revenues annually for the local economy. The local tourism economy

is in deep crisis, with tourism revenues down €200 million in Clare alone this year, and 8,800 tourism jobs are now at risk. Tourism businesses are facing a stark choice. They are calling for a new financial package, including bank loans and guarantees, a reduction in the VAT rate to 9% and investment in marketing and tourism budgets.

As part of the recovery strategy from the last recession, the last Government devised ideas such as the Wild Atlantic Way and the Gathering, and these strategies dramatically grew both tourism numbers and income right along the entire western coast. Now is the time to devise new ideas and I ask the Minister of State to organise a new ideas forum for the recovery of the tourism industry. In 2022, Ireland will have been an independent State for 100 years. We could use this as a marketing strategy to celebrate our centenary and invite people from the four corners of the globe to come to Ireland. Let us remember both the United States and the Australian bicentenary celebrations some years ago. We could start by inviting the President of the United States to celebrate St. Patrick's Day in Ireland, after landing into Shannon Airport, of course.

The curtains have come down on the entertainment and gig economy for musicians, artists and sound, light and visual technicians. This sector has been virtually locked down since the middle of March and I ask the Minister of State to make a special case to keep this industry going at this time.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I held the post of jobs Minister back in 2011 and, to be fair, I think some of the characterisation of the recovery that we forged in those years that has been presented by the Opposition does not ring true with me. We built a stronger economy, a fairer economy, with a lot of really strong employment and diversified sectors, and that has to be reflected. However, I absolutely agree that the design and implementation of the next national economic plan is going to be the most critical challenge we face. We are facing a perfect storm with the decline of consumer confidence, with returns in most of our sectors dramatically down in terms of profitability, with acceleration of change distorting and putting pressure on sectors, and, of course, with the prospect of disruptive impact on our key exporting sectors.

What Ireland needs to do in this plan is not to try to recreate the economy we had last year; instead, we have to break new ground to get ahead of the trends which are reshaping our society. The big challenge in this economic plan is to show our capacity to do that and it will require bold investment measures from the Government. The crucial thing is not how much we borrow, it is what we use that money for. We have to make the right choices. If we aspire to something better than the developer-led growth which has misshaped our society in recent years, we have to put in place the tools that can deliver better, and that represents a big challenge to us. The first thing we need to do is increase the level of investment. The €9 billion that has been set aside for next year will not be enough, and it will not be enough in the years beyond that. However, we must also take steps to speed up some of the critical investments in infrastructure that need to happen very quickly. We have real problems in regard to regulatory approval and inertia in our system of getting necessary investments done. We need to adopt design, build and finance approaches, which was a part of how we designed the national broadband plan, so we can get more ambitious programmes off the ground and not just wait for the traditional ways of building. We need to be really ambitious in strategic areas of investment, be it in broadband, in digital, in renewable energy and so on, as these are going to be crucial for us.

I share the view of the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, that we have to look at our sectors in a more creative way. I agree with him that examinership is not the way to go and that we need to design much simpler and easier ways for people who are in genuine difficulties to move

forward. We also need to find a way of mobilising banks, insurance companies and higher education institutions to support the structural change we will have to see in many sectors. They have tended to take a hands-off view but they have to be engaged in this because it will affect the future of their business if we do not make the right decisions.

We need to protect our success in many parts of the digital economy, in biopharma and in the globalised economy. That means addressing some of the imbalances we have seen in that globalised economy because the strength of those sectors will depend on the quality of regulation, and there is a real opportunity for Ireland to lead in quality regulation in many of these sectors.

We also have to recognise the hugely painful adjustment that is going to fall on individuals in our society and on families. That is why this is the time, as we build a national economic plan, to recognise that we need the wider concept of a new social contract, so we can recognise that the economic change has to be accompanied by social change. If we want a sustainable, fair society, we need a strong economy, but if we want a strong economy, we also need to ensure a sustainable, fair society. This is the opportunity to see those two drivers of progress in our society go in harness together.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** The last six months have been extremely difficult for many businesses. Business owners and employees recognise that they had a part to play in flattening the curve, and supports were put in place at that time. As the restrictions were lifted some businesses were in a position to reopen, but in many cases they still need supports. Others are still unable to open and many people are still out of work with no prospect of returning any time soon.

One sector that has little prospect of reopening soon is the entertainment and hospitality sector. Hundreds of theatres, venues, clubs, festivals and events of all sizes have been silent since March. The entertainment industry employs more than 35,000 people, between full-time and part-time workers. The vast majority of these people have had no employment since 12 March. It was the first industry to shut and is likely to be the last one to reopen fully. The events sector alone directly contributes over €3.5 billion to the national economy. It is estimated that for every €1 spent on a ticket for an event an additional €6 is spent in the wider tourism economy. Until recently, the sector has been ignored and received virtually no Government aid. The workers and their dependants desperately require serious Government support to survive. Workers at all levels in this sector have no prospects of earning a living in the foreseeable future. The supports must be appropriate to address the dire financial situation facing almost every person and business in this sector.

We have discussed several times in the House how important good mental health is for everyone and how seriously it is being impacted by the Covid crisis. Music and entertainment have an important role in contributing to good mental health. However, it is the people in this sector, who normally bring such joy to others, who are suffering now. At a minimum, they require the immediate reinstatement of the wage subsidy scheme or the pandemic unemployment payment at the full rate per week until the sector is allowed to return to work, because it is fully closed by the Government under public health advice at present.

Many SMEs are suffering but one example is the dry cleaning and laundry business. That business is heavily linked to both the hospitality and tourism sectors. It should, therefore, receive the same benefits as those sectors, especially considering that most cleaners report that

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60% to 80% of their work comes from those sectors. These businesses remained open during the lockdown, but many of the businesses they rely on for work were closed. Cancelled functions, such as weddings, graduations and so forth, have impacted the industry. Working from home has had an impact on it. Many in the industry are reporting a decrease in footfall from walk-in customers. They have also lost sales from corporate bodies who get uniforms and so forth cleaned. This is a sector that requires some support so I ask the Minister to consider formally allying this industry with the hospitality and tourism sectors. Any rescue packages given to the latter should also be given to this industry.

Many indigenous SMEs depend on trade fairs and exhibitions for product testing and future sales. For some businesses, these events are the only places they get to meet their customers face to face. I have been assured that trade fairs and exhibitions can recommence in a safe and responsible manner. They have informed me they have full contact details for all attendees and they have large venues with multiple exit or entrance points. They are not social events so the attendees can be staggered and allocated time slots. In addition, there are specific health and safety protocols drawn up by the Irish Exhibition Organisers Association for all event organisers to put into effect. They include temperature testing and isolation rooms. These protocols have already been the subject of detailed consultation with the Health and Safety Authority, HSA. The majority of such events in the rest of Europe are back in operation or have been given a commencement date by their respective governments for when operation can commence. Through this network the event organisers in Ireland are learning of the many successful approaches to running safe and responsible events. I ask the Minister to consider that as well.

Covid-19 means businesses are operating under uncertainty and with considerable economic challenges. The SME and microenterprise businesses are facing disastrous consequences as we head into winter. The SME sector employs 63% of people working in Ireland and it will have a catastrophic 2020. It needs a clear strategy outlined by the Government so businesses will know what will occur should restrictions be reimposed, and we know that is possible for many businesses as we approach winter. There is no room for ambiguity. They need to know what the right decisions should be, what they can be certain of and that they can trust in what the Government's response will be.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I am spokesperson on a variety of issues for my party, such as education, social protection and the arts. This is the first occasion on which I have seen a Minister being present for opening statements and then leaving the Chamber before the full Opposition has had a chance to engage. It debases parliamentary democracy. We have to be better than that and hold ourselves to a higher standard.

I will begin by highlighting some of the slogans that we used to convince ourselves that we were on the right track. Some of them were appropriate. When the pandemic began the slogan we used was: "We are all in this together". Some of the measures that were initiated suggested that this was the case. We introduced a pandemic unemployment payment of €350 per week. It is not an extraordinary amount, but it was enough to afford dignity to those who needed it and to ensure they could live their lives without experiencing or facing the anxiety of poverty. The temporary wage subsidy scheme was highly appropriate and reflective of the lessons we learned from the crash in 2008. It meant that workers could maintain a connection with their employment. It was a worthy time in dealing with the pandemic.

However, gradually darker clouds have set in and, suddenly, we are no longer all in this together. There are new slogans now. We are now being told that we must learn to live with

the virus. Learning to live with the virus seems to be a way of acknowledging that somehow we have let go of it a little and we must live with it. Some of the workers and companies I have been talking to in the last ten days have said that while we are telling them to live with the virus, some of the measures and the fact that we are ignoring their calls suggest that we want them to live with the virus while experiencing anxiety and removing their wages and social protections. It is harsh, discriminatory and unfair. It means that some of the indigenous industries that we spent a long time building up over the last ten years are precariously placed.

I wish to give a voice to some of those industries and the different groups with whom I have had conversations over the last ten days. I will refer to two indigenous industries that are essential to our re-emergence from the Covid-19 pandemic. In referring to them I am mindful of a saying on a wall down the road in Westmoreland Street: “There is a good time coming. Be it ever so far away”. When that good time comes, we will be relying on the events industry. That will be when we can go to concerts again and when we can dance and laugh with our friends. When that happens, it will not just be the person on the stage who we paid the ticket to see who will be the important factor in ensuring everything comes together, but the thousands of events industry workers. There are 35,000 people who make their living as freelance technicians, work in promotions, do the stage design and ensure that when a person gets on a stage to perform the sound is of a quality that everybody can hear. That industry is on its knees at present. It is struggling.

We made massive strides to ensure we protected our artistic community through a €20 million grant to the Arts Council fund. However, the arts industry could not survive without the people who were excluded from that fund. This has been raised several times tonight and since the industry first made its presentation to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response in July, but nothing has happened. Eventually, in a post-pandemic world, if such a thing will exist, and I believe it will, we are going to need that industry. If it is to survive and be sustained, we must provide it with proper State support so its workers can afford to feed themselves, pay their bills and not be at risk of losing their homes. That is not their experience at present.

The other group that will be vital to how we live our lives when we emerge from this pandemic is the travel agents. Both industries have done a good job of talking to their public representatives because all of us are raising this tonight. However, let us not raise it in a way whereby once we say it in the Dáil it must be over with. It is frustrating that the senior Minister is not present to acknowledge the fact that when we raise these matters, we would like some action to result from it. There are 3,500 travel agents in this country and they are worth approximately €1.2 billion in turnover to our economy. That is money on which they pay tax. It comes back to us and we get to reinvest it. It is vital, but the industry has lost 90% to 95% of its income since the pandemic. That is probably more than any other industry. The travel agents are not asking to reopen or saying that they want to send people all over the world. They are saying that when we ask them to put their industry on hold, we should provide them with the appropriate safety net in terms of income and security that they can pay their rent and bills.

That way, when we can eventually aspire to go on holiday again, we can make a booking with the Irish industry that has built itself up, rather than go to one of the international companies with which the Irish ones were already competing before the pandemic.

We cannot talk about travel agents without talking about other industries that are under threat. In the last few days I had the opportunity of meeting people from the Irish Aviation

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Authority, including workers such as baggage handlers and others who ensure we are all safe and looked after when we go to the airport. When they heard the slogan “We are all in this together”, those workers responded by accepting a 20% cut to their wages and taking a four-day week. It was unfair that they had to do that but they stepped up because they were told that we were all in this together. That was phase 1 of that particular measure in the Irish Aviation Authority. As part of phase 2, those workers are now being told that their terms and conditions are being altered and that they will lose particular protections that they have always had, under the guise of the company having to make changes because of Covid-19. Many people are being forced out of that industry and if we lose it, it will be gone forever. Those workers have built up a wealth of experience and they need protections. In cases like that of Debenhams and others, industries are taking advantage of the pandemic and workers’ hard-fought terms and conditions are being altered under the auspices of the pandemic. The Irish Aviation Authority is a semi-State body and the people involved in it are just using the pandemic as a way of undermining their workers. It is absolutely wrong. We are seeing it in Debenhams and elsewhere too.

I refer to living with the pandemic. St. Monica’s nursing home is in my constituency and St. Mary’s nursing home is just up the road on the south side. Workers who have built up those care homes and built relationships with elderly people in their time of need have now been told that they have been made redundant and they do not have any access to appropriate measures. The Sisters of Charity, if one can believe that name, has washed its hands of them and said it cannot pay them. This industry is really important. It provides care to our older people when they are most vulnerable. Those workers are gone and it seems we have just let them go. That is totally inappropriate.

We could sit here all night and talk about the industries that are being impacted, such as the taxi industry. These are statements on protecting jobs. Has a bigger statement been made than the taxi drivers taking to the street yesterday in their thousands and demonstrating what would happen if they removed their labour? Again, to protect them, they need income support. We have asked them to put their livelihoods on hold in many ways. A percentage of their income has been drastically cut. They have lost the tech industries and the wet pubs, from which they ferry people around. All they are asking for is an appropriate payment, until such a time as they can recommence their labour and once again step in for the entirely unsatisfactory standard of public transport in this city. Yet, they are being ignored. I guarantee they will not be ignored for too long. They are working with my colleague across the Chamber. They will be back out on the streets and it is highly appropriate that we look after them.

We cannot separate protecting workers, or what the Taoiseach referred to earlier as a job providing “a sense of self-worth and well-being”, from the societal provisions we need to offer our workers. We were all elected in February and the concerns at that time were access to housing and childcare and an inability to pay for healthcare. These same workers went out and voted for change back in February. Many of them were told that we were living in an Ireland of full employment and that that was great. If the only ambition of our Government and Parliament is to recalibrate back to January 2020 and look for an Ireland of full employment, then we are failing and missing an opportunity, because that Ireland of full employment was backed up by 160,000 workers living in poverty or precarious housing conditions. Let us be ambitious for our workers and acknowledge and protect those who have been left behind, of whom there are thousands. We rely on the workers who built indigenous industries that are the envy of the world in certain sectors. Let us be entirely ambitious for them and no longer lie or use the figure of full employment when those people are suffering.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** We are engaging in an unprecedented level of State intervention to combat the Covid-19 crisis. We should ensure this money is invested smartly and in a manner that future-proofs our country, not only for living with Covid-19 today but also for living in a post-Covid world. It has been a difficult time for many in this country and the virus has exposed many of the structural problems across our economy. I believe strongly we have an opportunity, as President Ursula von der Leyen stated today in her state of the Union address, to turn this “fragility towards a new vitality”. We must pursue a new model of stakeholder engagement and invest smartly in the future development of our country. We need to ensure regional balance is at the centre of this new social contract. Protecting and building indigenous industries and putting sufficient capital infrastructure in place is vital to ensuring the ecosystems of local economies are sustainable and self-sufficient. I recognise the good work the Government has done in ensuring the employee-employer relationship was maintained through the wage subsidy scheme. Grants were also given to SMEs to get them through this crisis. However, we must recognise that the pandemic has fundamentally changed the way some sectors in our economy operate. There has not been enough engagement with these groups in creating a roadmap to adapt to this new normal.

I have seen at first hand the damage this pandemic has done to industries such as the aviation sector. I spoke in the Chamber last week about the need for clarity on international travel. I also met representatives of Cork Airport, the managing director of the airport and the CEO of Ryanair, along with Deputies Pádraig O’Sullivan and Aindrias Moynihan. The Government announced that we will be following the European traffic light system for travel, which is coming into place next month, and updating our current green list. However, there is a serious need for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation to work with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to implement the report of the task force on aviation recovery, which clearly states that State intervention within the aviation sector is required. The wage subsidy schemes are redundant if the industry is structurally broken. The estimated GDP contribution of air transport to Ireland is €8.9 billion and the aviation sector supports 140,000 jobs. We saw what that looked like at our visit to the airport. I am extremely concerned about this issue and would like to see more engagement from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. Those attending the meeting asked for that engagement and I wish to feed that back to Dáil Éireann and the Minister.

It is not only those in the financial sector and the IFSC who benefit from the aviation industry. I am talking about the pilots at Aer Lingus and Ryanair, the cabin crew, the baggage handlers and the airport staff. Many members of Aer Lingus cabin crew who are very unhappy with their treatment by Aer Lingus have been in touch with our office. I hope that airline will significantly step up its dialogue with its staff. We must also consider the countless spin-offs of employment that occur as a consequence of the well-functioning aviation industry in this country.

Reform of the national development plan, NDP, is also required to ensure this country is match fit to support businesses. In the lead-up to the budget in October we must support projects that have a net positive return for the economy. Strategic capital investment is required in a reformed national development plan to ensure strong regional growth across the country. Without a solid infrastructure base, no jobs can be supported. That is a simple fact. Over the last week, I have received news of two major school complexes in my constituency, in Carrigtwohill and Mallow, pressing ahead with tendering. These State-led projects are a prime example of ways we can reboot our economy in constituencies such as Cork East, which I represent. I am

also very excited about the review of the national development plan and the opportunity for the Government to review some of the areas that had been left out of the previous plan, which was drawn up in 2014. For example, I had a strong dialogue with the Taoiseach on the need for projects such as the upgrade of the N25, which would benefit people living in parts of east Cork like Midleton and Youghal, to be included in that plan. I would like to see greater State expenditure on transport and infrastructure to ensure the skilled labourers who have returned to Ireland and those who are out of work have an opportunity to go back into employment. There is no doubt we will need massive Government support to build our way out of this recession and that should be done through building projects. I thank the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, for his engagement. I am aware there will be some degree of consultation with Deputies around the review of the NDP and that will be exceptionally important to ensure all of us get a chance to have some input into that process.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** As we saw in the July stimulus package, this new Government is investing in key projects and supporting workers and businesses at an unprecedented level at an unprecedented time. The massive scale of the response underlines our commitment to protecting jobs and communities. With the July stimulus package, the State is spending approximately €87 billion in 2020. There is one category of worker, however, which has been adversely affected by this pandemic and which urgently needs further supports from the Government. That category is the self-employed. Every day they are often the first people up in the morning or the last to head to bed. They run their businesses from their vans or mobile phones and they were hot-desking in their kitchens long before the rest of us. They take home all the worries of that business on their shoulders, with few assets, resources, supports or working capital, yet they are the backbone of many of our local economies.

The Government rightly supports PAYE workers to the tune of €203 per week per employee in businesses that have seen more than a 30% reduction in their turnover, and that support will continue until next April. As one business put it to me, it just would not be open without the payment. A self-employed person, however, in arts, tourism, hospitality or other sectors impacted by Covid-19 receives no such income support. Such people are asked to leave the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and to go into a market that has often been reduced not by 30% but by much more. We are treating two categories of worker differently and should address that. We are supporting PAYE employees significantly but are not doing the same for the self-employed.

To take taxi drivers as one example, they are forced to come off the PUP to claim the Government restart grant of €1,000. They then receive no further State support and rely on a market that simply does not exist at the moment. I spoke to one taxi driver on the rank in Finglas this morning who said his business was down 60% today alone. There are other sector-specific measures that we could take to help taxi drivers, such as extending the nine-year rule, a temporary pause on new entrants, or providing a restart grant before they come off the PUP. Ultimately, however, some step-down payment that provides a basic income is the most important step we can take to helping them and many other self-employed people.

One such solution could be a special Covid back-to-work enterprise allowance, or a pandemic payment like that which is given to professional artists on jobseeker's allowance, or any other step-down alternative. Employers are encouraged to keep employees on their books, supported by the employment wage subsidy scheme, but no such support exists for those who are self-employed. One of the criteria of the wage subsidy scheme is that the employer is operating at 70% of its turnover, and I firmly believe that self-employed people should be given

State support at the same level. We need to give these people a helping hand. We cannot load the tools into their vans for them or unpack a delivery that arrives, but we can put our hand on their shoulder and say we have their back. This is a matter the Government urgently needs to address.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** We are all aware that Covid-19 has thrown up some real challenges for our nation, especially in respect of health, but the massive strain on jobs and business too has been thrown to the fore. The ways in which people have engaged with their week's work has for some become better but for others worse. Workers have found themselves working from home, an idea their employers would have said was a non-runner just 12 months ago. On the opposite side of the scale, hundreds of thousands of people have been laid off, many of whom have never been on a social welfare payment before, and have been plunged into unemployment, all of a sudden on reduced incomes, which obviously has led to struggles to pay mortgages, keep food on the table and pay all the other household bills owed, as well as the stress of trying to adjust and manage it all.

Covid-19 has offered many changes to how we operate in Ireland, both in the short and the long terms. Working from home for some may very well be a long-term arrangement, given that we have heard from some that workplaces have told their staff they will not be back on site before July 2021. While some will welcome this and are happy to work from home as it may allow for more flexibility with childcare and other family duties, it is imperative that we legislate for more security and rights when working from home. We have seen cases where employees are working much later hours from home, with some employers expecting the later working time to surpass their usual working day, something that would not be accepted if they were in an office environment. The phrase "out of sight, out of mind" comes to mind and these circumstances are not acceptable.

On many occasions over the summer, I stood in the Chamber along with other Deputies and outlined challenges being faced by many sectors of society that had been left behind during Covid. I take this opportunity to raise the issue of these people and their sectors once again, starting with taxi drivers. We are all aware there is a large gathering of taxi and hackney drivers outside the gates of Leinster House calling for supports that have been severely lacking. At the height of lockdown, these drivers were out of work and claimed the PUP. For some this may have been just about enough to get by, but for many others it was not. Throughout this time and since the start of the easing of restrictions, many taxi drivers have been aware of their public service obligations and have been cognisant of the front-line workers who have relied on their service. They have returned to work, even through the night when business hours have been severely reduced, and these drivers should be acknowledged for that.

There is also the tourism sector, a cohort of businesses that can be broken down into many parts. Back home in County Kerry, there are small business owners all along the Wild Atlantic Way who are totally dependent on tourists to survive. At the start of this pandemic, these businesses were not able to claim the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, due to being closed during the off season, unsure of whether it would be worth their while to reopen, leaving many unable to return to work when they wanted to. Bus operators in rural Clare and throughout the State were left unable to garner business. No sports teams, schools or tours meant their buses were left parked with nothing to do, but the costs did not stop. The loans needed to be paid and the insurance covered, and that was without supports. There are many others, such as travel agencies, the events industry, musicians, and artists, as well as horse and trekking companies in Clare with no tourists, business or supports, but the animals still have to be fed. A total of

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€350 a week would not go far, when one thinks about it, for a family of four with another 15 or so animals to feed on top of that.

I turn to the issue of Shannon Airport and the heritage sites. While we welcomed the announcement by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, that he would carry out a review of the Shannon Group structures, here we are nine weeks later with no sign of the review nearing completion. The review is needed and is eagerly sought by the people of the mid-west. There are staff at Shannon Airport and at the Shannon Heritage sites who need to know where their jobs will be in 12 months' time. Again, while there was a last-minute announcement of funding to keep the heritage sites open past the end of August, we need to ensure these sites will get the supports they need to stay open into 2021. We cannot allow circumstances in which workers are left waiting until just four days before an impending lay-off to find out whether their jobs are safe. While supports were made available via Exchequer funding, such as the PUP and the TWSS, many, including Sinn Féin, warned about the risk of cutting the TWSS and replacing it with the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS. As the matter unfolded, however, the Government went ahead with it anyway.

Finally, I raise the issue of those over the age of 66, who have been completely forgotten about. Many publicans, such as in rural Ireland, are over the age of 66. They were forced out of work and were unable to claim the PUP. This does not relate just to publicans but extends to taxi drivers, chauffeurs and many others who are unable to work.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I am sharing time with Deputy Barry, unless Deputy Paul Murphy comes to the Chamber, in which case we will change it slightly.

This place, I have to say, makes me laugh or cry sometimes. We have had an hour of Government speakers before we get reached, by which time the Minister - no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Troy - is gone. That is what the changes to the speaking order were designed to do. They were designed to knock down a significant section of the Opposition to the point where it is lost in the order, and to allow the Government to be both the Government and the Opposition. We have this fascinating situation where the Government refuses to give an income subsidy to taxi drivers and entertainment, music and arts workers, and intends to cut their incomes tomorrow, even though Government measures mean they cannot return to work or that if they do so, they will lose all their payment, but there is nothing even close to a viable income out there because their sectors have been impacted by Government measures. The Government is going to go ahead and do this. We then had a Government spokesperson speak after a Member of the Government and before the Opposition, and say how terrible that is. The Government is the Government and the Opposition. It is brilliant. That speech should be played out in, I think, Finglas, which was mentioned. The Deputy said that he is standing up for the taxi drivers, but he is part of a Government that is going to slash their payment tomorrow. He also said he is standing up for the arts workers, but, again, he is part of a Government that is going to slash their income tomorrow, has ignored their calls and is only now talking about them because earlier today we had the biggest ever demonstration of taxi drivers in the history of this State. I note Deputy Paul Murphy has arrived, so I will take only five minutes. This is an unbelievable example of speaking with a forked tongue. These people do not want tea and sympathy. They have stated their case. I recall raising the issue of taxi drivers and the arts and music workers during Leaders' Questions last March and the Minister at the time in the previous Government looked at me as though I had two heads, wondering why I was talking about them. I had to fight to get both groups an opportunity to present to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. I spent weeks arguing in online meetings for the taxi drivers and the

events workers to be allowed to appear before that committee because they are disproportionately hit. It was a hard fight to get them in. I eventually got them in during July. There was a lot of tea and sympathy at the Covid committee but nothing was committed to.

I would like to know if the Government is going to give the taxi drivers an income subsidy. I do not see what has changed. Is the Government going to give the events and arts workers and musicians an income subsidy because nothing has changed for them since it introduced the €350 payment? Nothing has changed. In fact, the situation is looking more precarious for them as we move to level 3, level 4 or God knows what. Why was it okay to give them €350 and now it is okay to cut their payment? Similarly, with the Aer Lingus workers or people in similar sectors and people working in cafés, bars and so on who are on the wage subsidy payment, the Government is going to cut their income. The companies get the money no problem. All they have to do is sign a declaration stating that their earnings are down by 30%. The arts workers' earnings are down 70% and the taxi drivers' earnings are down 70% but they get nothing. Aer Lingus declares that its revenues are down by 30% and there is no problem with giving them money. When it comes to what has happened to the workers on the ground, the Government has no idea what to do. There is no oversight of whether they get top-ups or whether on the days they are not working they actually get their social welfare forms signed. The ordinary person does not get looked after. Tea and sympathy is all they get until they take to the streets and put a bit of pressure on the Government. The only lesson one can draw from that is that taxi drivers will need to come out onto the streets until the Government does give them something, as will the arts, aviation and other sectors who clearly are not in it together with some of the others who are being cosseted by this Government.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** At the start of the Covid crisis we were told that there was a need for national unity and that we were all in this together. The treatment of the Debenhams workers shows that we are not all in this together. In the words of the United Irishman leader, Henry Joy McCracken, "The rich will always betray the poor." Debenhams is not the only employer using Covid as cover to promote a race to the bottom. There are many others, some of whom I propose to call out this evening. We have the case of Aer Lingus, a privatised company, that availed of wage subsidies but tried to starve workers into accepting massive cuts to wages and conditions by reducing their income under the wage subsidy scheme to between €100 and €200 per week and then refusing to sign the forms needed to allow people access social welfare for the days they were not working. After an outcry Aer Lingus relented on signing the forms but the payments are not coming through fast enough and this needs to change.

We have the case of Easons which closed seven branches in Northern Ireland, making 144 workers redundant, and then transferred all of its stock to the Republic of Ireland. Easons availed and continues to avail of wage subsidy schemes North and South, about which Sinn Féin in the Northern Ireland Executive has some explaining to do, in my opinion. We then have the case of Aramark Catering, which made workers redundant, made a disgraceful offer and told workers to take it or leave it after they had been promised by AIB the previous year that their terms and conditions would carry over. Congratulations to those workers now picketing the AIB Bank Centre in Ballsbridge.

Congratulations also and a big shout-out to the workers at Premier Periclase in Drogheda who have been on strike since 17 August. These are workers who are classified as essential, who went to work all through the lockdown despite the risks. Their further sacrifices were rewarded by their employer with the lay-off of 20 staff, termination of sick pay and pension arrangements and derecognition of their unions. Last but not least we have the cases of St. Mary's

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and St. Monica's nursing homes and the Caritas convalescent centre in Dublin which are being closed by the Sisters of Charity with the loss of 200 jobs. As in the case of Cara house in Cork, these facilities should now be taken over by the HSE.

We are not all in this together. Workers throughout the country should follow the example of the Debenhams workers and organise to defend their best interests.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Naomi Klein wrote a book entitled *The Shock Doctrine* which was published in 2007. It outlines how political and economic elites, the capitalist class and their political representatives in this case use national or international crises to try to reshape social relations, laws and norms in their favour. The truth, which is very far from the "we're all in this together" rhetoric, is that substantial sections of the boss class in this country are taking advantage of the coronavirus to reshape things in their own interests. The most classic example is Debenhams in terms of obvious abuse of the coronavirus pandemic to engage in tactical insolvency. There are other cases.

I will give the example of Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, the workers of which are fundamentally ultimately employed by the public sector. The DAA is rolling ahead with further investment. It proposes to roll out another runway but it is attempting to get rid of 1,000 of its 3,500 staff. To do that, it is engaging in tactics which have been described to me by a number of different workers as terror tactics. It is putting real fear in people and telling workers they have the option of voluntary severance; a career break of up to five years or reduced hours, or alternatively remaining in their job and agreeing to new ways of working and threats of reductions in pay of up to 60%. The DAA made €150 million last year but it now sees the pandemic as an opportunity to get rid of directly employed, unionised workers. These workers will be needed in the future. The DAA is pushing ahead with the investment in the new runway and so on. This is about getting rid of unionised, directly employed workers and replacing them with contracted agency staff in the future that will be on substantially lower wages and conditions. The workers in the DAA will not accept this. They are going to follow the example of the Debenhams workers and they are going to fight to defend their terms and conditions.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** I am sharing time with Deputy Cahill. I welcome this debate which is taking place in the run-up to the budget, which will, presumably, represent the next instalment of Government measures to alleviate the impact of Covid-19. Covid-19 does not discriminate between individuals but it does have a profoundly different affect on different sectors of the economy. In terms of our economy, the biopharma and tech industries are booming while the hospitality and tourism sectors have been hammered. The level of wages in the businesses or industries that have been relatively unaffected by Covid tends to be much higher than those in the sectors which are most affected.

I am wondering whether the Government's approach of one size fits all is the proper one. Much money has been spent but I cannot get away from the notion that sometimes if one spends just a little more, or alternatively if the same money is spent in a different way, or in a combination of both approaches, a much better result can be achieved. The question arises as to whether the sectors that are most affected should get most help. The Minister would of course say that different measures are in place for the different sectors but there is no doubt that with the big measures, there is uniformity.

I cite for example the main initiative taken by the Government, the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS. In the affected sectors, one of the main indications to me anyway, and I am

sure the same applies to everybody else, is that the TWSS should not have been suspended in its original form on 1 September but rather continued to the following April for these sectors. There is a mighty difference between the TWSS and the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, with the former being much more valuable than the latter. In many cases, the difference between the TWSS and EWSS would be the difference between life and death for a business. It would determine if it can recover or re-establish itself.

The economists have expressed some surprise that income tax returns have remained particularly stable because there was an expectation that income tax returns would drop by approximately €2 billion because of Covid-19. That has not happened and the reason is obvious. We have a very steeply progressive income tax system where above average wage earners pay the vast majority of income tax. This illustrates quite dramatically and very clearly that the people most affected by this pandemic are those on low wages, young people, part-time workers and people in the gig economy. In other words, these are the less well-off.

These people are most affected by the pandemic and from now we must focus on helping them. Otherwise we will have what the economists like to refer to as a “K-shaped” recovery with differences according to household income. It would deepen inequality in a society that is already very unequal if we leave those people behind. I dread to think of a large pool of young, semi-skilled or part-time workers being separated from the economic activity of their own country or left in a position where they have no emigration safety valve for the first time since the Second World War. This would have a scarring effect on society and it will not have a good effect on politics and social cohesion.

Many of these more vulnerable sectors, including wet pubs, have been closed for six months but they have enormous fixed costs. The people in these areas are very unhappy with the measures that have been put in place by the Government to assist them and which will not help many of them to reopen. There will be a consequent effect, particularly in local communities or rural areas.

Somebody mentioned travel agencies and these are in a unique position. They have seen no income since last March but they had to return much of the gross income they took in last year as holidays were cancelled. The live entertainment sector has 35,000 people involved and it is worth €3.5 billion to the economy. People also mentioned the taxi industry, which has been absolutely devastated.

If we took those particularly vulnerable sectors of the economy and determined the number of workers directly involved before calculating the cost of continuing the TWSS until next April for those sectors, if it could be done legally or constitutionally, I wonder what the extra cost would be. I know the extension of the EWSS is costing approximately €2.3 billion and I cannot imagine my proposal would add greatly to that cost because it concerns particular sectors.

The Government should not focus on the deficit. I know we must worry about our deficit but so must every other country in the world. All the efforts against the pandemic around the world are largely financed by debt anyway. We must focus on the primary task of getting our economy rebooted while at the same time keeping society together.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** It is clear from the July stimulus package that the Government is dedicated to investing in key projects and supporting workers and businesses. An historic level of expenditure will see the State spending approximately €87 billion in 2020 as part of

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this package. This is aimed at injecting much-needed money into our economy by supporting workers whose employment has been affected by Covid-19, providing supports for businesses to keep them operational during the lockdown and investing in large-scale infrastructure and capital developments.

I will highlight some matters that need particular attention and support. I was delighted last week to organise a meeting between a delegation of Tipperary publicans and the Taoiseach. These people represented their industry and rural pubs exceptionally well and made their points on the reopening of pubs in rural Ireland very clear to the Taoiseach. I welcome the announcement that pubs will reopen from next Monday but I call for additional supports to protect and help these businesses and save jobs in the industry. While restrictions remain in place that will affect footfall and turnover, supports must be provided with no age restrictions.

Many rural pubs are family-owned and family-run. They are local employers and provide key services to their local communities. They are hubs that allow local people to meet, socialise and get out of their homes after what has been an extremely challenging six months for so many people in a mental, physical and emotional sense. Rural pubs are so much more than just a pub and for many people they function as the heart of a community. They need additional supports.

The Tipperary publicans made these points clear to the Taoiseach when they met him last week. These pubs now face large costs in their reopening, including restocking and getting the business in line with public health measures. I am calling for these businesses to be supported by allowing for a full-year waiver of commercial rates.

Insurance companies must be called upon to honour payouts for those who were insured against pandemics with an infectious disease clause. It is completely unacceptable that companies are holding payments owed to businesses affected by Covid-19 restrictions and which were covered under these policies.

I call for banks and lending institutions to be more flexible and give publicans the breathing space they need to get back in business. I have been contacted with stories of pubs reopening on a Monday and getting a letter from the bank by the end of that week indicating that the bank is aware the business has reopened and that repayments should be recommenced. Publicans are under enough pressure without adding this to the mix so soon after reopening their doors.

This week I have received much correspondence from people in the entertainment industry, which has been so badly affected by Covid-19 restrictions. In hundreds of theatres, venues and clubs, taking in festivals and events, the domestic live events and entertainment industry employs in excess of 35,000 full-time and part-time workers. The vast majority of these highly skilled people have not had any employment since the middle of March. Never in the long history of staging live performances and events on this island has there been such a sudden and total cessation of all work or activity.

This industry is very large and extends far beyond those who we might see performing on stage. It also covers backstage staff, management teams, video production companies and the list goes on. I have met some affected people in my county and I know all too well the impact Covid-19 is having on the industry. It was the first industry to shut and, most likely, it will be last to reopen.

I welcome yesterday's announcement that the pandemic unemployment payment will remain open for applicants until the end of the year instead of closing this month. I ask for the

immediate reinstatement of the employee wage subsidy scheme for people who will face the toughest restrictions until normality returns. I also call for grant funding proportionate to what has been allocated by the Arts Council in 2020. The live events sector accounts for 90% of all tickets sold in Ireland and it is by far the largest employer and contributor to the Exchequer in this economic area.

I welcome the announcement by the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, of €6 million for a live performance and music industry package. It is a good start but we need to see further supports. We cannot afford to lose this industry and I ask for supports for these workers and their businesses until they can reopen and get back to doing what they do best, which is to entertain.

Travel agents are another prime example of businesses that are viable and profitable in normal times. They currently have no idea when they will be able to operate normally again. Once again, I call for the continuation of the employment wage subsidy scheme for these businesses. As Deputy O’Dea pointed out, these companies have had no cash flow this month and have had to refund a lot of the previous month’s cash flow to customers.

I refer also to tour bus operators. Some €10 million was recently allocated to them, to be distributed by Tourism Ireland. This money should be distributed on the basis of recipient companies’ turnover from tourism in 2019, rather than the current basis of buses registered using the VAT 71 form. This change would mean that operators whose entire fleet is not employed in tourism would be eligible for some of the €10 million. It is essential that the €10 million fund is distributed to those tour operators who need it most. To allocate funds on the basis of 2019 turnover from tourism, the figures for which have been given to Fáilte Ireland, is the fairest means by far. I ask the Minister to impress this on Fáilte Ireland.

The businesses I am discussing are viable. They were vibrant and successful before the pandemic and can be again. They need the Government to act in their best interests now so that when we eventually get back to life as normal, we will not have lost these key businesses and jobs for good.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We are here to talk about protecting jobs and supporting businesses. As part of that, we must also protect workers. None of these measures will work in the world we now live in if we do not have the testing, tracing and isolation infrastructure to underpin them. We all saw the difficulties in this House this week. Thankfully, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, tested negative for Covid-19. I wish him well. Proceedings could be resumed quickly, despite certain mistakes being made, because the Minister could get a rapid test result. That is absolutely vital. I was somewhat shocked by a report at the end of the “Six One News” showing once again that we do not have the infrastructure we require. We must put all the Government’s resources towards reaching the capacity to offer 100,000 tests per week in order that we can keep schools, businesses and this Parliament open and keep all other aspects of our society alive. One difficulty concerns the reagent, which is critical for rapid testing. Difficulties of this sort must be overcome or everything will come to a halt very quickly. I accept that some of these issues are global but we must do our part to address them.

The opening of schools is very welcome, and we recognise the work done by the Government, as well as by teachers, staff and parents. We must ensure that they stay open. This is vital for parents, who are part of the workforce we are talking about protecting.

I welcome some of the points made earlier. The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, spoke about

the need for corporate enforcement. Several of my colleagues have already spoken about the need for workers' rights legislation. The recommendations of the Duffy-Cahill report still have not been implemented. Many Members of this House have spoken about the travesty facing the Debenhams workers. An issue arose with National Pen in my own town of Dundalk. A factory was laying people off as the firm was advertising positions in Tunisia. Workers were not allowed to bring in third-party or union representation so the negotiation was between the company, with all its experience, and a collection of individuals. It was incredibly unfair. This is one of the aspects of industrial relations we have not dealt with yet.

I also welcome Deputy Troy's comments on insurance. Long before we had to deal with the pandemic, the leisure and entertainment industry and the aforementioned taxi industry were dealing with huge insurance costs. We need to revise the book of quantum. The previous Government set certain things in train but we were too late to the game and we really need to catch up.

We are once again dealing with the madness of Brexit. Boris Johnson is now willing to break international law and deals that he himself concluded. This is leading to huge difficulties for businesses, companies and this State. We may have to deal with one hell of an unmerciful Brexit, with no mitigations, and this Government must plan accordingly. The mitigation that can be introduced is, literally, Irish unity. People must be given that choice and plans must be put in place. It is as simple as that.

Everybody here has spoken about the necessity for sector-specific supports. They are needed for taxi operators and travel agents. Members have discussed industries whose turnover has declined severely. Travel agents' turnover has fallen by 130%. Consumer protections, which are absolutely necessary, are killing these industries. There is also a difficulty for Aer Lingus workers, who are not able to use the Xs and Os system. That has been dealt with to some degree, but there is still the issue of back pay for the period when workers were supported by the temporary Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme. The entertainment industry is on its knees. If we want to have a society after this pandemic, we must put the protections in place now. Too many companies, sectors, businesses and jobs have fallen between the cracks and we need to give them all the protection they need.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I will be sharing my time with Deputy Verona Murphy. In the past ten days, three economic reports were released by the Department of Finance, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and the employers' group IBEC. They examined the financial resilience of Irish small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs, the revenue lost since the onset of Covid-19 and the future revenue trajectory into 2021, depending on the broader economic environment.

The findings were stark. Almost half of firms made lockdown losses. Some two fifths of micro-firms and half of medium-sized firms face revenue shortfalls. Only 58% of hotels and restaurants were reported to be in profit. The total shortfall for the SME sector during the pandemic is estimated at between €6 billion and €10 billion. Firms with cash have largely used those reserves to bridge the funding gap.

The report highlighted several key concerns. Modified national demand, a measure which strips out the multinational sector, fell by 16% in the second quarter of this year. This reflects a two-speed economy as the multinational sector is performing well, with overall GDP falling by just 6%. Household savings are growing, standing at between €5 billion and €6 billion. On

the other hand, numbers on the live register, the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment and the temporary Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme remain high. Some 800,000 people were receiving support as of last week. The state of public finances, a rising national debt, concerns about the corporation tax take, higher debt refinancing costs and Brexit all add to our woes. The unemployed are disproportionately younger workers from the hardest-hit sectors, that is, retail, hospitality, tourism and the arts.

This evening I downloaded the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation's tracker to see what money has been disbursed. The restart grant accounts for €298 million; the Covid-19 working capital scheme accounts for €106 million; microfinance loans come to a total of €18.8 million; local enterprise offices account for €43 million; Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland account for €34.5 million; and InterTradeIreland accounts for €1.3 million. This comes to a grand total of €501 million over the Covid-19 period, which has been disbursed to mitigate losses of been €6 billion and €10 billion in the SME sector.

We need corrections to give confidence to those working in the private sector. The employment wage subsidy scheme may have to be reintroduced and extended. The present scheme is not working for businesses that are cash-poor or have low turnover.

Insurance reform has been mentioned. It is amazing that we are here yet again. A book of quantum was produced by the Irish SME Association, ISME, over a weekend but we cannot seem to put one together in two years.

We need something to be done in respect of rent supports and pressure to be brought to bear on landlords and banks to share the burden. Upward-only rents are still a major problem, while banks are not sharing the burden borne by indebted businesses.

Promises were made to bring in an examinership-lite process. It is badly needed, given where businesses are at. When will it be delivered?

A tax strategy for the regions is needed in order to encourage decanting from major towns to more affordable living, a more balanced way of life and a more balanced economy. I have a sense of *déjà vu*. I spoke to the Minister in advance of the July stimulus and raised most of these issues, but they are still on the list and not much is being done about them. There is a need for more creative tax incentives and supports for business to remodel and reimagine their business models in light of Covid and Brexit.

Another matter I asked be addressed is the issue of bringing about formal interaction between the Government and the SME community on pay bargaining. A seat should be made available on the Labour Employer Economic Forum. Surely it is now time for the SME sector to properly recognised with regard to pay bargaining. The Irish people and the SME sector are resourceful but we need listening and proactive Departments of Finance and Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

As other Members have stated, many industries are badly suffering, including the tourism, leisure, transport, motor and aviation sectors, the gig economy, wet pubs and hotels. They are looking for something but they have not seen it in the measures announced to date. I hope the October budget will have something for them. The SME sector, which employs more than 800,000 workers, needs additional help. The questions those businesses are asking of the Government are "If not us, who?" and "If not now, when?"

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** The opening statement delivered by the Tánaiste did not go far enough. In order to protect jobs and support businesses, the Government must ensure that the right actions are taken at the right time. Action must be taken to prevent the disruption that will arise from a no-deal Brexit. One form of protection would be ensuring that a daily service is provided across the Irish Sea from Rosslare and Dublin to Cherbourg or Le Havre. That would offer protection because it would lessen the need for many struggling businesses to spend money and energy on tasks such as sanitary and phytosanitary inspections, preparing transit documents and trying to access financial guarantees in order for their valuable produce to be thrust into the unsavoury hands of the UK authorities on the land bridge route. Many businesses will undertake many hours of paperwork and spend thousands of euro because no preparation is being made on their behalf by the Government to ensure the provision of a daily direct shipping service from Rosslare Europort to mainland Europe. Such preparation would allow those companies to circumvent the arduous and costly procedures involved in transiting on the land bridge. The failure to prepare is thrusting their fate into the hands of the UK authorities and we can all see where the UK authorities are at.

Protecting jobs and supporting businesses must entail the provision of an essential daily shipping service to mainland Europe such that there is certainty of delivery and that timelines will be met, thus ensuring that businesses' commitments to their customers and reputations as Irish exporters are protected. Such a service would ensure that the value of the businesses' goods would not be reduced as a result of late delivery. It is guaranteed that there will be delays on the land bridge route. What protection is afforded by a failure to provide an alternative to transiting the UK land bridge?

A daily shipping service to the European mainland would serve to support and protect jobs in Slaney Foods International in Clohamon, Irish Country Meats in Camolin and Kavanagh Meats Ireland in Enniscorthy. Those three employers provide 1,100 jobs, excluding ancillary services and the farmers who provide the raw material. Those 1,100 jobs depend on the meat product being delivered to the market on a deadline. Post Brexit, that deadline will not be met using the land bridge because it will provide anything but certainty. In fact, the only thing the land bridge will provide post Brexit is uncertainty. No buyer of which I am aware buys produce on the basis of "I will see you when I see you." Fresh food buyers wish to know when the produce can be delivered because they understand that the longer delivery takes, the less valuable the product becomes and that does not make the customer happy.

We should spare a thought for the truck drivers, the very people whose jobs the Government is protecting. Post Brexit, they will be front-line workers in the same way that doctors and nurses are for Covid: essential but scarce. Do drivers not deserve to have the best chance of going about their daily work without disruption and unnecessary and unwelcome interruptions? The best laid plans for strict driving times will be scuppered because of the failure of the Government to think ahead, prepare and do the thing that makes the most common sense, which is to provide a daily direct service from Rosslare Europort to the Continent now.

Earlier today, the Taoiseach told the House that we have the capacity. I will tell the House where the capacity should be. It is there, but goods can only leave Ireland on a direct ferry sailing on Tuesdays, Thursdays or Saturdays. We need that capacity to move to a service that is available on Mondays to Sundays, inclusive. That is what will protect the €18.2 billion of trade that is carried on the land bridge.

A haulier who was caught up in significant delays at the Port of Dover sent me a report on

the matter that was published in *The Irish Times*. I received it yesterday. It took him 3 hours to travel 1.8 km. He was carrying pharmaceuticals worth €3.2 million in his trailer and he spent an extra ten hours in the UK. That one load was worth €3.2 million.

I refer to the common transit convention and the future of the land bridge. There is a possibility that the insurance guarantee on the insurance will be invoked, as there is no guarantee that the UK will continue to honour the convention. That could all be circumvented by making preparations and ensuring there is a daily direct ferry to the continent. If that were done, the haulier to whom I refer could travel by ferry from Ireland to France. It would avoid giving the UK any more power over us. Support and preparation are what will safeguard jobs and businesses.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** We now move back to the Government side, for which there are three speakers. Are the Deputies sharing time?

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** Yes. I thank the Acting Chairman.

We have learned in recent months that we must find a way to live alongside the virus but we need to trust the people now if we are to protect jobs and the economy. I ask the Minister of State to assure me that businesses in the various sectors will be treated equally as we move through the new plan. For example, there must be equal treatment for businesses in the retail, hospitality and manufacturing sectors. We cannot have a repeat of the confusion that arose in March, when Deputies' offices were inundated with queries as to who could operate and in what way.

We must not single out one section of a sector. It is incredibly unfair that some pubs were allowed to open but others were not because of the requirement that food be served. That was never part of the advice for pubs. Rather, it was for restaurants. All Members know it will not be business as usual. We know we are in a new normal but we must bring everyone on this journey.

That said, I welcome the new plan, which was needed. However, I am concerned that people are being told that they may only socialise in organised establishments. That is not supporting businesses to create work for people. We are closing the door on caterers, bouncy castle operators and photographers, all of whom are ingredients in many family milestone events that are usually held at home. Christenings, first communions and confirmations, many of which were delayed, are once-in-a-lifetime experiences but one is no longer permitted to celebrate them at home or outside the home, such as in a hotel. Many small businesses that catered for such events are effectively being shut down.

The Minister of State may have seen taxi drivers protesting outside Leinster House yesterday. They are fighting for survival and to pay their bills. We need to embrace living with this virus if we are to succeed and give people the tools to continue to operate properly in the economy. Many people are being forced out of work, businesses are being closed and work for the gig economy is being shut off in a bid to keep the country open.

I welcome the news that musicians and live performers may return to work. They are among the most creative in our society and have suffered significantly during the pandemic. As the Minister of State is aware, music and entertainment form a significant part of our culture.

I received a phone call today from a travel agency that is under significant pressure and

needs extra support.

As the economy begins to open up, the planning authorities are coming under additional pressure from both corporate and personal applicants. All inquiries are being dealt with through Zoom calls and meeting. These, while understandable, are difficult for both staff and applicants. One-to-one meetings are important. Does the Minister of State anticipate that such meetings will reconvene soon?

I see a significant backlog in healthcare. This is a direct result of this level of restriction. Why can we not set up a contact tracing department and staff it with people who answered Ireland's call, who speak several language, and do the job of test, trace and locate for each case so that we can stamp this virus out? If we do not have work done and people back to work, we will not have a functioning economy, a functioning health service or a functioning Civil Service. We need to get back to work and work living with this virus.

Can the Government ensure that in order to create jobs, IDA Ireland visits to rural counties are increased because there is not enough of them? My firm belief is rural Ireland has been forgotten and the one priority I will ask of the Minister of State is that IDA Ireland comes down to Carlow and other places and works on creating jobs. We need to create jobs in rural Ireland. I am a firm believer that everything is centred around Dublin. We in rural Ireland need help badly. I can speak for that in own area of Carlow-Kilkenny.

I am concerned about the restart grant. It has come to my attention in the past few weeks that applicants in my area missed the deadline, only by a day or two. My understanding is there is no appeal mechanism. Can the Minister of State clarify the matter? I have  
*9 o'clock* spoken to other Deputies, who say that they have some who they think will get sorted. Can the Minister of State provide clarification and inform all local authorities that if a person's restart grants application is a few days late, to save the person's business, if he or she has a genuine excuse such as I heard, he or she will be allowed get that restart grant?

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** I am well aware of the many measures that have been introduced to aid businesses throughout the country to get back up and running. However, I will focus on one sector that was in crisis pre-Covid and will be essential to the country if we are serious about any post-Covid recovery, and that is, of course, the forestry sector.

The introduction of new forestry licensing procedures in 2019 has been a disaster and it brought the industry to a standstill. Presently, only one in four of the required licences needed for production is being issued and many other sectors that are wholly dependent on the forestry sector are coming to a standstill.

We have made much of our programme for Government and stated that we are determined to build our way out of the Covid crisis but the reality is that if we have not got timber, we will not do a great deal of building. Sawmills are now months, if not weeks, away from running out of timber unless this issue is addressed. From a purely partisan point of view, I want to battle for one of our own indigenous businesses, that is, Glennon Brothers, County Longford, which has been established and has been a familiar landmark in Longford town for over 100 years, now employs 250 people right across the country and has an international footprint. Brothers Mike and Pat Glennon have made a significant and detailed submission to the much-flawed Forestry Appeals Committee review, which is currently at consultation as part of the draft agri-

culture appeals (amendment) Bill 2020.

There are now 400 projects across the country in a quagmire in an appeal process that is evidently designed to bring this industry to a standstill. In one week, in August, orchestrated objectors challenged as many as 10,000 cu. m of timber - enough to build 5,000 homes in this country. Many of these objections are orchestrated and come from the same or similar sources, and their motivation is pure and simple. They want to bring this sector to a standstill and in doing so, put approximately 400 people out of work in the case of Glennon Brothers.

It is incumbent upon us to ensure that we bring the agriculture appeals (amendment) Bill to a speedy resolution. As I was coming into the Chamber this evening, I was delighted to meet the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, who assured me that he will be bringing the Bill to the House next week. That is extremely welcome news for the forestry sector this evening. For the sake of Glennon Brothers, its staff and all the families, and, indeed, the peer companies which are dependent on the performance of this proud company, this is a crisis that we need to resolve.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** First, I thank the Tánaiste and Minister with responsibility for enterprise, trade and employment as well as the Ministers of State, Deputies English and Troy, for their work in providing an update on the range of business supports now available. Confidence and certainty are critical sentiments required by local businesses and enterprise operating in the real economy. Thankfully, this week we have moved to a medium-term framework following the publication of the resilience and recovery plan for living with Covid.

We need to make sure that we act collectively as a society to ensure that we never return to a lockdown situation. Our business owners have been incredibly resilient and we need to nurture their needs in the months ahead. Quite frankly, our economic future depends on it.

Many of my extended family are self-employed and I have seen at first hand the havoc caused by prolonged business closures. I spoke in the Chamber last week about protecting the mental health of our older people and in the weeks and months ahead, we must also do the same for our entrepreneurs and business owners. They carry the weight of their employees on their shoulders and ensure that they have enough capital to make payroll, even if that means cutting back on their own take-home pay or forgoing it altogether. This is not sustainable.

I have been incredibly impressed, and, in fact, proud, to see so many changes businesses have made around Mayo since March. I am a strong believer in the only constant being change itself and when I walk into some shops now, it is somewhat surreal when compared to pre-Covid times.

Publicans and retailers and their staff have truly gone above and beyond in doing their part to protect their community. They have changed their way of doing business even if it results in reduced capacity. We need to commend them and their overwhelmingly responsible behaviour.

In terms of more practical business supports, I note that the Department has a detailed booklet available on its website outlining the supports for businesses impacted by Covid. I suggest that it should be distributed nationally to business owners or that at a minimum, hard copies be sent to local enterprise offices, LEOs, if the Department has not already done so.

Before the summer recess, I spoke briefly about the difficulties being experienced by policy-holders when claiming for business interruption cover. I note that the UK High Court handed

down its judgment yesterday in the Financial Conduct Authority's business interruption insurance test case on behalf of policyholders. I was particularly interested to note that the court found in favour of the arguments advanced for policyholders by the Financial Conduct Authority, FCA, on the majority of key issues. I understand that the Central Bank of Ireland has been in contact with the FCA about the issue here and the Central Bank has since published its business interruption insurance supervisory framework. I raise this point as I want to ensure that the business interruption cover is not forgotten about until the majority of claims have been finalised in adherence with the highest standards of financial conduct. While insurance is not a specific responsibility of the Minister of State, Deputy English's Department, it is an issue weighing heavily on the business owners and is worth mentioning.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The pandemic has delivered the sharpest, deepest and most dramatic shock to our economy and, indeed, society. We thought that Brexit, and everything we had to deal with there, and still have to deal with there, was a shock.

We have now had six months to protect businesses and jobs. At an early stage, it was agreed on a global basis that austerity would not work, it was not the answer and we needed a Keynesian approach. My concern is that we are attempting to do that but we are not doing it nearly enough. We are not doing it in the same way that other countries are doing it and we will not get the results that we want to achieve from it.

The July stimulus package offered some measures, but not nearly enough and not in the form that it was asked for. It is not me saying that. It says something when the Government's own Deputies, whom I have been listening to here, are telling the Minister of State, Deputy English, to stand up for rural Ireland and that rural Ireland and different business have been forgotten.

Loans with uncompetitive interest rates and limited grants with unrealistic timelines were the feature of the July stimulus package. Banks still charge businesses rates of 6.5%. Credit unions would offer better loan rates than that.

There is an issue in Britain where companies were being set up to draw down some of the guaranteed funding from the state. What measures have been taken to prevent false companies being set up to draw down money the State will be obliged to pay back?

Businesses here were only recovering after years of austerity. They do not have the capacity or appetite to carry any more debt. The Government is falling very short in protecting jobs and supporting businesses during the pandemic. I will give an example. Last week I spoke to the owner of a hospitality business who employs just fewer than 50 people, a significant number, in a rural town. On Tuesday, he was really pleased to get a restart grant of €15,000. He was busy in July and August with people holidaying in Ireland and had just about managed to pay the bills he would normally pay in March and April. He caught up and was ready to batten down the hatches for winter until some sort of normality might return to the sector. He worked out that his insurance bill would be somewhat similar to the previous year, which was in the region of €27,000, a huge amount by any standards. However, his renewal notice arrived two days later and his insurance premium had increased to €120,000. Eventually, after a week of sleepless nights, the cheapest premium he could get was €72,000. His €15,000 grant goes straight to the insurance company along with four times that figure again. Add a huge rates bill and the high interest rates sought by the banks, which are looking for mortgage repayments from October, and one can see why many businesses will close down. The insurance companies are still running riot.

I commend the work undertaken by my colleague, Deputy Doherty, and the Joint Committee on Finance collectively regarding insurance companies, but it is not nearly enough. Businesses such as the one to which I refer are tired of the false promises, reports and a legal system that settles unfounded claims. These businesses and the jobs they provide are hanging on a knife edge. They are worth €7.6 billion to the economy and employ 180,000 people. We received the autumn legislation programme from the Government earlier today but, unless I missed it, there is no sign of any legislation that will bring about the necessary change to the insurance industry. In recent months, insurance companies have demonstrated their complete disregard for people and businesses. They have refused to pay out on claims from struggling businesses during the pandemic. The sector's income has boomed in recent years but, despite an annual revenue of over €15 billion, pubs, restaurants and hotels have been forced into court to get their coverage. I have carefully monitored the position in Britain. We need to take immediate note of what is happening there.

We must also take note of what the authorities in Britain have done in respect of audit companies. I have much more to say on business but I do not have time. We are far behind the curve in dealing with the big four audit companies, the insurance companies and the banks. We need to take this matter seriously.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** We now move to the Rural Independent Group, from which there will be four speakers.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Protecting jobs and supporting businesses is a particularly relevant in the midlands and, specifically, my constituency of Laois-Offaly, which has been very hard hit by threats to employment. These include the just transition process and its dire impact on employment at Bord na Móna and, most recently, the threats to the forestry and tree-felling sectors. All these problems were systemic in my constituency before the Covid emergency. They have affected long term employees and seasonal workers alike. I have been contacted by key local employers, saw mills and businesses that support hundreds if not thousands of jobs, directly and indirectly. They are shocked at the chaos and dysfunction that continues to obtain in the context of licensing in the forestry sector. I call on the Government to ensure that this matter is resolved as soon as possible. Sawmills, farmers and others are seeing large numbers of appeals being submitted under the ecology heading and this is destabilising potential jobs. This cannot continue and must be resolved urgently to protect up to 12,000 jobs in the forestry sector.

Following the publication of the first interim report of the just transition commissioner, I supported the view that a range of measures were needed to ensure ongoing job creation and job retention in the midlands. The commissioner made it very clear that an immediate sense of urgency was needed around developing the employment potential of the midlands, and counties such as Offaly and Laois in particular. Has that sense of urgency been maintained now that the focus is off the just transition process? I highlight these issues because they speak to major deficits in the comprehensive job protection strategy. On one hand, we are here talking about the most recent Government moves to protect and support jobs while, on the other, we must accept that thousands of jobs, particularly in the midlands, are under serious threat from the Government's handling, or failure to handle, of its response to certain sectors. These jobs are also under threat because the Government has taken a very specific policy direction in what it is willing to prioritise. For example, it is not willing to prioritise the peat sector in the midlands because it has prioritised the pursuit of a so-called just transition process which has not instilled any confidence that it can create high levels of job growth. The impact of the process is questionable in that regard. Ecological concerns and the imposition of regulatory directives

from Europe on the forestry sector are prioritised, regardless of how they undermine the sector's very existence.

We need to protect SMEs including those in the hospitality, hotel and tourism sector, as well as jobs in entertainment and arts. It is clear from the many emails and phone calls we receive from desperately concerned local businesses and those in entertainment and the arts that these sectors must be prioritised and receive and their problems be given an urgent response. We must hold structured dialogue with the key stakeholders to allow them to advocate across Government to ensure that the needs of SMEs are taken into account. We must support new projects and businesses and help them get off the ground. The Banagher Chilling project needs support from the Government and from Laois-Offaly Deputies. It has been held up by unclear guidance from the evaluation committee of the immigrant investor programme.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** The Deputy is out of time.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** We have seen how travel agents are suffering. Take a family that has booked a holiday for €3,000. A travel agent does not get paid until someone flies. Travel agents' income in 2019 was zero and it is zero for 2020. What other industry had to give back its 2019 income in 2020? Who was there to answer people's emails and calls about their holidays? Travel agents remained open to help those who had booked holidays and to deal with refunds. They dealt with people around the world to bring them home before the airports closed. They need support from the Government. They need grants, not loans. How would we manage our holidays if they closed?

**Deputy Michael Collins:** This is a hugely important time to protect jobs and support businesses but the Government is doing the exact opposite. Take how businesses and private residents in west Cork were destroyed following recent flooding in Bantry, Skibbereen, Rosscarbery, Bandon and Rathbarry, when the only support they got was humanitarian aid, which businesses cannot get if they already have insurance. No private residence will get anything from this fund even if they have no insurance. The Minister tells me that he wants to protect businesses and jobs when he is doing exactly the opposite. The Taoiseach came to see the floods first-hand, as did the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, and the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, but not a brown cent is following these visits. From what I hear tonight, there is no money for the roads either. They were badly damaged because of the floods. We have only been given a budget which was approved before the floods. This is appalling. It is west Cork and we know that other than a few weeks of holidays, this stunning place is off the Government's political radar.

Another place that needs emergency aid to survive is Cork Airport. This Government must immediately stop all Government charges on Cork Airport if it is to survive. Cork Airport is losing millions and cannot continue, so it is time to wake up to what I asked the then Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, four months ago. We need to have rapid testing in our airports, which would immediately start businesses here again. I asked for rapid testing in our airports and both the Taoiseach and Ministers were looking at me as if I had two heads but now it must be done. Rapidly test all those coming from destinations on the red list and have voluntary tests for those on the green list if the Government wants to save our airports. Wake up quickly, as the train is gone from the station and the Government is still standing at the platform. If the Government will not help the airports and airlines, it will have devastating consequences for jobs and businesses throughout west Cork.

To help to save thousands of publicans and employees from ruination, who have availed of the moratorium on mortgages which ends in September, has the Government intervened with the banks to continue the moratorium? It was the Government that pointed these publicans out and kept them closed in west Cork, including great pubs such as in Ballinadee, Drinagh, and Reenascreena to mention but a few. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have almost ruined these businesses and threw them crumbs after giving them false promises and hope of a survival package, which ended up being a pittance for these businesses that have been closed for over six months.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I too am concerned about the way the Minister is talking about supporting jobs and industry. The music and entertainment industry, the buses, taxis, hackneys, limousines, those aged over 66, the dance teachers and travel agents have all been left behind completely. This is doing nothing for them. The Government gave stimulus money to the banks, which will not loan the money out.

Small business owners and entrepreneurs who have a part-time job to support their enterprise have been left behind. They are unable to claim the restart grant or indeed the enterprise support grant, because they be working for a few hours a week. That is totally unfair. Those who operate a business from their home or online, or a sport or even a dance venture, for example, could not receive the restart grant due to having a second income by way of a part-time retail job, which they had to put food on the table. That continued during the pandemic. They were unable to avail of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment. The kind of situation that people have found themselves in is shocking. Half of their income was being diminished as a result of the pandemic but they could get no supports. They were restricted in every way. The enterprise support grant excludes those same people who could not avail of the pandemic payment. There are significant anomalies and discrimination there.

I pay tribute to those in the rates and finance section of Tipperary County Council, who have rolled out a restart grant to 1,700 businesses and 800 restart plus grants, with 700 more still in the queue. The staff have been extremely helpful to my office, to all public representatives and to all these business people. It is a welcome source of income for those who can receive it but I am concerned about those who have not been able to receive it. Student nurses find themselves in another difficult situation. They had to give up their part-time jobs because they cannot be co-located, they are helping out in hospitals and elsewhere with the pandemic, and now that they are going back to college, to their education, they have no income because their jobs are gone. They have been left behind. I appeal to the Minister to do something for these groups of people. The over-66s have been forgotten completely.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I am sharing time with Deputies Michael Moynihan and O'Donnell.

I do not need to explain to anyone here the importance of the SME sector in Ireland, the substantial numbers that it employs and the significance of those operations throughout the regions, our towns and rural areas. I listened to Ursula von der Leyen's state of the European Union address today and was encouraged to hear the importance of the SME sector highlighted in her speech, that they are the leaders in innovation, that they will lead the circular economy, and that without a strong SME sector, we will not make progress. President von der Leyen said today that the SME sector is "the motor of our economy and will be the engine of our recovery". I met SME representative groups recently and I am sure many people here have done so too.

I have met representatives of musicians, artists and production teams. I have experience

of that sector, I know the work and I know that they have very little. I have met travel agents. Some 3,500 jobs are at risk among travel agents, behind 234 shopfronts in towns throughout the country. They need targeted assistance and they need it now to get through the next stages of rebuilding our economy. All across the SME sector, there is scope to support and encourage investment, to improve energy efficiencies throughout offices and commercial buildings, to improve operations and manufacturing processes, waste and resource management. These are aspects of the business that may not be at the top of the list for the owner of an SME as the business struggles to re-emerge from this crisis, but it is important for its sustainability. This creates savings and jobs, and ensures viability. It is in this area that we can lead and facilitate, and connect investment opportunity and help SMEs.

Digitalisation will have an impact on our economy, monetary policy and almost every job that exists. At the heart of digitalisation and technological advances lies long-term sustainable job creation and apprenticeships, including mature apprenticeships, and upskilling. The pandemic forced many to work remotely or from home. This has shown that many jobs can be in rural towns and villages with the right infrastructure in place such as digital hubs and workspaces. This creates a number of questions for us. How will this impact on city workspaces? How will it impact on car-dependent commuting? Will office blocks be redesigned for residential use and bring life back to urban centres? Will this lead to opportunities for rural rejuvenation and improved economies of provincial towns? We do not know the answer to those questions and until we know the epidemiological path of this virus, we must consider and plan for many of the changes that we have experienced being possibly long-term structural changes rather than a cycle.

We need to seize the chance that we have to borrow at an all-time low interest rate, to invest in the infrastructure deficit that exists in our public transport networks, both rural and urban, in our fibre and communications networks, housing, our water network infrastructure, town planning, urban design and placemaking. These factors attract investment and create jobs. Investment is also needed in our education system, from early years, primary and secondary, through to third level, in order that we enable and encourage the next generation of innovators and people in research and development.

I was delighted to see SSE Renewables select Arklow, County Wicklow, as a base for its 500 MW off-shore wind development. There will be more of these developments on our east and west coasts. I envisage more opportunities for Arklow and Wicklow to become a centre of excellence for renewables, where jobs will be created in training, designing, testing, commissioning and maintenance of offshore wind and onshore solar renewable energy developments.

All of these objectives will create jobs. They will decarbonise our economy. They will ensure energy resilience and affordability and protect our natural environment. Europe is aiming for higher cuts in emissions. We are all part of that journey and, like our northern European counterparts, we need to see the opportunities that exist. We have a good programme for Government with key commitments and it is vitally important that we move as quickly as possible to create these jobs, a greener economy and a sustainable future for businesses in Ireland.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I want to address two issues. The bus fleet of private operators has been in garages and off the road in recent months. They had been preparing to go back to providing the much-needed bus service for schools over the last weeks and have done so successfully. Some of those buses had been off the road since March and had not been taxed because the private operators did not know when the buses would be back on the road. To get

them back on the road, they had to pay the road tax for the buses for the period going back to March. I think the regulation in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport states that they should have notified it first. We should zone in on that. Small initiatives like that will help some of the private operators. Something should be done for all the bus operators. I am sure that every Deputy in the House has operators in their own areas that need to be looked at. There should be an innovative way to help them so that they are not saddled with substantial road tax for a bus fleet that was in their garages and off the road over the last six or seven months. That is something small that should be looked at and dealt with.

There is a raft of sectors which are challenged with Covid and how we go forward. There was much discussion earlier in the debate about forestry. The Government needs to grapple with this and get the legislation through, to make sure that these felling licences, thinning licences and roadway applications are all streamlined and go through the Department as quickly as possible, with the least difficulty.

There also has to be a review of the entire planning process to make sure that planning is not held up by fictitious objections and that there is serious review of the planning laws. They have been added to many times over the years and it is time for a review. Another issue that has come to the fore concerns community centres that have been operating, paying insurance and complying with the law despite having no income for the past six months. There should be a very sincere, targeted way of getting funding to all the community centres run by voluntary organisations and we should make sure that these valuable centres will be used again in the future, post-Covid, whenever that may be. We need to make sure these community centres are kept viable and are open for business.

We have to look at innovative ways of dealing with the various sectors. There are great challenges and myriad issues. The Government has to look at them carefully in order to streamline them. We have to accept that with Covid over the last six months, as always, the public is about 20 steps ahead of the political system and the Government. Many people have relocated and many are working from home in rural communities. This is a dream that was being talked about by rural Deputies for many years. It is now happening and we have to embrace that and make sure that everything is put in place for it to continue. Working from home has enhanced the vibrancy of rural communities over the last while. We have seen that they are safe and the issues in respect of large urban centres and Covid.

We have to look at this issue. Many years ago, we were talking about decentralisation. Now is the time for a major programme of decentralisation. We need to make sure we embrace it. We talk about carbon and all the rest of it. This is an issue that ticks every box we have been debating in the last while. It ensures that rural communities can thrive and enhances them, keeping young people in their own communities. Many people are commuting to Dublin from all over the place, some for two and three hours. That is not sustainable for the individuals involved, their families and their lifestyle. There should be coherent thinking about how we face the future. We should embrace a massive decentralisation programme and rejuvenate and sustain rural communities. They are vibrant and able to do it. We have seen what they have done over the last six months. We should now challenge the State and ensure it embraces what people have done over the last months.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I contribute to tonight's debate in the context of Covid. Until such a time as a vaccine is found, we will be living in Covid world. We are seeing an increase in the rate of infection, which we will have to tackle. It is not going to be easy over the next six

months or more until a vaccine is found. A number of steps should be taken in the context of the budget. One must be to maintain sectors that are coming under extreme stress from external shocks. In general, the multinational sector has come through this pandemic reasonably well. The hospitality sector, including publicans and hotels, has come through extremely difficult times. The arts sector is going through a very rough time. Then we have the whole area of aviation, airports such as Shannon Airport in my region and travel agents.

The recovery fund is a strong measure which should be of significance and scale. If required, funding for it should be increased. While we have to view the fund in terms of the overall financial well-being of the economy, we need to spend in the current climate to ensure we retain jobs. On the aviation side, there has to be support from the State for strategic routes. Aer Lingus is not flying to Heathrow from Shannon Airport. I want to see that service restored as quickly as possible, which will need State support. I want to see the transatlantic routes operating again. That will take a bit more time but it is most important as there are many jobs involved.

In the arts sector, a large number of people are very exposed. It is hugely important that the arts and the SME sectors come through the pandemic intact. The worry is that the longer the pandemic goes on, the more exposed they are and the more difficult it will be to resurrect these sectors. We have to put supports in place and look at the budget on a sectoral basis. We must consider how to support events and live acts. The hospitality sector, hotels, publicans and restaurants must be looked at. I made reference to the aviation sector also. It is a feature of this crisis that, in the main, our income tax revenues have held up, which is something. This is because the multinational sector and other professional sectors have held up. Our system is by definition progressive but many of the sectors where people are paid less and are not paying income tax will need significant support, particularly the entire hospitality and retail sectors.

Shannon Airport is vital to people in Limerick and must be supported. Aer Lingus, as the national carrier, is vital as it operates the Heathrow and transatlantic routes. We need State supports in that area. I want the Government to provide support for strategic routes, including to Heathrow and the Aer Lingus transatlantic routes to JFK and Boston airports.

We can come through this pandemic. Do we have a recovery fund? We do not know what will happen in the next six to eight months. We have to ensure we have funds in place to deal with issues as they arise, as we have done to date.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I listened to the contributions of the Minister of State's colleagues. I agree with them that some of the supports that are now in place, depending on the sector, are helping to bring about a positive difference to people's lives and the economy. While many sectors are operating, albeit on a knife-edge, others remain horribly exposed to the effects of Covid-19. Earlier I spoke of the great challenges faced by the taxi and chauffeur sector and on other occasions I have addressed the challenges faced by the tourism sector. I know it is not the Minister of State's responsibility but I want to pass on the message that we need to see the VAT rate cut from 13.5% to 9% in this sector. While this is important nationwide, it is crucial in the Border areas where we have to compete with a much lower VAT rate in Northern Ireland.

The cultural, events, arts and entertainment sector is in dire trouble. In that context, I would like to read a few lines from an email I received from somebody I know who works in the sector. It states:

I wanted to send you a note today as the date for the PUP scale-back is imminent. With no date on the horizon as to when we can operate at full capacity again or at a sustainable capacity, I feel it is wrong to implement the PUP cutbacks at this point on anyone within sectors that cannot return to work safely or sustainably. With Covid-19 recovery plan stages taking so many setbacks and increasing numbers, I feel the PUP cutback timeline needs to be readjusted to logically align with how the recovery is actually panning out.

Those are wise words and we need to act on them.

The events and entertainment industry supports 35,000 jobs. Its turnover has collapsed. These jobs include invisible professionals such as sound and lighting engineers, site crews, riggers, event planners, logistics experts, poets, bar and catering staff, singers, actors, camera operators, drummers, designers, dancers and many others. These workers cannot bear the brunt of the crisis because they cannot get back to work. Tomorrow, their pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, will be cut and their safety net will disappear.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the measures such as the start-up grant, the rates initiative, the Covid payment and the VAT reduction. There is a lot of talk around the loan system and the credit guarantee, but many businesses are very afraid to move at the moment because they do not know what the future is.

Most food products, and indeed most products, are shifted with pallets. One sector has come out today to indicate that Ireland will soon be without pallets and this is because the previous Government and this Government have not tackled a problem in the forestry sector. People will wake up when they see they have no timber pallets on which to put food products. This is coming down the road very fast and then there will be a big hullabaloo. I believe that certain people within the Department have not dealt with it and, to be quite frank, no Minister has cracked the whip to get it sorted out. That is the problem.

There is also a situation with the bus companies. Firstly, drivers have left them and the operators are struggling to get drivers. The bus operators must pay insurance and perhaps rent a building where the vehicles can be kept or fixed. There are overhead costs. I am aware that there are start-up grants and this, that and the other but at the end of the day operators running fleets of buses will go bust shortly if they do not get back on the road or if some initiative is not put in place.

Footfall in the larger cities has fallen by quite a lot. I spoke with a hairdresser in Galway city who employs a good few people. While the first three weeks were great there was a fall off straightaway. If we do not keep some of these businesses on life support we will lose them down the road.

There is one thing that should be done and I ask the Minister of State to ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine about it. Consider the people who kept food on the table, the farming communities, those who got up every morning and the hauliers who kept bringing the milk, beef and all food produce around the country. Farmers who exported cattle that were fit for slaughter have been left out of the beef finisher scheme. These are the forgotten people in all of this.

Knock airport is vital to the west of Ireland. We need to make sure we target and give enough funding for the life support to keep businesses going. If we do not do so, whether people like it or not, there will be a lot of redundancies. On top of that would be more taxes

for working class people because the Government would need more money. We will not keep on borrowing for the next four or five years, let no-one go coddling themselves. We need to put the incentives there for the people who are employing people, and also for entrepreneurs to get them out and moving and employing people. That is how we will generate an economy.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I believe that a huge opportunity is being lost with this plan. The Government could have the chance to make the State really responsive to the needs of our society and our people. Indeed, it could be doing things like making sure that workers will be protected, as with the earlier motion on the Debenhams workers. The Government could also work to make sure taxi drivers are cared for and looked after, along with the 35,000 workers in the entertainment and hospitality industries who have been affected and who are being totally left behind. That sector in particular generates €3.5 billion income for the State each year in the taxes it delivers. Those are the people who should be targeted as part of this response and as part of the plan to make sure the economy gets back on track again.

There is no doubt that the plan appears to have significant provisions in it, but when one looks closely at it perhaps they are not as significant as we thought. The restart grant and restart plus grant of €156 million and €145 million amount to a grant of €4,800 per application, based on the 62,699 applications paid so far. This is hardly significant, and especially when it was announced as the €25,000 grant. It is not because it works out at €4,800. Out of the 62,699 applications perhaps 300 or 400 received the €25,000.

There is the reduction in VAT from 23% to 21%, which the Government has said will boost employment and encourage spending, but will it really? The previous reduction in VAT at the low rate was mainly pocketed by businesses and was not passed on to customers. That has been seen across the board. The VAT reduction is an across-the-board reduction so a business that is doing well, as some are, will not need the reduction but will benefit from it anyway. That is not the most efficient targeting of the payment.

Other measures put money into businesses in the form of loans but there is probably more that can be done to move money, in the form of grants, into businesses. This applies especially to small and micro enterprises as this money will remain in the local area and benefit everyone around that business.

Taxpayers who spend more than €625 on accommodation, food and non-alcoholic drinks between October and April can get up to €125 back through a tax credit. How much of this money would have been spent anyway? This is a question about which there does not seem to be much discussion. For example, I may go away for the weekend, as I have usually done over that period, and I can now claim a tax credit for it. This is really just paying me back for something I would have done anyway. There is an unfairness to that payment also. Consider the low-paid workers who have been impacted most through the lockdown and who may decide to go away for the weekend. They will not qualify for the refund because they are not paying tax anyway. They will not benefit from this tax rebate. Perhaps we are saying that those people should not be able to go away anyway because they are on low pay.

It is interesting that the tax take has not been impacted by the initial period of the lockdown and the downturn in the economy because, in reality, most of the workers affected did not earn enough to pay tax. The State's taxes have held up simply because it is the low-paid workers who have lost their jobs. That in itself says a lot about the type of economy and society we have built over the last 20 years or so.

There are, however, some good things in the plan. The employment wage support scheme, which replaces the temporary wage subsidy scheme, seems to be a targeted payment, which makes sense. There has been some discussion about the reduction in payments but it is actually targeted at employees and making sure the benefit gets to them. That seems to be a good way of doing it. That will make sense. Hopefully this plan will stimulate the economy, support our workers and help in the recovery of our society from Covid, which will be needed as this crisis will go on for some time yet.

**Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Damien English):** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the chance to say a few words back on the issues raised, and also to identify some of the things I am working on with our own Department.

The commentary in general has been around the supports for business, which is important, but we also must bring the conversation on in the months ahead to new concepts and new ideas for the future of business. We are meeting with businesses and different sectors every day of the week to ask them to explore the options for new types of business, how to develop their sectors, how to support a growth strategy and moving away to reskilling. We can support all of that. As well as trying to protect what is there we must realise that some businesses will have to reinvent. We in Ireland have been very successful in that regard over the years. We need to be in that space in the months ahead.

I listened to many of the contributors to the debate tonight but I did not hear a lot of new initiatives coming forward. Deputy Conway-Walsh criticised and said that we are not comparing ourselves with other countries, but the Deputy did not give me an example.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I ran out of time.

**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy had plenty of time but did not want to do it. In our Department we do analyse what is happening in other countries and we do compare it. Our offering is quite competitive compared with every other country. It is fine if the Deputy finds something in another country that she thinks is good and that we should copy here. The Deputy should mention it, bring it to us and we would look at it. We do that. We do try to adapt many of our schemes. The offering here, including the initial supports announced up until May followed by the July stimulus plan, has been quite good in terms of supporting business. That said, we recognise that those initial offers of the wage subsidies, the restart grants and the rates rebates were scattered across all sectors and going forward with the budget and into the economic recovery plan will require a sector-by-sector, tailored approach. We can now analyse and see what sectors need more support, like the travel agents referred to earlier, or the buses. Different sectors will need different interventions and that is where the conversation needs to go over the months ahead. That is what we are doing in our Department - we are meeting every sector to see how we can tweak or change the schemes to suit them and that will inform the drawdown from the recovery fund in the months ahead.

The approach being taken by the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is right. We have a recovery fund which we can use at different stages over the 12 months ahead because we are not fully sure what sectors will need adjustment or more supports. We have to monitor that but we also have to be in a position, as the Government and as a country, to adapt and respond. I hope that Members here, as individuals or groups, will come forward in a responsible way with various ideas and suggestions. Let us know because this is

about trying to spend the recovery fund wisely in a way that sustains jobs while also recognising that we must look to future jobs, new jobs as well as reskilling. Quite a lot of resources will be put into reskilling, upskilling and apprenticeship schemes, about which we have been talking for many years. It is well recognised that there is great potential there but we must tailor the schemes appropriately.

Deputies must acknowledge that what has been done so far was to get us through the initial six or seven months. The plan published yesterday is not about announcing moneys or supports in general, apart from for the health service. It is about giving people a window onto what will happen under each stage and why we have to go from levels one to five, if needs be. It is about the management of the virus. Separate to that is the supports to enable businesses to open up and the wage subsidy scheme has played a major part in that regard. Quite a lot has been done with taxpayers' money but more will need to be done in certain sectors and the Government recognises that.

Deputy Harkin raised the issue of the pandemic unemployment payment rates and I understand what she was saying. Indeed, the point she made would have come through at a lot of our meetings as well. The Minister with responsibility for social protection, Deputy Humphreys, will respond to that and is well aware of the situation. Again, we are trying to encourage people back to work because in some sectors people are telling us that they cannot get staff. We have to get that balance right and we will try to do so. That said, we must also recognise that some sectors cannot get back to work and the Deputy is absolutely right about that.

Deputy Pringle asked about the restart grant which amounts to quite a lot of money for quite a lot of businesses. I do not have the breakdown but I will get it for the Deputy. It is not the case that the majority of businesses only got €4,000. If one analyses the rates paid by companies over the last couple of years, the average paid was between €7,000 and €8,000 so that is probably where the grant is at. Many businesses will get €25,000 and some will get €20,000. I have met quite a lot of business people in my county that have gotten €15,000, €16,000 or €17,000 which is quite a significant amount. It is not the case that businesses have only received €4,000. The Deputy is only taking an average figure. I am just telling him what the facts are and I am happy to get the details for him. We will get the figures for the Deputy. All of that can be seen because we are able to see the rates payable for the last two years. It is quite visible and nobody is hiding that. The grant is up to €25,000 for companies that would have paid rates last year up to that amount. It is quite significant and business people will say that it is quite a lot. That said, we need to do more and are prepared to do so.

Certain sectors are not able to get fully back to business and we must decide how best to deal with them. Do we put them on life support and try to make sure they are still there in six or seven months when we need them? As was said in the context of travel agents, if we do not do that, we will lose that business to other countries. There are certain areas that need specific support and that is what we will have to do. People will have to contribute to that debate over the next few months and put forward suggestions for certain areas. We must all accept that there is not an endless pot of money but we must spend what we have as wisely as possible.

Issues were raised about the credit guarantee scheme, the banks and so on. Deputy Mattie McGrath claimed earlier that we are bailing out the banks again but the credit guarantee scheme has nothing whatsoever to with the banks. It is about reaching banks' customers with a financial product they can afford. The credit guarantee scheme involves the use of taxpayers' money to guarantee loans, up to 80%, to enterprises and companies. That is a support for business and is

not a support for the banks. Trying to muddy the waters with that claim is a little bit silly, to be honest. We have already seen this week that the credit guarantee scheme is having an impact on the cost of money to businesses and that is what it is about. It is about reducing the costs to business. Many financial institutions, including the credit unions and others, have applied to be in that scheme and they will bring forward more products, which is what it is about. Deputies should not judge the scheme on the basis of what happened six or 12 months ago because it is a new scheme. The governing legislation only went through the Houses in July and the scheme has only been operational for the last few weeks. It is in the months ahead that we should judge the scheme and I am quite confident that it will have an impact and will be of support to business. Everyone is coming in here and saying that businesses do not want to borrow but we have to be honest with businesses. If we are to get through this it will require a combination of grants, wage supports, upskilling funding and so on but there will also be a necessity along the way to borrow money. In the last seven or eight years since the recession there has been a reluctance to borrow and I can accept that. I worked with a lot of companies in my time and I know that this will need a combination of liquidity, grants and borrowing. There is no point in kidding people that the State will be able to provide every penny because it will not. The State does have to step in to reduce the cost of borrowing and to make credit easier to access for businesses so that those that have good cashflow and good plans for the years ahead can borrow money. It would be wrong for Deputies to constantly tell businesses that it is all going to be grants because that is just not possible, regardless of who is in government. We have to be honest with people. The aim is not to indebt them or put a noose around their neck that they cannot afford. Rather, the aim is to get that blend right. That is why we have vouchers issued through the LEOs to help businesses assess their situation and make a case. They will be able to use the voucher to get financial advice on trading their way out of this situation. We should not be giving people false hope, however, because that is unfair.

Contact tracing was mentioned by quite a few speakers. It is very important and part of yesterday's announcement was about beefing up the team of people involved in contact tracing and testing. It is important we do that. People were set aside to do that but they had been taken from other Departments and offices. We are now specifically signing people up to take over that work. It is important we do that in order to deal with the next five or six months because that is a support in terms of keeping the economy open as well as protecting public health. The approach is two-pronged.

There is no point in denying that Covid-19 has had a major impact on everybody. It has affected all of our towns, villages and counties. When it comes to business and those who try to create and sustain jobs we must put a wind behind them as best we can and in a timely manner, with additional supports. We are engaging with the retail sector quite a lot. I am chair of the retail forum and we recognise that a lot of the sector, apart from groceries, is under immense pressure. There are around 300,000 retail jobs in this country so we want to get people back into that space. Footfall is returning in certain areas but is moving away in others. In the cities and large urban areas, footfall is down and will take quite some time to recover. It is back to about 60% in some cases but it will take a long time to get back to pre-Covid levels. That said, other areas can benefit from that. We must make sure we manage the opportunities and see how we can equip our towns and villages to take advantage of potentially new customers. We need to get that balance right. We recognised, even before Covid-19, that there was a move to online trading in retail and other sectors. We are trying to row in there with supports to encourage more businesses to adapt their own offering. That is why we have the online retail grant through Enterprise Ireland. That scheme is open again but will close at the end of September. I would

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ask businesses with ten or more employees to look at the scheme and submit an application. It is quite an attractive scheme. The grant in most cases is over €35,000. Most people will also be familiar with the online trading voucher scheme. We have put a lot of extra money into that through the LEOs, with extra staff who are encouraging businesses to go online to compete for the market share that they may have lost in the last couple of years. Online retail sales have really taken off during Covid and we want to make sure that Irish companies can benefit from that too.

Time has run out but we will talk about some of the other issues again.

### **Expenditure Response to Covid-19 Crisis: Statements**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Sin críoch leis na ráitis maidir le poist a chosaint agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do ghnó. Táimid ag dul ar aghaidh anois go dtí an chéad phíosa oibre eile, sé sin ráitis maidir leis an gcaiteachas mar fhreagairt ar ghéarchéim Covid-19.

I now call on the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, who has 30 minutes for his opening statement.

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I will be sharing time with the Ministers of State, Deputies O'Donovan and Ossian Smyth.

I welcome the opportunity to open this debate and to set out from the Government's perspective the very significant response that has been made to the evolving situation regarding Covid-19. As we all know, the onset of this pandemic earlier this year has had an enormous impact on society and on economic activity in this State.

The rapidly evolving nature of the public health situation required the previous Government and the new Government to act quickly to address the challenges facing our citizens as a result.

*10 o'clock* In light of this, the Government has introduced a series of critical expenditure measures designed to support incomes, employers, jobs and the wider economy from the unprecedented shock of Covid-19 and, of course, to provide the necessary funding to our health service to fight this pandemic.

In July, the Government announced a series of measures designed to save small and medium-sized businesses and to help people to get back to work. There is no doubt the income and business supports that were introduced then continue to have a beneficial impact. As we learn as a society how to live with Covid-19, we will have to continue to extend that support to businesses and households.

Approximately €16 billion in additional Covid-19-related expenditure supports will have been provided this year by the Government, which represents a very substantial investment. It equates to roughly 9% of GNI\* and is equivalent to over five times the original increase in gross voted expenditure planned for this year, as set out in the Revised Estimates for Public Services published last December. Looking at the position at the end of August, gross voted expenditure was €10 billion, or 24%, ahead of the same period in 2019. The main drivers of this increase are in the areas of social protection, health and business support. The increase is reflective of the additional Covid-19-related expenditure introduced by the Government to date. All told,

it is currently estimated that gross voted expenditure for this year will be over €86 billion, an increase of over €19 billion, or almost 30%, relative to the outturn last year, or 23% higher than was originally budgeted for 2020.

The House will get a sense of the scale of the response from Government and the impact that has had on the overall expenditure profile of our country. The uncertainty that the virus brings makes it an even greater challenge to formulate a budget. In addition, we must assume that the UK and EU will be trading on WTO terms on 1 January 2021. This all means that spending in the upcoming budget will have to be focused on the policies that help the economy to recover, support businesses and get as many people back to work as possible. Having to deal with one of the challenges of Covid-19 or Brexit in the lead-up to a budget would represent a huge challenge, but having to deal with two at the same time makes the task ahead all the more difficult.

As Deputies will know, first and foremost, aiming to safeguard the health and well-being of our citizens is the number one priority for Government. Building a healthcare system that can cope with Covid-19 is no easy task but it is one we must meet. We must further increase capacity in our healthcare system to prepare for the months ahead and we need even quicker turnaround times for Covid testing. These measures will prove critical during the upcoming winter months.

This House approved the additional Covid-19 health expenditure when it voted through a Revised Estimate in July, including a €2 billion increase relative to the health allocation set out in the forecast published in December last year. This funding has allowed the HSE to put in place important and extraordinary public health measures across a number of key areas, including testing and tracing, nursing home supports, special arrangements with GPs and enhanced procurement, with a focus on PPE and the temporary arrangements that were put in place as a precautionary measure with private hospitals in order to ensure that capacity was increased in the system. Also of vital importance, of course, was the funding that enabled a scale-up in intensive care units and hospital bed capacity generally. Those are supports that we must continue with over the period ahead, particularly when we look at the current trajectory of the virus and the latest figures that have been published.

Further resources have recently been agreed to, for example, extend the scope of the flu vaccination to vulnerable categories. Yesterday, the Government approved €600 million for the 2020-2021 winter initiative to ensure our that health service has the capacity and resources needed to deal with what is forecast to be a very challenging period ahead for the State's health services. The details of that winter initiative will be published by the Minister and the HSE in the next number of days.

Looking ahead, officials in my Department are actively engaging with their counterparts in the Department of Health and the HSE in respect of all of these headings and others with a view to allowing us to return to the House next month with a workable, sustainable and comprehensive allocation for the Department of Health in the context of the 2021 Estimates and budget processes. Overall, the additional expenditure in health this year will be somewhere between €2 billion and €3 billion above what was originally envisaged. We have to now establish what will be the requirement to ensure we have a health service that is fit for purpose to deal with the situation that will arise in the winter months and that will be sustained right through 2021 against the assumption we have to make that Covid-19 will be prevalent throughout that period.

Aside from the public health aspect, the labour market has, as we all know, taken the brunt of the restrictions put in place to tackle the virus, and how this impact evolves into next year will have to be monitored very closely. We are already seeing signs of recovery, but that recovery is uneven and the longer-term scarring effects on the labour market will need to be addressed. This is why so many supports over the past six months have focused on household income and employment supports. As the economy has gradually reopened, much of the damage that was done to individual sectors has been revealed and continues to reveal itself. The impact of that scarring is something that will have to be considered very carefully to ensure we provide the supports that are needed.

The pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, for example, has been shown to be an extremely effective support in responding to the economic impact of Covid-19 and in cushioning the population from sudden income shocks. Currently, just over 200,000 people are in receipt of the payment. This represents a drop of nearly two thirds on the almost 600,000 people who were on the payment at the peak in the first week of May. The payment will continue to run until the beginning of April and we have decided, as a Government, that the scheme will remain open for new applicants until the end of the year, albeit at the reduced rates which kick in this week.

In addition, in support of businesses and their efforts to retain existing jobs and create new ones, the new employment wage support scheme has now succeeded the previous temporary wage subsidy scheme. The new scheme will run until April 2021. As part of it, employers whose turnover has fallen by 30% will receive a flat-rate subsidy of up to €203 per week per employee, including for seasonal staff and for new hires - for people who are taken on - which was one of the main issues raised by employers in the feedback they gave on the initial temporary wage subsidy scheme.

Further supports to the business community continue to be rolled out. The restart grant and the restart grant plus, which is currently available, bring total funding of the restart grant to €550 million, with up to €25,000 available to SMEs under the grant scheme. This Government is committed to supporting our businesses through the crisis. I will continue to consider further measures that can help to support SMEs as the economy continues to reopen, and as we respond to the evolving health situation. With the new plan that has been published, there may be a requirement in different parts of the country to move from one level to another, and we have to be adaptable and agile, as a Government, and be in a position to respond and to provide supports as and when, and where, they are needed throughout the period ahead.

As Deputies will be aware, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Foley, published a roadmap for the full return to school on 27 July and, in support of this plan, additional funding at a cost of over €375 million was provided. Further to this, updated guidelines, including in regard to the use of PPE and enhanced hygiene in schools, were published by the Minister.

The roadmap, supported by the additional funding, succeeded in getting almost 1 million students back to school. By and large, it has gone very well. It is not just important for the young people who have returned to school and who have already borne a heavy burden as a result of this pandemic, it has also proven important for parents and society in general in returning to a sense of normality in these new times.

This funding has enabled schools to prepare for reopening, including making adjustments to the physical arrangement and layout of classrooms. In addition, the funding has facilitated the

recruitment of additional staff. In this regard, the measures in the roadmap include over 1,000 additional teachers being made available to post-primary schools under the free scheme and enhanced supervision supports. Funding is being provided for additional supervision to support the management of physical distancing in secondary schools. To support the availability of substitute teachers in the primary sector, the Department is extending the current pilot supply panels on a nationwide basis for the school year that has now commenced. This will involve the additional allocation of approximately 200 teaching posts.

The Government also recognises the importance of investing in the higher education sector and the essential role this sector can play in driving recovery across regions and in preparing for the opportunities and challenges of what is now a changing economy. As part of the July stimulus plans, a substantial investment of up to €100 million was allocated to the higher education and further education and training sectors, providing over 35,000 additional places in undergraduate, postgraduate, upskilling and reskilling programmes. The new Department with responsibility for further and higher education received an additional €150 million in Exchequer funding to help reduce the impacts from Covid-19 on the higher education and further education sectors. A few examples include supports for ICT, health and safety, mental health supports and increased student access supports. The Exchequer has also provided for an additional 2,225 places in the higher education sector to address the impact of the new calculated grades model and Central Applications Office, CAO, offers in the higher education sector for this academic year.

The Government recognises the positive impact that investment in capital infrastructure can have on the economy. To this end, as part of the July stimulus programme, an additional €500 million was allocated for capital works projects for the remainder of this year, with about €100 million spilling over into 2021. A commitment was also made to invest over €9 billion in capital expenditure next year. This sends a very positive signal to the construction sector and gives it the certainty it needs to plan ahead for next year. There are companies that will invest in Ireland, keep on workers and hire more workers as a direct consequence of these decisions to back capital investment. In finalising the list of projects to be in receipt of funding from the July stimulus package, particular emphasis was placed on supporting projects that had the maximum jobs impact and contributed to key missions of the Government in the areas of climate change and housing.

Looking forward, the programme for Government committed to a substantive mid-term review of the national development plan, NDP. This review will afford the Government the opportunity of reappraising the NDP and realigning it with the new priorities set out in the programme for Government and to ensure it is consistent with the Project Ireland 2040 plan. We intend to set out an overall capital envelope for the next decade to 2030 and provide individual ceilings for Departments for the next five years. This will give them a high degree of certainty in order that they can plan the delivery of projects under their areas of responsibility for the next number of years. That is important.

Ensuring the provision of the necessary funding to support our citizens and to protect vital public services over the next phase of the Covid-19 pandemic will be the overarching priority in budget 2021. While directing resources to these areas, we will also ensure that existing services are preserved and that the increases in capital investment set out in the NDP are implemented in order to support the recovery in the economy. Over the next four weeks, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and I will intensify the preparations that are well under way at this stage for budget 2021. We have set out some of the main assumptions underpinning our ap-

proach to that budget. The assumption, unfortunately, of there being no trade deal in the context of Brexit is one we all hope will not materialise. There is also the assumption that we will have to deal with Covid-19 through next year. We are determined to be agile and responsive to the needs of the economy next year and that is why we intend to put in place a recovery fund. We will outline the details of that in the Budget Statement. In addition, the Government will publish a new national economic plan in the middle of November which will set out its policies for the next number of years in key areas. I refer, for example, to enterprise policy, the policy on reskilling and policies on the development of a new green economy. We look forward to all that work.

All of this has had a profound impact on the public finances. We are facing a deficit this year in the range of €25 billion to €30 billion. Next year, on the basis of no policy change and looking at the amount of Covid-related expenditure we will have to incur in the health, education and transport systems and in other areas, there will be a need to borrow between €15 billion and €19 billion in cash. That is before we make new decisions about implementing programme for Government commitments and undertaking new policy initiatives. This gives a sense of the scale of the impact on our economy, our budgetary position and the fiscal outlook within which the Government will have to work. We are in a period of unprecedented and extraordinary uncertainty, but the Government is determined to respond to that in the best way it can by supporting our citizens, protecting vital public services and ensuring we provide supports for businesses through next year. We are putting the recovery fund in place to be able to respond to the emerging and evolving needs.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth):** As outlined by the Minister, the Government has taken significant action to support our key public services, particularly the health service, and to provide funding for workers and businesses impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The estimated cost of these measures is approximately €16 billion. This leaves overall gross voted expenditure for the year at more than €86 billion.

The first phase of the expenditure response to the Covid-19 pandemic involved significant additional funding for the health service to support scaling up capacity in acute and community settings, for equipment such as ventilators and PPE and to secure the full capacity of private hospitals for a three-month period. In this phase, the emergency measures of the PUP and temporary wage subsidy scheme were also introduced to support workers and businesses. In early May, with significant restrictions on economic activity in place, there were almost 600,000 people in receipt of the PUP. In tandem with these income support schemes, a number of emergency business supports have also been introduced. These include liquidity supports, restart grants for businesses negatively impacted by Covid-19 and a commercial rates waiver.

The next phase of the Government's response seeks to minimise the potential longer-term effects of the crisis on our economy. By supporting the connection between workers and employers and providing targeted supports to business, the objective of policy has been to facilitate business restarts as public health restrictions are eased. Expanding on these initial supports, the July stimulus package includes a number of measures designed to support the economy as businesses and society reopen. The purpose of these measures is to provide additional targeted supports to stimulate activity across the economy, assist firms and support employment. Critically, the July stimulus package included the following measures: extending the PUP and wage subsidy scheme to the end of March next year; the provision of further grants to enterprises and an extension of the commercial rates waivers to six months; targeted investment programme in

the life sciences and a specific tourism initiative; additional capital works across a number of sectors to support necessary infrastructure development.

Of critical importance is the fact that this Government recognises the impact that investment in our capital infrastructure can make on the lives of our citizens. To this end, job-rich projects that contribute to key missions of the Government, such as climate change or housing, have been targeted. With a view to supporting better transport infrastructure across the country, the stimulus package for transport includes the following measures: €40 million for pedestrian infrastructure; €42 million to support urban and rural cyclists; €21 million towards improving rail journeys; and €10 million for the adaptation of the road network to protect it from climate change.

With regard to housing, 2,000 social housing units will be targeted for refurbishment in order to be re-let to individuals and families struggling with homelessness or who may be on the social housing list. Further to this, housing retrofitting is a major part of the Government's climate action plan. In light of this, as part of the July stimulus, an additional €100 million has been committed in 2021 to the energy efficiency national retrofit programme. This will double the overall impact of the programme in 2021 and will provide certainty to the industry regarding the Government's ambition in and commitment to this area, thus encouraging a focus on long-term capacity building for the remainder of this year.

More broadly, looking forward, delivering on our commitments on capital investment will be important in supporting the recovery in the economy. In this regard, the Government committed to the previously published gross voted capital expenditure amount of €9.1 billion for next year in the July stimulus plan. This represents an increase of €1 billion on the capital expenditure amount for 2020 set out in the Revised Estimates for public services 2020, published in December last year. In this regard, the decision to bring forward the review of the national development plan from 2022 is of critical importance. In carrying out this review, it is important to note that this Government has committed to recognising the importance of balanced regional development, clustered and compact growth and improved connectivity to deliver economic prosperity and environmental sustainability. The review will include an overview of the macroeconomic context and justification for the planned level of expenditure, taking into account demand and supply side constraints. This is critically important as enhanced investment in new infrastructure, such as new healthcare centres, schools, affordable housing units, public transport and renewable energy will create jobs and deliver tangible assets that will fuel the long-term economic growth we need to help restore our public finances and improve the delivery of public services for our citizens.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I will speak specifically to my own area of responsibility, namely, the Office of Public Works, OPW, which has three main focuses: heritage services, flood risk management and estate management. As an organisation, the OPW provides a wide spectrum of essential services and has largely continued to function in many areas during this period. The OPW has implemented considerable business continuity measures throughout the various phases of restrictions to ensure that services deemed essential to the public, including Departments and local authorities, could continue during a shutdown of workplaces. Throughout this period, a wide network of regional offices has continued to maintain the safe and ongoing operation of up to 2,000 public service buildings, where, in turn, essential services in health, social welfare and other areas have been provided to the public. Drainage maintenance services in our workplaces across the country continue to implement work plans during the optimal maintenance season

and have minimised the impact of restrictions on much critical seasonal work.

As regards construction and maintenance works under both the flooding and property management programmes, many of the services and contract works, while initially stalled, have continued and recovered to original timelines and profiled budgets. The safe operation of construction sites for major capital projects was achieved in partnership with contractors from 18 May, when the Government allowed for the return of critical projects, and many have recovered to their original delivery timeframes. This has all been facilitated by more than 1,000 staff within the OPW who have been successfully set up to operate from home. Gradually, these staff are now returning to the workplace, which has been made safe for their return through the installation of measures to comply with physical distancing and a secure place to work.

The OPW was also very pleased to be able to play a critical role in advising other Departments and offices across the public service on how to safely return to the workplace. Through a series of well-received webinars and meetings, the OPW reached out to several hundred officials to provide advice and support on the issue of returning to the workplace. My office was also centrally involved in the provision of expert advice on enabling major contractors to also return to critical and strategically important building sites across the country, thus ensuring an efficient and rapid upscaling in economic activity.

The OPW has also worked closely with the HSE, An Garda Síochána and other front-line agencies to assist them in issues relating to the provision of emergency property solutions. This continuity of service has been facilitated and achieved through risk management and business continuity plans for each business area, delivered within an overall Covid-19 response plan for the office, which is a living document reviewed on an ongoing basis in consultation with OPW managers and workers, while constantly being steered by the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. The plans will now be adapted to align with measures in the Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19 document, which was published this week.

An assessment of the business impact of Covid-19 continues across the main work programmes of the OPW. However, with the co-operation of staff and contractors, the impact on financial outturns and work output has largely been minimised in 2020, which in turn has ensured a continuity of services within the wider economy.

Within the heritage estate, many of the visitor sites had to close for a period, yet access to parks and outside areas was an important facility available to the public during the restrictions and included dedicated space and time for many people who were required to cocoon in recent months. I am pleased that most visitor sites have adapted to the new requirements and are now safely open to the public. They will continue to play an important role in the recovery of the tourism industry and will be a much-needed recreational facility for the public in the period to come. The value of the heritage sector has never been more apparent. It is a tremendous asset for the people that is protected, presented and maintained by the OPW. In support of this, I announced an initiative that waives admission charges to many OPW heritage sites as part of the Government's July stimulus package, in an effort to encourage domestic tourism and support the tourism economy.

The OPW has now moved to considering the role we can play in the ongoing recovery. I welcome the provision of an additional €10 million funding from the Government under the recent economic stimulus programme, which will allow for the acceleration of well-distributed

work programmes of essential works at Government-occupied buildings and heritage properties.

Widespread restrictions are difficult on us all, individually and as a society. Together, we need to reduce the opportunity for the virus to spread from person to person. We need to do this individually and collectively so that we can continue to prioritise protecting the most vulnerable, our healthcare system and our education services. Over the coming months, our objective is to suppress the virus to the lowest possible level in order that we can continue our lives to the greatest possible level.

As Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW, I note that this building is maintained by OPW staff, as are all other Department buildings. I acknowledge the contributions they have made during a very difficult time, as well as those of staff in Leinster House and the Ceann Comhairle. OPW staff often go unnoticed in a very quiet way in the maintenance of this and other public buildings and they have kept the cogs of the State turning at the same time.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I am sharing time with Deputies Pearse Doherty and Brian Stanley.

Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus an Aire Stáit as an méid a dúirt siad. Ní fhéadfaí beag is fiú a dhéanamh de thionchar an choróinvíris ar ár ngeilleagar, ár bpobal agus, ar ndóigh, ar shaol na cosmhuintire. Cailleadh daoine le linn na paindéime seo, chaill teaghlaigh a n-ioncaim ar fad agus níl a fhios ag go leor daoine céard atá i ndán dóibh. Teastaíonn infheistíocht inár ndaoine, inár ngnóthaí agus inár bpobal. Cinntíonn infheistíocht níos airde go gearrthéarmach costas níos ísle eacnamaíochta agus sóisialta go fadtéarmach.

It is hard to overstate the devastating impact Covid-19 has had on our economy, our communities and people's lives. We have heard this pandemic and our battle with this virus being likened to a wartime situation and I think that language is fitting. Families have lost loved ones, whole households have lost their incomes, and many people have no idea what the future holds. These unprecedented times have required us to take the kinds of drastic measures that would be unheard of outside of a wartime situation. The various income support measures that were introduced have been essential in keeping the economy going, keeping people in jobs and preventing the mass immiseration of people. However, many feel they have been completely forgotten during this pandemic, such as the people who have gathered outside this building on Kildare Street and on Merrion Square; the taxi drivers who protested outside yesterday; the Debenhams workers, about whom we had a robust debate earlier; carers and many others. We are in extraordinary times and it is worth noting that when the Revised Estimates were debated in May and additional expenditure was sought, we knew that much of it had already been spent. That is reflective of the extreme fluidity and uncertainty of the situation in which we are living. Voted spending is now well above pre-pandemic forecasts, with social protection and health naturally accounting for the lion's share. While on the face of it this might seem shocking in magnitude, it is matched in scale only by the level of the crisis. Higher expenditure in the short term is necessary to avoid long-term social and economic devastation.

I recognise the Government having taken on board much of the constructive criticism that has been made by me and colleagues and the various anomalies we have highlighted, especially in income and business supports. Several of the shortcomings we highlighted were addressed, such as our work to increase the subsidy for low-paid workers under the temporary wage subsidy scheme and to include SMEs that were initially excluded from grants. There are, however,

ongoing issues with the lack of an appeals process for the PUP and the eligibility for certain groups, including artists, musicians and others in the entertainment industry. We have heard how difficult they have had it in contributions this evening and through the various representations made by that sector to all of us in recent days. There is also the fact that under the new EWSS, employees with gross weekly income of less than €152 per week will not be eligible for any subsidy. It is still my hope that these issues, in addition to the many others we raised, will be recognised in the forthcoming budget.

We know that on the path ahead the fiscal rules have been abandoned and no timeline for their reintroduction has been proposed. Restrictive rules for government spending at a time of unprecedented crisis are a recipe for disaster, as the period of harsh fiscal austerity clearly demonstrated. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, an institution known for its cautious conservatism, has forecast that our deficit will fall dramatically over the next five years, and that is without the need for austerity measures. The programme for Government states that budget 2021 will set out a medium-term roadmap detailing how Ireland will reduce the deficit and return to a broadly balanced budget, but this phrasing concerns me slightly. Surely the Government has learned the lessons of the previous crisis. Past Governments have tended to have a poor record on counter-cyclical spending and have often reflected that old Charlie McCreevy mantra of “When we have it, we spend it, and when we do not have it, we do not spend it.”

Deficit reduction should not be the guide for our economic policy over the medium term. What matters now is not the size of our deficit but the sustainability of our debt. We know from the financial crisis that the victims of premature deficit reduction are always infrastructure and public services, and times such as this pandemic show how vital these services are and how much more vulnerable a lack of investment made us when battling Covid-19. I acknowledge that the Minister stated building a healthcare system that can cope with Covid-19 is no easy task but that it is one we must meet, and I hope that will remain crucial to any further spending decisions. It would be a more progressive and pragmatic strategy for the Government to adopt the golden rule approach to budgetary spending, whereby the Government borrows to fund capital investment projects that will benefit future generations by enhancing accessibility and facilitating trade, improving mobility, generating greater employment opportunities and boosting overall economic productivity.

We need to remember that investment is not a cost but something that can increase our productive capacity and boost future growth. This was done in the late 1980s and helped to reduce our debt-to-GDP ratio by almost 50%. The major difference is that today we can borrow to fund this capital investment at historically low rates and it would be negligent not to do so. Last week, the National Treasury Management Agency, our debt management agency, sold €1 billion worth of bonds at a negative rate of 0.098%. This essentially means investors are paying the State to borrow their money. It offers a significant opportunity for major capital investment projects that can put people back to work in good jobs with good pay and addresses serious deficiencies in housing and health that have spanned numerous Governments, helping to bring about more inclusive growth that will shrink our debt as a proportion of economic growth.

The Minister stated last week that this should be an investment-led recovery and I agree. This certainly seems to be the approach taken by some member states. The French President, Emmanuel Macron, has just announced the France relaunch stimulus programme, which proposes €100 billion in spending on jobs, businesses and large environmental capital projects. Earlier this summer the German Government announced plans for €40 billion in green projects as part of its €120 billion stimulus package. We need to replicate this in our own right.

Some commentators in the Irish media have tried to downplay the severity and scale of the economic crisis. They have sought refuge in our headline GDP figures, which demonstrated the lowest year-on-year decline of all EU member states for the second quarter. We shed less than 3%, whereas Spain's GDP shrank by a whopping 22.5%. As my colleague, Deputy Doherty, noted last Tuesday, when examined from a jobs point of view, which should be the real measure of resilience, we exhibited the second highest number of job losses, narrowly losing out to Spain. How can we be the best performing economy in terms of GDP and yet second only to Spain, the country with the worst rate of job losses? I do not wish to go into the details because we all know the issues with using GDP as a measure of the health of the economy, but recent data from the Parliamentary Budgetary Office show that, to date, annual corporation tax receipts have outperformed forecasts, with August receipts being 31.5% higher than the same period last year. This is being driven mainly by the multinational sector, with the likes of big pharma and big tech taken into consideration, but we should not forget that SMEs account for more than 99% of active enterprises in the State and almost 70% of employment. This sector is struggling. As a recent Economic and Social Research Institute report showed, almost 50% of SMEs do not have enough cash reserves to cover one month's expenses, so it is little wonder that Ireland is currently the worse EU country for investment.

A simple way of measuring investment within the economy is to look at gross fixed capital formation, which is a component of the expenditure method of calculating GDP and includes spending on the likes of plant machinery, equipment purchases, land improvements, and the construction of railways, roads, residential dwellings and industrial and commercial buildings. It takes account of how much is being built and the kinds of productive assets that help bring about even more production. According to European statistics, we are the worst in this class. Gross fixed capital formation has fallen off a cliff, which means we are currently the second worst in the EU in terms of job losses and the worst in terms of investing in production. This is where the State needs to step in, not merely with current spending but also with capital expenditure.

Tá sé soiléir dúinn ar fad go bhfuil dúshlán mór romhainn. Baineann an dúshlán sin le cúrsaí sláinte, eacnamaíochta agus sóisialta. Tá go leor plé déanta againn ar na himpleachtaí atá ag an ngéarchéim seo ar mheabhairshláinte na ndaoine. Nuair atáimid ag déileáil leis an bhfadhb seo agus ag iarraidh athshlánú eacnamaíochta a dhéanamh, ba cheart dúinn a chinntiú go bhfuil na daoine agus na pobail i gcoilár chuile shórt atá á dhéanamh againn. Nuair atáimid ag cruthú post maith a íocann go maith, ba chóir dúinn a chinntiú go bhfuil siad sna ceantacha éagsúla agus ní hamháin sna cathracha. Sna blianta atá amach romhainn, agus muid ag breathnú siar ar an bpaindéim seo, tá súil agam go mbeidh Stát níos cothroime againn ná mar atá againn anois.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire agus leis an Aire Stáit as na róil nua atá acu. Ní bhfuair mé deis é sin a rá ar urlár na Dála roimhe seo.

Léiríonn an phaindéim seo dúinn go bhfuil sé ar chumas an Stáit bogadh go gasta le ioncaim, le sláinte agus le poist a chosaint má tá an toil ann. While the level of spending to confront this threat has been considerable, it is not unparalleled and we should remind ourselves of that. On previous occasions, the State poured €44 billion into the banks a decade ago, following a famous era of Government mismanagement. In comparison, the State committed an additional €7.8 billion in expenditure to respond to Covid-19 to the end of August of this year. So, as we begin to hear some of the usual voices bang the drum of deficit reduction and fiscal prudence, this comparison from ten years ago is worth bearing in mind. To be clear, the additional ex-

penditure in our economy and public services was not an option; it was simply necessary. The alternative was social and economic ruin. Had the Department of Health not spent an additional €1.2 billion to the end of August, the consequences for our health, our citizens, those at risk and our healthcare workers would have been devastating. Had the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection not spent an additional €6.2 billion to the end of August, the 600,000 people who had lost their jobs throughout this period would have faced tremendous hardship. That is the context in which we must view additional expenditures to respond to the Covid-19 crisis. It was not an option; it was a necessity. I also wish to note that the conditions for such spending have been particularly favourable for this State with the cost of borrowing at historic low levels. We know that the NTMA has issued €21 billion in bonds this year with an average yield of 0.25% and that is welcome. Some of the most recent issuances, as Deputy Farrell pointed out, have been at negative interest rates. These conditions are likely to continue and the capacity of the State to manage and increase stock of public debt in a sustainable manner will be largely determined by this Government's ability to protect incomes and invest in the future in a prudent way.

Spending across all Vote groups to the end of August stood at €52 billion, which is 18% ahead of the pre-pandemic profile. The increase in expenditure was mostly driven, as we know, from current expenditure, with health and social protection comprising most of the increases. Since the beginning of the pandemic a number of schemes and additional supports were introduced by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, including the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, the temporary wage subsidy scheme and recently, unfortunately, the new, flawed employment wage subsidy scheme. The pandemic unemployment payment was introduced to ensure that workers and families did not face an income cliff brought about by a sudden and unexpected unemployment. The very introduction of this payment was itself recognition by this House and society that the existing social protection system was not fit for purpose. To date, payments totalling €3.5 billion have been made under PUP, reflecting the damage caused to jobs and to incomes.

Figures recently published by EUROSTAT show that Ireland suffered the second highest job losses in Europe from April to July this year. The figure in this regard is twice the European average. While the virus is the same across Europe at different levels and different degrees, the consequence here in this State has been twice as many jobs losses than the European average. As Deputy Farrell outlined, we are second only to Spain in terms of topping the league. Ós rud é go bhfuil an ráta dífhostaíochta is airde ar fud na hEorpa againn mar gheall ar Covid-19, caithfidh sé nach bhfuil ag éirí go maith leis an Rialtas maidir leis seo.

With the possibility of stricter public health measures in the time ahead, unemployment is likely to remain persistently high. This will be exasperated, in my view, by the new employment wage subsidy scheme. The temporary wage subsidy scheme was a crucial policy measure and one that Sinn Féin supported. Having submitted our proposals to the Minister for Finance in mid-March of this year, we worked constructively with him to address the deficiencies. We were successful in ensuring that there was an increase in rent supplement for lower income workers and also to ensure that women returning from maternity leave were not locked out of the scheme. By the end of August, it had provided €2.8 billion in crucial supports to 663,000 employees and 65,000 employers. Then came 1 September and a new scheme has been introduced to replace the old one that will run to the end of March 2021. I have concerns in regard to the design of this scheme, which I have raised previously in the Dáil with the Minister and I raised again earlier this evening. It is outrageous that 153,000 workers, those who are the

lowest income earners in this State and earn below €151.50, are completely locked out of this scheme. Not one cent of support will come from Government for those workers to their employers. That is scandalous. I also believe that the cuts to the level of wage supports of other workers through their employers is not warranted given the economic shock and situation we are in. The scheme amounts to a blanket reduction in wage support, failing to take into account the unequal impact of public health measures across our economy. While it is claimed that this will generate savings to the State, in my view this scheme will cost the State because jobs that could have been saved will be lost and businesses that could have been rescued will close or go into liquidation and close. I am, therefore, calling on the Minister to change course in government to end the blanket reduction in wage supports that give no regard to the unequal impact felt across the sector and that locks 153,000 workers out of the scheme.

We know that the health Vote to the end of August was up €1.2 billion above its pre-pandemic profile, with the majority of additional spending arising from acute hospital care, procurement of PPE and community care. The level of additional expenditure in our health service is not a fiscal concern but is a public health requirement. If we are to contain the spread of the virus, further spending and investment will be required for the remainder of 2020 and the years ahead. I will reiterate a point I made already because it needs to be made. The reason we have such severe restrictions in this State is because we under-invested in our health system for well over a decade. We have a serious issue of capacity, which is one of the factors in terms of what type of restrictions will be placed on society. That is a problem and we need to rectify it. We can never again find ourselves in a situation where our health system is so weak such strict impositions have to be placed on communities, people and businesses.

I echo what has been said by my colleague, Deputy Farrell, on the future direction. We need to see an end to the fiscal conservatism in respect not only of this year's budget but beyond. We need to take a leaf out of the book of some of the governments across Europe. The French Prime Minister was mentioned earlier by my colleague in regard to the €100 billion recovery plan announced, €5 billion of it in railway infrastructure, €7 billion in retrofitting and €30 billion in social cohesion projects, including employment projects and skills training for the French youth. In Germany, a €130 billion recovery plan was announced in June. This is the type of path we need to follow. We need to ensure that the things that were failed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the past ten years are rectified. Let us build the houses to house our people. Let us fix the capacity issue in our hospitals. Let us make sure that life is affordable for ordinary people and let us make sure that we continue to support businesses in a real and adequate way and that there is a proper social security net for those who fall on hard times.

I am disappointed that the Minister is bragging about a €9 billion capital investment. It is not near what we need in this year's budget, it needs to go way above that. There are shovel ready projects that need the go-ahead at this point in time. I give the example of Finn Harps stadium in Donegal. More than €1.2 million was spent on it by Government years ago. It is lying idle now with grass growing over it. It is shovel ready and has planning permission. It could lead to a return to work for people in a county that has the highest level of unemployment per proportion of people on the pandemic unemployment payment but the Government will not sanction it. Instead, it leaves the €1.2 million spent withering on the ground. This is not acceptable. These types of projects exist across the State. This is the way we can get our people back to work. We need to get the economy going and we need to invest our way out of the difficulties we have at this point in time.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The HSE is forecasting that it will spend more than €1 billion this

year on PPE. From Sinn Féin's point of view it is essential that we retain as much of that money as possible in the Irish economy. This means purchasing as much PPE as possible from businesses in Ireland and developing domestic capacity over time. This will help to relieve pressure on the Exchequer, it will stimulate job creation and it will allow us to recirculate a significant amount of money within the Irish economy. Prior to Covid-19, the HSE typically spent €20 million per annum on PPE with little or no indigenous production. It, therefore, makes perfect sense us to begin to develop our own capacity of PPE supply chains not just for Covid-19 but for post-Covid-19 when the health sector will require a larger supply.

From the information released by the HSE we can see that only a fraction of the HSE spend is being retained in Ireland. One particular Chinese company, China Resources Pharmaceutical Group, has been paid more than €225 million this year for PPE. We accept that PPE had to be purchased but we should not be facing into a crisis in that way. Surely, we can find a more practical way of providing PPE which represents better value for money. There are many small firms, including in my own constituency of Laois-Offaly, that are involved in fabrics and upholstery etc. that could produce masks, gowns and visors, etc.. I am proposing to the Minister that he put in place a scheme through the local enterprise offices to identify companies and to work with local businesses to establish local supply chains and to begin developing the capacity to produce PPE in this country.

It is important for the taxpayer that this Government secures a better deal with the private hospitals this winter than we have had to date. Again, this was the right thing to do to increase capacity at the time but we did not get a good deal. We know from the figures released by the HSE that the State paid €115 million per month to private hospitals and a grand total of €338 million in three months. We need to ask why we paid €44,000 per bed when the United Kingdom secured private hospital beds at a cost of €10,000 each. Why are we paying €592,000 per ventilator when the United Kingdom pays €68,000? What are we doing this time around to ensure the new deal represents value for taxpayers' money?

What work has the Department of Health done to increase public hospital intensive care unit capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic? This is not just about temporary capacity but rather long-term capacity. Prior to the pandemic Ireland had only six intensive care unit beds per 100,000 people, which is only half the European Union average and much lower than what is available in Germany. In Tullamore hospital, for example, there are just four intensive care unit beds and Portlaoise hospital, critically, has only two such beds. That is for a population catchment area of more than 160,000 people. It leaves us in a tricky position if there is a surge in Covid-19 numbers.

These are matters in our health services that must be addressed regardless of whether the pandemic continues. We could have a win in the health area and for the economy by addressing them.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I will ask Deputy Nash to adjourn the debate at 11 p.m. There are approximately nine minutes left.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** We are approaching that time. I will not waste any more of my time so.

It is no exaggeration to say we are at an absolutely critical juncture in our history and Covid-19 has exposed some of the existing strains and inequalities in our society and economy. Putting it frankly, there should be no going back to business as usual or to an inequitable and

unfair economic model that sees over 20% of our workers on low pay. There should be no going back to a services model where those with the wherewithal get to see a doctor first because they can pay for it. There should be no going back either to a housing system of endless rent rises and a life of precarity for those forced to rent because the State has decided it will not or cannot house them securely.

The recent July stimulus initiative was a missed opportunity to chart what I might describe as a new course for our country. As I said at the time, in truth all we really got was more of the same from the tired Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael toolbox. The upcoming budget and national economic recovery plan will be an opportunity to do things differently. In many ways it may be a last-chance saloon for the Government to put its imprint on a new economic model and social contract. Unfortunately, the early indications are of some concern.

The presentation of the narrative from some people in Government Buildings when it comes to so-called fiscal sustainability is a little worrying, for example. What is more, this is completely out of kilter with the *zeitgeist* and winds of change sweeping across Europe. Of course, we will know the colour of the money from the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform on budget day. I look forward to getting a greater understanding of how the national economic recovery fund is designed to work, although we will have to wait until next spring to hear more detail from the Minister on how he proposes to balance the books in future.

Such is the scale of the economic challenge facing us we see fiscal conservatives such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel backing a bigger European Union budget and so-called corona bonds as part of a Keynesian approach to a Covid-19 recovery. The Italian Prime Minister, who leads one of the worst-hit countries on the Continent, has recently stated that Covid-19 is “an opportunity ... to design a better Italy, to work on a serious, comprehensive investment plan that will make the country more modern, greener and more socially inclusive”. That is a sentiment backed by other countries right across the Continent.

In contrast, we are hearing clarion calls from certain quarters about the need for a clear and credible deficit and debt reduction plan and the need to return to a balanced budget as quickly as possible. My advice to the Minister is to tread carefully on that front. To be clear, the Minister cannot cut his way out of this crisis and he admitted as much, in fairness to him, in a recent *Sunday Business Post* interview. I will hold him to account on that commitment not just at the next budget - it will be an unusual budget - but over the lifetime of this Government. To go about cutting now risks turning a health and short-term economic crisis into a long-term social crisis, with the Economic and Social Research Institute already warning against moving too quickly to try to rein in the budget deficit.

Make no mistake, this crisis is fundamentally different from that of 2009, when Ireland suffered a banking, public finance and economic crisis as well as social and reputational damage. We now have options. Put simply, in 2009 we could not borrow but now we can do so at practically negative interest rates. We also have access to a substantial level of grants and low-cost loans as part of an unprecedented European Union recovery plan. Not only may we borrow to invest but it makes practical sense to do so.

OECD evidence demonstrates that when the public capital stock and interest rates are low, borrowing for capital investment in badly needed housing projects, public retrofitting and transport infrastructure, for example, more than pays for itself in the long run. Such State investment is badly needed with the massive drop in private investment within the domestic economy,

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which has been measured at upwards of 16%. For example, in housing alone, private sector investment outpaces public investment by more than two to one but it is now inevitable that we will see a major drop-off in investment from the private sector while we still have nearly 70,000 people on the social housing waiting list and 10,000 people homeless. One does not need to be an economist to see first-hand what years of underinvestment has done, whether it is in housing, the caring economy or climate action. We are well behind the curve.

Before Covid-19 Ireland already had the lowest rate of general government expenditure in both the European Union and OECD so we are effectively playing catch-up on our European Union counterparts. Increased public investment is required and now is no time for fiscal conservatism.

It would, of course, be churlish of me and my party not to acknowledge the unprecedented and expensive measures that have been taken, many of them paid for with borrowed money over the past few months. They have kept people in work and businesses afloat. The Minister admitted in his contribution that more needs to be done over the short to medium term. In the short term we must absolutely maintain supports for workers and businesses and in the long run we must focus on capital investment and retraining to create the new sustainable jobs and opportunities of the future.

This, however, does not give the Government *carte blanche* to write blank cheques without care or consequences. It is interesting that over the past few months there has been a lack of clarity in the reporting and oversight of money being spent in response to the pandemic. That is not my opinion but rather what the Parliamentary Budget Office has intimated.

For example, despite the Minister's role being that of guardian of public expenditure, he has repeatedly allowed Cabinet colleagues to come before the House this summer with Revised Estimates allocating billions of euro in additional spending without any concrete or clear indication of the intended outcomes of the expenditure. It is no way to do business and I hope it is a once-off experience.

The July stimulus represented another multi-billion euro bailout to many big businesses. There were very important initiatives for our small and medium enterprise and main street businesses but many big and very profitable businesses benefited from handouts from the Government without any social or environmental conditionality attached whatever, such as the requirement to pay a living wage or commitments to carbon reductions.

We also saw some ill-targeted tax reliefs for people on higher incomes, including an extended help-to-buy scheme and bike-to-work schemes. These kinds of handouts to higher earners will undoubtedly represent a dead-weight loss to the Exchequer; the initial help-to-buy scheme, for example, already proved to be such a loss. I often wonder why the Minister allowed such measures to be signed off but it seems from some of the documentation we have seen that some of the measures were introduced against the advice of expert officials.

With regard to pay increases for the public sector, I note with interest the Minister's recent comments to the media on the 2% pay restoration for public services. Quite frankly and with respect, it was disingenuous of the Minister to suggest the decision to award the pay restoration - not pay rise - was on the basis of public servants doing "a really good job over the past six months". I wonder if these are the same public servants that have been lying on the couch watching box sets, according to the Minister's Fianna Fáil colleague, Deputy MacSharry. As

the Minister well knows, the Government had to honour a signed agreement and it was not offering some sort of award to public servants for their good service.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to propose the adjournment. He will have just under two minutes left in his slot. I am sure a number of us want to get home to watch those box sets at this hour of the night.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** Indeed.

The Dáil adjourned at 11 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 17 September 2020.