



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 6 Deireadh Fómhair 2020

Tuesday, 6 October 2020

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday was a critical day in our fight against Covid-19. The Taoiseach and I spoke yesterday afternoon as he considered the public health advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET. I am glad the Taoiseach also spoke to Michelle O'Neill and Arlene Foster about strengthening the all-Ireland approach. There is no doubt that the decision facing Government yesterday was hugely challenging. It has decided not to implement the NPHET recommendation to move to level 5 and instead we will move to level 3 from midnight tonight. The truth is that a move to level 5 now would have proven catastrophic for workers, families and businesses. I say this because the Government has cut the supports and protections that they need simply to survive and get by. I was very alarmed by the aggressive approach taken by the Tánaiste on RTÉ last night. Governments ask for advice and, when given advice, they should accept it with some level of maturity and grace and then make their decision. The NPHET recommendation comes against a backdrop of very high levels of community transmission and, critically, very low capacity within our health service. NPHET is worried and it is right to be worried. Listening to the Tánaiste last night, one would never think he had been Minister for Health, much less that he and his party had been leading Government for the past decade or, indeed, that he joined with the Taoiseach in cutting supports like the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, that people rely on.

The vulnerabilities that we now face are down to the Taoiseach and his partner in government, Deputy Varadkar. In 2009, we had 289 intensive care beds. More than a decade on, we have 280. We have fewer intensive care beds now than we had more than a decade ago. This represents a decade of failure from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. It is on them. Last night, as the Cabinet had come to its decision, there were only 39 adult intensive care beds available. That is the situation we face and it is a troubling one. Along with testing and tracing, capacity in our hospitals is perhaps the most important measure to protect us from going into very severe lockdowns. It is how we ensure that non-Covid care is not suspended again with the terrible impacts that has. It is how we will keep our schools, economy and society open during this pandemic. When we spoke yesterday, I asked the Taoiseach to provide assurances that we were

winter ready, in other words, that we have the necessary supplies of personal protective equipment, PPE, testing kits, reagent, laboratory spaces and ventilators to deal with the second surge. He could not give me that assurance. I find that very worrying given the rate of infection in the community, the resurgence of the virus in nursing homes and the increase in people over the age of 65 contracting this virus. It seems that the Government does not have its eye on the ball and does not have a grasp on what is needed to ensure people can live safely alongside the virus. This came across strongly in what the Tánaiste had to say last night. He expressed his concern about mental health, isolation and poverty. If the Government is really concerned about these things then take action next week in the budget.

Is the Taoiseach concerned at the lack of capacity in intensive care? Does he accept that we now need to urgently increase ICU capacity as we enter winter in this pandemic?

The Taoiseach: Unity of purpose on all fronts is essential in dealing with a pandemic of this scale and severity, including within this House. The Deputy has consistently sought in recent times to undermine not just the efforts of the Government but those of the HSE in the context of acute hospital care, testing capacity and so forth.

The Deputy has now misrepresented the telephone conversation she had with me yesterday when she said I could not give her assurances. That is not true and she has no right to misrepresent a phone call of that importance. I took her in good faith. The Deputy made clear to me that it would be catastrophic to move to level 5. She could not understand how we could move from level 2 to level 5 and I agreed with her on that.

I take seriously the advice from NPHET about the exponential growth of case numbers. The situation out there is serious in terms of the growth of cases. That is why we have moved to level 3 in accordance with the Government's graduated plan, which involved discussions with NPHET prior to its formulation and publication. I believe we have an obligation to the public and to industry, business and jobs. There is an expectation they should have a sense of knowing when we could move from level 2 to level 3, level 3 to level 4 and level 4 to level 5.

Given that the advice we received on Thursday was to basically stay at level 2 outside of counties Dublin and Donegal, to then move on Sunday to level 5 would have been an enormous shock to people and jobs. The Government must take wider issues into consideration. To be fair to NPHET and the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, they have to advise on public health grounds. We take that advice seriously and I have great respect for the CMO and NPHET. I have known the CMO for a long time and served with him during my time as Minister for Health. At that stage, he was deputy CMO and worked with me on the SARS-CoV-2 situation.

What must also be acknowledged, and I believe the CMO does, is simply that the impact of moving to level 5 would have been severe on the lives of many people. I spoke to him before the Cabinet decision because it is not something I recommended to the Cabinet or that the Cabinet decided upon lightly as one wants a common approach to this. We know from our analysis of the pandemic to date that lockdowns affect lower paid people, those in lower income groups and the marginalised more. When schools close, disadvantaged students lose out. Notwithstanding that we have provided for the continuation of education at level 5, there is no guarantee that would happen. One must foresee all eventualities. Disadvantaged children suffered most during the lockdown when schools were closed and, likewise, in terms of income streams, impact on employment, workers and young people. Young people do not have savings to fall back on and will suffer enormously in a level 5 scenario. These are serious and profound decisions

with profound impacts on society and the economy.

The Deputy said the country was not ready because of cuts to services. That is not the case. It is the enormity of what a lockdown does. We are already looking at a budget next week when we will have a substantial deficit of well over €20 billion. We are projecting similar figures for the entirety of 2021. The intervention to support people has been unprecedented. At one stage, more than 1 million people were on the Government payroll during the lockdown. We are looking at hundreds of thousands of people being made unemployed once we get to level 5, so it is not unreasonable for Government to take stock before deciding to go to that level in one fell swoop knowing the implications it would have on economic sustainability in the longer term. Already pandemic unemployment payments have cost about €3.6 billion which is fine. It is vital and just. It will move to €5.2 billion. Yesterday we decided at this stage not to move to level 5, but it is in all our hands collectively to avoid having to go to level 4 and level 5. The only way we can do that is by ensuring we contain the virus by our individual behaviours and our collective behaviour.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government cut the pandemic unemployment payment and the wage subsidy. That is the reality. For all of those in low paid work to whom the Taoiseach referred, and whom he correctly said are disproportionately affected by a very severe lockdown, let me tell him that the fact the Government cut these important supports looms large and is to the forefront of their thoughts when there is any talk of a complete lockdown, because those are the supports they rely on to pay their bills and to live.

The Taoiseach said the Government has to foresee all eventualities. I absolutely agree with him. More is the pity that back in 2009, when we had 289 intensive care beds and when we knew at that stage that that was grossly insufficient, he and others in government did not have the foresight to plan for proper capacity. The truth is this. We are now reaping the harvest of more than a decade of underinvestment in our public health system. The truth is that we do not have the necessary capacity to reassure the public and even to reassure NPHET that we can make it through the autumn and winter months. Does the Taoiseach accept that we need to increase intensive care capacity? What will he do now to make that happen?

The Taoiseach: First, Fianna Fáil was not in power for the last decade. The Deputy consistently says that even when we were at 20 seats. She equates 20 seats with being in power. That is just an aside. It is immaterial and irrelevant. She keeps on with the propaganda and, really, we do not need that now in the middle of a pandemic of this sort.

On intensive care unit, ICU, beds, there has been a 25% increase since March. There were 225 ICU beds in March; we now have 282 fully staffed beds, which is an extra 57 with a further 17 in the winter plan with the staff available for that. With the surge capacity that was achieved in the first phase it went to 370 ICU beds. The HSE says it has the capacity-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That was with no other care in the system.

The Taoiseach: -----to deal with this. I do not know why the Deputy does not believe the leadership team in the HSE. She takes umbrage at other situations, but she seems to disagree consistently with the leadership team in the HSE which consistently says to me, because I make it my business to check if they have capacity to deal with the current situation, "Yes."

On testing, the supply at the moment is more than capable of meeting the demand. It is one of the few countries still in a position to meet demand and is exceeding demand right now. That

includes all the serial testing. Significant progress has been made on testing over the last five or six months, but it never gets acknowledged by Deputy McDonald or by others. Of course, we can do better and can go further, but testing across the board has made a quantum leap forward in recent months.

An additional 810 general beds have been put into the system. By the time the winter plan, costing about €600 million, is implemented there will be a further 1,400 beds in total if the 800 beds are added to 590 beds that will be provided under the winter initiative. By any yardstick in such a short space of time that is significant progress. It gives us the capability and capacity not just to deal with the impact of Covid, but the non-Covid services as well, which was one of the factors in our decision yesterday. We did not want to shut down non-Covid services given the challenges they are currently facing.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I raise the issue of direct provision and quarantining in the Dundalk area. In the centre of Dundalk, the Carroll village apartment centre is currently used as a direct provision centre and has been since 2005. The number of asylum seekers it houses varies from around 50 to 80. It is known as an own-door-type accommodation and is self-contained accommodation. I understand that approximately half of the residents have been there for five years or more. The building itself is on the old P.J. Carroll site at the northern end of the town and is very well known to locals. Last week, it was reported on local radio that 80 Covid tests were carried out on residents of the Carroll Village centre on 20 September and that those swabs were subsequently mislaid or lost. The Taoiseach can imagine that this has caused great concern locally and many questions are now being asked. I understand that subsequent tests have been carried out. We need to find out exactly how these tests could go missing. It is important we get answers and find out if this was an isolated, once-off case or if there were many more cases. We need clarification as to whether this was an isolated case.

The Carroll Village centre is situated on the main commercial street in Dundalk and people are asking if proper public health guidelines on self-isolation and quarantine are being adhered to should a resident test positive for Covid. On quarantine, a local hotel on the outskirts of Dundalk, not far from the Carroll Village centre, is being used as a quarantine centre. Again, my understanding is that those in direct provision who need to self-isolate or quarantine are being directed to this facility for a two-week isolation period. I believe the centre is housing people from all over the country for this purpose. As the Taoiseach can imagine, this is causing great concern for people locally. The local hotel in question has been used for this purpose since the beginning of September.

The Taoiseach can appreciate my many concerns about these centres. First, regarding the Carroll Village centre, can the Taoiseach confirm whether the original 80 test swabs were mislaid? Can he also confirm that replacement tests were carried out? Can he confirm that the proper public health guidelines are being observed should a resident test positive for Covid? On the quarantine centre, I have a very real concern about the means of transport those who need to use the centre are using. The facility is located approximately 2 km from Dundalk town centre and, as I said, it is accepting people from all over the country. Does the Department provide the necessary transport for those going to the facility or do the users avail of public transport, which would be a clear breach of public health guidelines? Furthermore, when a resident's period of self-isolation is completed, what methods of transport are being used to these facilities? These are real concerns that need to be urgently addressed. The people of Dundalk, like those of the rest of the country, have made tremendous sacrifice and effort to combat this virus. We need to ensure we all work together and follow the same guidelines so we can all get

back to some form of normality.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue given the concerns locally. Protecting those living in direct provision accommodation centres from any Covid-19 outbreak has been an absolute priority of Government. A comprehensive programme of serial Covid-19 testing by the HSE has been completed across 66 accommodation centres. My understanding is about 3,300 tests have been undertaken in direct provision centres and about 18 positive tests have emerged from that testing programme. That is a positivity rate of 0.53% among residents and staff. I will endeavour to bring clarity to the points the Deputy raised in the context of local media highlighting these issues. The transfer of residents from Dublin to Dundalk has created some degree of confusion locally.

As the Deputy knows, there are two international protection accommodation services facilities in Dundalk, Carroll Village and the Carnbeg re-accommodation facility. Carroll Village independent living is a block of apartment-style independent living units housing mostly family groups. The Department of Justice and Equality has confirmed there has been no large-scale transfer of residents either in or out of this centre in recent months. Routine testing as part of the Covid-19 serial testing programme was completed recently at Carroll Village. As I said, this was one of the public health measures put in place by the HSE and the Department of Justice and Equality to safeguard residents and staff in direct provision centres since the beginning of this pandemic. The HSE's investigation into the specific incident the Deputy highlighted found there was an isolated logistics issue whereby swabs did not reach the laboratory within the required timeframe. As the swabs had expired, they had to be retaken in line with standard practice. The HSE has apologised for the inconvenience this caused to the residents concerned and it conducted on-site follow-up testing on Friday, 2 October to complete this serial testing and all results have now been communicated at this point.

The Carnbeg Hotel, which opened earlier this year, is used as emergency, temporary accommodation for people who willingly left their accommodation centre at the start of the pandemic and are now seeking to be re-accommodated by the International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS. To be clear, the Departments of Justice and Equality and Education have confirmed the Carnbeg Hotel was not affected by the retaking of tests in recent days. This facility is used for 14-day quarantine prior to re-accommodation in a dedicated accommodation centre. It has a regular turnover of temporary residents. These residents had been living in private accommodation located throughout the country prior to requesting re-accommodation from the Department. That is the situation as of now.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. As I have said already, the people of Dundalk and the rest of the country have put their shoulders to the wheel and it is very important that they get clarity. The one question the Taoiseach did not answer is with regard to transport and the people in Carroll Village and the Carnbeg Hotel. Will the Taoiseach guarantee that people who have tested positive are not walking the streets of Dundalk? How are they getting from Carroll Village to the Carnbeg Hotel? This is of major concern.

Last week, I raised in the Dáil the issue of moving the test centre from Dundalk to Ardee. In fairness, the HSE contacted me during the week and invited me to look at the facilities in Ardee. I have to say the facilities in Ardee are absolutely fantastic. I cannot complain. However, I am very concerned, and I ask the Taoiseach to answer my question please because I will be asked about this by the people in Dundalk. How are people travelling from Carroll Village? Earlier, the Taoiseach mentioned there were families involved. How are they getting to and from Car-

roll Village?

The Taoiseach: How are they getting from Carnbeg Hotel?

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: From Carroll Village and from the Carnbeg Hotel. Are they using public transport? If they are using public transport we have a serious problem. Will the Taoiseach please give clarity on how people are getting from A to B, whether from Carroll Village to the Carnbeg Hotel or from the Carnbeg Hotel to Carroll Village? It is a serious concern.

I visited the Ardee centre and spoke to Martina Ralph of the HSE. I was giving out about the test centre being located in Ardee but what is most important is that it can do 720 tests a day. The issue is the location. There is nothing wrong with the facilities in Ardee, which are excellent. It is about getting people to go from Omeath, Carlingford and Dundalk to Ardee. The facilities in Ardee are excellent.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his very positive comments on the facilities in Ardee. Carroll Village is a block of apartment-style independent living units housing mostly family groups. There has been no large-scale transfer of residents either in or out of the centre in recent months and they are entitled to travel, like anybody else, in whatever format or mode they so desire.

It is also very important to point out that in the national serial testing programme, we are looking at a 0.53% detection rate, which is quite low. There have been 18 positives out of 3,300 tests. This has been a feature of most serial testing programmes, including those in nursing homes and meat plants. This suggests, with regard to the origin and source of the virus, that by and large, transmission is in the community but it can spread very quickly when it comes into congregated settings. When we do a serial testing programme at any point in time there may be a very low level of the virus in that congregated setting. This is why the serial testing programme is regular and consistent to try to keep an eye on these congregated settings.

With regard to the Carnbeg Hotel, which is emergency temporary accommodation, people come to it using a variety of transport modes. I do not have the specifics on this but I can check.

Deputy Michael Collins: I want to concentrate on the many who suffer from massive pain in this country, whether it be from hip or knee, or the pain and worry of losing eyesight and being in need of a cataract operation. The cataract operation is a 20-minute procedure for which many people in Cork and Kerry have been waiting for five years. For many of these, the cross-border directive has been a game changer in their lives and it has got them out of excruciating pain or has given them back their eyesight when they knew they were being left to go blind. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae and I have organised taking 2,000 people from all over counties Cork and Kerry to Belfast in the past two years. Some of them were far into their 90s. They had no choice except to go blind at home or go to Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast to save their sight. I truly welcome the recent announcement of the building of a new cataract theatre in Cork. I hope in the coming years this happens and that it is not like the endoscopy unit, announced by the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, surrounded by a huge fanfare in Bantry hospital two years ago which, as of yet two years on, has not had a sod turned or a brick laid. The people who are losing their eyesight rapidly cannot wait two years for a clinic to open in Cork. Some cannot even wait two months.

In the next week and a half, I have men and women from Skibbereen, Durrus, Bandon, Ballymore, Ballineen, Carrigaline, Ballinlough, Ballyvolane, Dublin Hill, Kinsale, Goleen, Midle-

ton, Kealkill, Tipperary, Clonakilty-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is not a laughing matter.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is not a laughing matter. They are going blind on the Taoiseach's watch. That is the second time that he has laughed. People are not happy about that.

There are people from Dublin Hill, Cork, Kanturk, Macroom and all over parts of Kerry frantically heading to Belfast. One of these is a 36 year old woman, Maeve, from the Taoiseach's constituency. She has allowed me to use her name. She was rapidly going blind and attended the Taoiseach's constituency office, desperately hoping that he could get a cataract operation done in Cork for her. Like many more of us, the Taoiseach's constituency office failed to get this 20-minute procedure done in Cork or anywhere else in the Republic for her. The Taoiseach's office advised her to travel on our buses to Belfast. She did so four weeks ago. She had her eye surgery and is now due the second operation in the next week and a half. What the surgery has done for that woman is truly unreal and has transformed her life.

I am quite happy to help the Taoiseach's constituents, as I know he is a busy man. For me to do this, however, and for those who are in pain to find relief or save their sight, we will need a cross-border directive to continue after 31 December, deal or no-deal Brexit. I asked the Taoiseach three weeks ago would the cross-border directive continue for those who are desperately awaiting surgery in the South and he skirted over the answer. In the Dáil I questioned the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, about the cross-border directive continuing. He gave encouraging signs and said legislation is being put in place which may help in this matter.

On behalf of the thousands who are in pain or are in massive fear of losing their sight, many of whom are from the Taoiseach's constituency, who need a shining light in the dark and want a "Yes" or "No" answer, is the cross-border directive going to continue?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his remarks. I also thank him for the seat on the bus for any constituent of mine. My emphasis, however, is to avoid people having to go on long journeys to get cataract operations. We should be increasing capacity locally. That is what I modestly announced last week. There was no fanfare. I simply said there would be a significant investment going into the South Infirmity-Victoria hospital, the largest centre in Munster for dealing with eye, ear and throat issues. In particular, it will develop capacity locally with a dedicated cataract surgery theatre in the South Infirmity-Victoria hospital. It will have a re-fitted designed area with two side-by-side ophthalmology operating theatres which will go to tender shortly and which will have a capacity of 2,000 cataract surgeries annually. One theatre will deal with the most complex ophthalmic cases while the second will serve as a dedicated cataract theatre.

The cost of all of what the Deputy has been at - I have no difficulty with it. It has been a gamechanger too for the Deputy electorally in terms of number of people on buses-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is not fair to say.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is a snide old comment. That is beneath you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Come on. The lads need to relax a bit.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is a reflection on the people who need to use this bus.

The Taoiseach: I was reliably informed that Deputy Michael Healy-Rae approached people outside a mass saying he could get them on the bus if they wanted a cataract operation.

Deputy Michael Collins: And God bless him, if he did.

The Taoiseach: The woman concerned-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You should take that back. You are a disgrace. You are only in the bottom of the barrel now coming out with that kind of a statement. Cop on a small bit, Taoiseach.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Taoiseach should look after his constituents.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is beneath you. For the Taoiseach of the country to make a statement like that-----

The Taoiseach: Relax.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You do not tell me to sit down. The man who will tell me sit down is the Ceann Comhairle and not you.

The Taoiseach: I am not telling you to sit down-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we all-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: God damn it, that is an awful thing to say.

The Taoiseach: That is the truth.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Smiling and laughing as if it is some sort of a joke. If somebody belonging to you was going blind, you would not like it.

The Taoiseach: Calm down.

An Ceann Comhairle: Calm down, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You are a disgrace.

The Taoiseach: The cross-border health directive is an EU directive. I explained that to the Deputy the last day. Britain is leaving the European Union. Deputy Michael Collins knows that. I have told him. What happens is the EU directive does not apply to the UK anymore and it is no longer obliged and we then have to develop a bilateral agreement with the United Kingdom, a similar scheme which we would have separately with the UK as we have had with the European Union. That is currently being considered and discussed with the UK authorities.

On top of that, as part of the common travel area, we have had a long-standing relationship with British health care services. They have had the same with us in terms of their citizens availing of Irish healthcare services when they are living here and *vice versa*. As part of preparations for Brexit, we are devising and working up a memorandum of understanding, which will be legislated for to guarantee the type of ongoing provision of services to Irish citizens in Britain and British citizens in Ireland that were always part and parcel and to continue with a similar arrangement as applied under the cross-border directive.

6 October 2020

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. His time is up.

The Taoiseach: I apologise to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae if there was any offence. I meant it in good faith.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Taoiseach is a downright disgrace.

The Taoiseach: It was said to me, by the way, by a clinician. The Deputy may not have realised who was who but that is fine. That is evidence of the degree of energy he applies to the scheme, making sure to inform people who do not know that they can avail of the trip to Belfast.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is our job to take care of people.

The Taoiseach: Absolutely.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: If the Taoiseach was half as worried about people, he might be a lot better off.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Taoiseach does nothing for them. He would let them go blind.

The Taoiseach: In any event, the most effective way of dealing with this is to build capacity locally and in the region in order that we do not spend excessive amounts on people having to travel outside of the jurisdiction.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Taoiseach, even though some of his reply was a mockery to the people who are struggling with pains and are going blind. The Taoiseach must be well aware of the benefit of the cross-border scheme, as it was on the Fianna Fáil pre-election video, showing what a great benefit it was and how Fianna Fáil got operations for its constituents. Maybe the Taoiseach was outside the church at mass advising them and, if he was, he should be proud to think he looked after his constituents and did the like of it and not be one bit ashamed to say he did it, wherever he stood to help them. I spoke to the Taoiseach about the constituent who went to his constituency office and was advised to go to me to look after her. I saved her eyesight and the Taoiseach failed to do so.

Surely, just a few months into his leadership, the Taoiseach is not intending to get rid of the scheme which helped thousands who were on the waiting lists for procedures. They used this cross-Border scheme and not the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, or any other scheme. I am delighted if there is anything that will increase the capacity of surgeries in the south of Ireland. I am all for it and, of course, that is where this should be happening but that may not happen for a year or two. Until it does, will the cross-border scheme, which gives people the opportunity to get surgery in Kingsbridge Private Hospital or any other private hospital in Belfast, continue in order that people have somewhere to go rather than go blind on the Taoiseach's watch?

The Taoiseach: Does the Deputy understand that Brexit is happening?

Deputy Michael Collins: Quite clearly.

The Taoiseach: It is happening on 1 January. Does he understand that EU directives will not apply to Britain from then on? Does he understand that? What does that mean?

Deputy Michael Collins: It means that other directives and legislation should be put in

place already.

The Taoiseach: Through the Chair-----

Deputy Michael Collins: The Taoiseach asked me a question and I gave an answer.

The Taoiseach: -----it means that as the European Union directive will no longer apply to Britain, we have to do a separate agreement with Britain in relation to that.

The Deputy has not paid for any one of these cataract operations. The taxpayer pays for them. Let us all be clear about that. Anybody in this country is entitled to utilise the directive in any EU member state right now. Some Deputies can assist people to get on buses and hire buses and so on but it is the taxpayer who pays for it.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Who said anything else?

Deputy Michael Collins: I am not saying it is not. We have failed the people.

The Taoiseach: The State is ensuring that people do not go blind through-----

Deputy Michael Collins: We have failed them. There are 90-year-olds having to go to Northern Ireland.

The Taoiseach: The NTPF paid €10 million for ophthalmology procedures in 2018. The Government and the State are not resiling from underpinning this financially. The NTPF is paying about €1,450 per cataract operation. That is outsourced to private hospitals here or in the North. Since I became Taoiseach, I have been anxious that we build up capacity in our own centres in order that people in west Cork, Cork city, Kerry, Limerick or anywhere do not have to go to Belfast or outside the jurisdiction to get cataract surgery done. That is my objective. It is more cost effective and better for the patient to have that approach and system. That is all I am saying. I commend the Deputy on the work he is doing but the taxpayer is paying for it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Are you going to let them go blind in the meantime?

Deputy Michael Collins: It is not happening.

Deputy Joan Collins: NPHEM met last Thursday and decided that, while concerned with the trends and the increase in infections, it did not see a reason to move to level 3 nationally. Three days later, it recommended a move to level 5 nationally, in effect reinstating the lockdown from the spring and early summer. NPHEM has pointed to an increase in the 14-day incidence rate in over-65s and 31 outbreaks in nursing homes, seven of which were reported in the last week. There are 25 open outbreaks among vulnerable groups, with ten in direct provision centres, seven in homeless settings and another seven in Traveller communities. NPHEM also made a point about increasing admissions to hospital and ICU beds, with 243 of 281 critical care beds now occupied.

Why are we in this situation? The Taoiseach and the Government had months over the summer to prepare for the inevitable second wave. Why are there still only 38 high-dependency beds in the public system? We all knew the perilous state our public health system was in when this pandemic struck in February and March. We were overly reliant on acute hospitals, emergency departments, EDs, with a bed-occupancy rate of 95% and a severe shortage of ICU beds. Germany, for example, has 37 ICU beds per 100,000 of its population whereas we have

6.5 ICU beds per 100,000.

It was only last week that we had a discussion in this Chamber about the proposed HSE winter plan. Serious questions have been raised by organisations representing nurses, doctors and consultants about our ability to deliver on the plan, particularly the increase in qualified staff that would be necessary to deliver on it.

I must also raise the issue of track and trace. I note that in the winter plan it is only by November that the necessary levels of staff dedicated to providing track and trace will be reached, allowing HSE personnel currently operating in the system to return to their normal duties. Can we continue to meet the level of 100,000 tests and traces per week?

Having flattened the curve due to the lockdown in the early part of the year, there was an opportunity to prepare that was not taken. We can contrast that with how quickly the Government moved to end the bans on evictions and rent increases and cut the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and temporary wage subsidy scheme. The move to level 3 nationally will put thousands of jobs at risk, particularly in the hospitality sector. The Restaurants Association of Ireland is warning that 180,000 jobs are at risk. It is entirely possible that the Government will be forced into a turn in the next couple of weeks and will move to level 5. Such a move would have catastrophic effects on jobs and livelihoods, as the Taoiseach has said. He has also made the point that those on the lowest pay are most affected by the restrictions under level 3 and would be most affected by the restrictions at level 5. Will the Taoiseach make a statement that in next week's budget, the Government will restore the PUP and the wage subsidy scheme to their previous levels? Will he introduce a ban on evictions and rent increases?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is correct to say that we received advice on Thursday and Sunday. A lot has been done in public service and about capacity in acute services since the first lockdown in March. What is increasingly happening is that non-Covid-19 issues are being dealt with. That is why quite a substantial number of ICU beds are being used - they are predominantly being used for non-Covid purposes. That is the reality. With the winter initiative included, we are looking at a 30% increase in ICU capacity. ICU is not just about the provision of a bed, it obviously also comes with a large complement of staff.

There will also be substantial increases in the numbers of general hospital beds. Including the measures in the winter initiative, an additional 1,400 beds will have been created in our general hospital system. I think it has been overstated that the system is run down, although it has challenges. The health system managed the first phase of the pandemic well within its capacity. The HSE is clear that it has the capacity to deal with the current situation. It will obviously have to watch the growth in positive cases, hospital admissions and admissions to ICU. There are many hospitals around the country that have no Covid patients in their ICUs at the moment. That is true of many hospitals around the country and must be factored in. Quite a lot of counties will be aggrieved that they are at level 3 because people there will feel they ought to have stayed at level 2, given their numbers. We decided to take on board the advice from NPHE that there was a growth trajectory that needed to be arrested. People in counties such as Tipperary, Waterford, Mayo and Kerry will be looking at their numbers of infection and wondering why are they going to level 3. I understand that. It is a severe hit for the hospitality sector in those counties and parts of others. Moving to level 3 has very significant implications and impacts for the hospitality, tourism, arts and culture sectors in the counties that up to now were not at level 3 - those outside Dublin and Donegal. Could one imagine what it would be like if we had moved to level 5 by midnight tonight in terms of the economic impact, the impact

on jobs and so on? We have to take the broader picture into consideration. I will not pre-empt the budget but in the budget we will look to see if we can do something more specific for people in certain categories of work or sectors. The pandemic unemployment payment was originally designed as a 12-week scheme and was rushed into this House, and everybody agreed with it in the context of it being a temporary scheme. It is now being extended to April, along with the wage subsidy scheme. By April, €5.2 billion will have been spent on the pandemic unemployment payment. That is an enormous sum of money for just one social welfare payment. Social welfare spending overall will go well beyond €30 billion by next April. We have to consider the financial and economic impacts well beyond April 2021 and we are now factoring in what the situation will be to the end of 2021 in terms of the economic and fiscal impacts of Covid-19.

Deputy Joan Collins: Many people in Dublin and Donegal have lost their jobs over the past few weeks. They are in receipt of €203 per week because of public health advice and for public health reasons. This did not happen of their own volition; they did not lose their jobs in normal circumstances. Rather, they were forced out of their workplaces.

We are facing into the winter. People have to pay rents of €1,800 and mortgages. Electricity and fuel bills go up during the winter. Families are trying to feed their children while living on €203 or €250 a week, but they earned more when employed. I ask the Taoiseach to reinstate the previous levels of the pandemic unemployment payment and the employment subsidy scheme and reintroduce legislation to protect people from evictions and rent increases. If we do not do that, as the Taoiseach said, a cohort of low-paid workers will be left in a very vulnerable situation. We need to address that and reinforce that we are all in this together rather than hanging apart.

The Taoiseach: Those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment will be in a better position, relatively speaking. Obviously losing a job puts people in a very difficult position. We did not want to increase the number of people losing their jobs this week. That is one of the factors that fed into the Government's decision yesterday not to move to level 5. Quite a number of businesses may not be closed on a temporary basis, but may close long-term resulting in longer-term sustained unemployment.

Prior to the pandemic, there were roughly 213,000 people in receipt of jobseeker's allowance of €203 per week. Many people employed before the pandemic never got the pandemic unemployment payment. We have to be fair to those people, as well as those in receipt of carer's allowance and other social protection payments who are in receipt of basic social protection payments.

Deputy Joan Collins: Raise them.

The Taoiseach: It will not be possible to raise everybody's payment to €350 per week. There are limits to what the Oireachtas and the State will be in a position to do.

Deputy Joan Collins: People have to be able to live, not just survive.

The Taoiseach: That is why we have to try to manage the situation in the most fair and sustainable way we possibly can. The implications of the pandemic for people will now go beyond April 2021. Therefore, we also have to spend money on creating jobs and work for people in areas such as construction and other projects, such as retrofitting, where we can create meaningful opportunities for young people in particular.

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Deputy Róisín Shortall: On a point of order, the Ceann Comhairle could consider reminding Members of the public health advice in respect of wearing masks and that the main purpose of wearing a mask is to protect other people. I think some people need to be reminded of that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much. We will conclude Leaders' Questions on that and move to the Order of Business.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: The House has agreed, for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency only, that the rapporteur's report of the Order of Business shall not be read out but shall be taken as read. There are three proposals to put to the House today. First, is the proposal for dealing with Tuesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies Paul Murphy, Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Deputy-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: I do not see how we can have a Dáil sitting today that does not debate the rejection of the clear public health advice by the Government and the Tánaiste's undermining of that public health advice in a very cynical and dangerous way on RTÉ television last night. Lives will unfortunately be lost as a result of the Government's decision. The approach will not avoid going to level 5; it will simply mean going to level 5 later and for longer, potentially into Christmas, after lives have been lost in nursing homes and in the community. We will continue then on a roundabout of lockdown, partial reopening, and lockdown. We need to have a debate today about this and an alternative strategy based on eliminating community transmission by Christmas by supporting people, by full PUP restoration, full eviction and rent ban, but also by investing in ICU and in test and trace.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There is breaking news from Portlaoise. Kilminchy Lodge nursing home has confirmed 31 cases, 21 of whom are patients. This is deeply disturbing. The entire State has gone into level 3. I appreciate that we meet every Thursday to try to agree a Dáil schedule for the week ahead but there are developments happening that require urgent adaptation by this House, and there needs to be accountability to this House from Ministers. I am calling, on behalf of the Sinn Féin Party, for the schedule to be changed to make space for statements from the Minister for Health on what has happened. We will also have other proposals for Thursday.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I support my colleagues on their request. One of the big issues here on the roadmap is the issue of confusion. Under the Government's roadmap we know when we can get a pint and where we can get a pint but people with a disability do not know when their facilities and training centres will open and their elderly relatives or parents do not know when these facilities will open. We need clarity on all of these issues.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach referred earlier to different counties. There are approximately seven counties with quite low Covid-19 figures in comparison to counties Done-

gal, Monaghan and Dublin. Local county restrictions seem to have been binned now, where it seems that one size fits all. It does not make sense. This Dáil has been bypassed from these types of discussions since the election. We need to have a debate on this issue today.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: We should be able to make time available for a special debate and questions and answers on this issue. This is the biggest issue facing the country now. It is completely unacceptable that the Government should take key decisions separate from this House and that there is no accountability.

We have the five-level plan. It makes no sense at all that eight counties, where the incidence is less than half the national rate, should be penalised. There should be an incentive there for counties to work together to drive down the virus. There are no grounds for penalising counties that have been doing that. Equally, in the two counties, Donegal and Dublin that are already on level 3, it is not clear what, if anything, the Government is doing to address the escalating figures in those two counties.

I have asked the Taoiseach to consider a cross-party approach to this issue. He has deliberately excluded the Opposition. Since he came to power, there have been two briefings since the end of April.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are moving away from the Order of Business.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is not acceptable. Can the Taoiseach please arrange for a special time for a debate and for accountability on this issue?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too ask the Taoiseach for a briefing of party leaders. There is great frustration and angst as people all over the country do not know what is going on. We need the PUP payment restored for all of these businesses that are going to be closed down.

In that context, if the Ceann Comhairle will allow me, I made comments earlier about Dr. Holohan and I asked where he had been for the past number of months. I understand totally where he has been, looking after his sick wife, and I profoundly apologise if I caused any offence. I was asking in the context of the leaking on Sunday night and the whole furore. Do we have any idea the impact of that on people's mental and physical health? I want to apologise to his wife and family for any hurt caused.

The Taoiseach: I have not been excluding anybody. I rang Deputy Shortall's co-leader, Deputy Catherine Murphy, last evening. I have been in regular contact with leaders-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: No. It was-----

The Taoiseach: I did ring.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach made a phone call.

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is not consultation. It is not cross-party-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we hear the Taoiseach, without interruption?

The Taoiseach: There was a cross-party briefing.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: When?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Who is saying that?

The Taoiseach: Am I not going to be allowed speak now? With the greatest respect-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we just let the Taoiseach respond, please?

The Taoiseach: -----I want to get a few points across. Deputy Shortall says there is no justification for eight counties going to level 3. NPHEAT wanted every county to go to level 5. There is no mystery about it. She knows that as well as everybody else.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Yes.

The Taoiseach: She should not be disingenuous in the House about that. I said to her co-leader last night that there would be a leaders' briefing this week. I said that last week. She knows that but it does not suit so she comes into the House and says the opposite.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am not talking about a-----

The Taoiseach: I also want to make the point that people know, in terms of physical matters, about getting things done in one full day between meeting with NPHEAT yesterday, and we had a very good, long meeting with NPHEAT, further discussions, into a Cabinet meeting and communicating with the general public.

I have to put on the record this business of excluding Opposition parties. In terms of Laois, Offaly and Kildare, every single Oireachtas Member and councillor was briefed that evening. In terms of Dublin, every single TD, Senator and councillor was briefed by officials up to 11 o'clock and, in some cases, midnight so let us have a bit of fair play all round. That happened.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Twice-----

The Taoiseach: I am saying that each time we extended to level 3 we briefed people because we knew TDs, Senators, councillors on the ground and the mayors of each council would be under pressure.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is not a multi-party approach.

The Taoiseach: I have no difficulty at all with having a debate in the House on this but I put it to the House that everybody wants to cram everything into Tuesday and Wednesday. I believe Oral Questions tonight will be at 11 o'clock.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is the Government's proposal.

The Taoiseach: No. It is not.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: Why? Is it because everybody is here on Tuesday and Wednesday? If we want a serious debate, and let us have a serious debate, we should have it on Friday morning and I will take part in it. What goes on here every week is that the business is agreed by the Business Committee and then every Tuesday, since I have been coming in here, someone stands up and says it is not agreed because he or she wants a debate on this, that or the other issue. I guarantee that next Tuesday it will be the same, and the Tuesday after that. We have a budget

next week so it may not be that week but it will be the Tuesday after that, and the one after that also. That tends to be the practice.

This issue merits debate. I accept that last Thursday people were not aware, neither was I by the way, that NPHE would be meeting on Sunday and proposing to go to level 5. I have made a suggestion and I will leave it to the Business Committee. The Business Committee is empowered, with other parties, to make a call as to when there would be a debate on this but I think that is what we should do.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are we all happy to come in on Friday and have a special debate? Yes, okay. Can I take it that the proposal for dealing with today's business is agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: One point I had made was the idea that sitting until midnight on Wednesday in some way comes from the Opposition. It does not. That is a proposal from the Government at the Dáil reform committee, the idea that we use the Convention Centre on a Wednesday and sit until midnight. We could continue to do votes on a Thursday and, it seems clear to me, that the incentive behind that is the idea of people leaving Dublin early on a Thursday. There is no need for that. We could be sitting late on Thursday.

The other point I make is that Deputy Boyd Barrett wrote to the Business Committee today. Obviously, what has happened in terms of the Government decision yesterday is new. It happened since the Business Committee met on Thursday so it is perfectly responsible for us to come in here and say that we need to have a debate on it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On a point of clarification about what the Taoiseach said, we have not had a leaders' briefing in three weeks. We have had only one since he became Taoiseach. I missed last week's meeting but we always make our dissent known at the meeting. Members from my group do not come in and object to something to which we agreed. We make it known that we are not happy with the progress.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the business for the week agreed?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: On Thursday's business, the Taoiseach would have to agree that there have been extraordinary developments in recent weeks that we could not have foreseen at the Business Committee on a Thursday. One of them is the issue of calculated grades. I appreciate that we had the Minister for Education and Skills before us last Thursday night. The chance to have statements was welcome but there was a missing element, namely, the Minister with responsibility for further and higher education, research, innovation and science. I emailed the Business Committee and the Chief Whip's office today to request that time be provided on Thursday to have that Minister in the House for statements and questions, with a similar format to that of last Thursday night. There is obviously a major crisis over places in the universities for the affected students. I ask the Taoiseach to agree to that on Thursday.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that the Minister with responsibility for further and higher education, research, innovation and science will be before the education committee on Thursday morning. That should be reasonable, I would have thought.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: To be clear again, I am asking for statements on Thursday. That is a request from our spokesperson, Deputy Conway-Walsh.

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The Taoiseach: The Minister will be in front of Deputy Mac Lochlainn's spokesperson on Thursday morning at a meeting of the education committee.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I believe there could be an opportunity in the Dáil so I make my request again.

An Ceann Comhairle: In fairness, if we are to respect our Oireachtas committees, we should consider that if an Oireachtas committee has a discussion on a matter, it would seem rather pointless to have the same discussion in the Chamber with largely the same group of people on the same day. I do not know that we would be complimented for our great use of parliamentary time if that is what we were to embark on. Can I take it that Thursday's businesses is agreed to now? Agreed. I thank all the Deputies for that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I reiterate the concerns over the news of cases and a cluster in a nursing home. I presume that we have a better plan for residents in nursing homes and those who run them than we had last spring.

I have raised the issue of testing and tracing with the Taoiseach time out of number. We are being contacted increasingly by parents across the State who are facing lengthy delays for tests for their schoolgoing children. There was a delay of up to six days in one case I dealt with. Those affected include children with underlying health conditions. Could the Taoiseach respond to that? My position remains that our testing and tracing system is still not up to scratch, months and months later. That is deplorable. Could the Taoiseach respond in respect of children of schoolgoing age, in particular?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising that issue. About 200,000 tests have been undertaken in nursing homes for healthcare workers across 565 homes since early July. One would get the impression from certain Deputies in the House that nothing at all is being done, that there has been no expansion of the testing programme and that there is no increased capacity. I describe the reality. There have been 381 positives out of the 200,000 tests undertaken as part of the serial testing programme of the HSE. Some 27,000 tests have been done in the meat plants, with testing across 80 plants since 21 August and with 107 positives. As I said, 303,000 tests have been undertaken in direct provision since 12 September, with 18 positives.

With regard to schools, mass testing of 250 schools, including crèches and primary and secondary schools, based on public health advice-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: It is important for me to conclude, if I may. Roughly 5,890 teachers and students have been tested, with 112 positives over and above the index case, which gives 0.19% positivity. I could go on but I obviously do not have time.

Deputy Alan Kelly: As an aside, will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Health or somebody, perhaps through NPHET, to sort out the issue arising over masks and visors? The misuse of visors across the country and, dare I say, in this House is wrong. It is not helping in our collective fight against Covid.

The issue I want to ask the Taoiseach about concerns our use of private hospitals. I have referred to this before. I have been banging on about it for a long time. Without a shadow of a doubt, part of the reason NPHET made its recommendation in recent days was concern over

ICU beds. I realise the Taoiseach has answered the questions and I respect what the chief executive of the HSE, Mr. Paul Reid, is saying in this regard but surely it would be cost effective and the right thing for the State to purchase now at least one, if not two, private hospitals.

3 o'clock

We are meant to be building two elective hospitals in this country anyway. We need capacity. We need ICU capacity, but we also need elective capacity.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Time is up.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Will the Taoiseach consider the purchase of such hospitals in the coming budget for the coming year because we need them?

The Taoiseach: I will make three points. First, there needs to be a sale to enable a purchase. That is a procurement issue and there is a negotiation issue if such a situation were to materialise. Second, there is a €25 million bridging agreement already in place between the HSE and private hospitals which allows for diagnostics and general services to be provided. This will move into a more comprehensive procurement agreement, which has been completed between the HSE and the private hospital sector and will be up and running in the next couple of weeks, again dealing with diagnostics and general services. Third, the HSE is currently engaged in discussions around having provision similar to what was available in the pandemic in the event of a major surge occurring. The HSE is confident it will achieve agreement on all fronts.

Deputy Holly Cairns: We know from media reports that the Minister for Health was urged by legal advisers to introduce legislation to allow the Government to forcibly close meat plants. We know entire counties have had to close on account of meat plants, that a plant in Cork with 226 cases never closed and that meat plants have been a consistent problem in terms of clusters of Covid-19, posing a serious risk to workers and public health. We now know that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is concerned that some plants are becoming complacent. To date, no move has been made to introduce this legislation. Is it proposed to introduce legislation to allow the Government to forcibly close meat plants?

The Taoiseach: All of us have to make sure we are fully informed in terms of the dynamic of this virus and how it affects particular settings. A total of 27,000 tests have been undertaken as part of the serial testing programme in meat plants across 80 plants since 21 August, with 107 positives. There had been a view prior to the serial testing programme that the plants were the origins of source of the virus. It seems now, looking at that objectively, that that may not be the case. It may be the case that people are bringing the virus into the plants. The difficulty then is that conditions within the plants can be conducive to a rapid spread.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Is it proposed to introduce legislation?

The Taoiseach: On the introduction of specific legislation for specific sectors, the Health and Safety Authority has powers in regard to workplaces and around making sure that companies adhere to the health and safety practices that should apply.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Will the Taoiseach introduce the legislation?

The Taoiseach: I will not give a commitment to introduce legislation of that kind. Obviously, such legislation can be put forward.

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An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

The Taoiseach: The plants are not, as of now-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Many people will have been surprised to see the Tánaiste last night become a new convert to concern about poverty, mental health and ordinary workers. If they thought that was real, they will be quickly disabused of the notion when they hear about the decision of the Cabinet today to increase the minimum wage by a miserly 10 cent, from €10.10 per our to €10.20 per hour, which is an increase of less than 1%. This for the workers on the front line who have been stocking the supermarket shelves, selling the goods and delivering to people, and for whom the Government has been very happy to clap but is not willing to allow a decent pay rise to a living wage. The Taoiseach earns ten times their wage. He takes home €4,000 per week compared to their wage of €400 per week, not to mention the Taoiseach's pension. Given the overwhelming public support for front-line workers and those who have kept our society running at this time, how can the Government refuse to give a decent wage increase for low-paid workers?

The Taoiseach: The Government is implementing the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission. The Deputy knows that since its establishment the Low Pay Commission has been consistently recommending increases to the minimum wage, which Governments have successfully implemented and fulfilled. It is the Government's view and hope that, notwithstanding the dispute between the union side and the employer side on this occasion, those issues can be addressed with a view to maintaining the Low Pay Commission, not just in terms of dealing with the minimum wage but also the living wage concept as well and how that could be developed in time.

A clear recommendation was made. The Government's view is that it is better to be consistent in implementing recommendations as they fall due. Obviously, there are wider issues in terms of employment rights as well.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Page 49 of the programme for Government commits to recruit additional front-line allied health professionals such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech therapists and so forth. Is there any chance the Government could get the existing front-line therapy staff back to work to deal with the four-year waiting list, instead of continuing to allow them to work at desks as contact tracers? It is seven months since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Can the Government not find ways to provide these vital therapy services to children across the country? As one parent put it: "I am watching my son regress before my eyes and there is nothing that I can do to stop it". The Taoiseach can do something to stop it. I ask him to direct the HSE to use back-office staff to make telephone calls to find out if somebody has been to the pub or the restaurant, and let the therapists treat our children.

The Taoiseach: I agree that we want therapists on the front line dealing with children and people generally who require interventions from therapists. That is why 500 people are being recruited in the community swabbing area. They have gone through the interview process and the first new staff will start on 8 October in community swabbing. On the contact tracing side, the first 400 people are through the interview process. Some 65 new staff start this week, on 6 October, and 70 start next week. The HSE will start 60 to 70 new staff on contact tracing every week after that. That issue is being dealt with as part of the plan the Government published

three weeks ago to recruit a permanent workforce for the testing regime.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Farmers and self-employed people are being discriminated against under the fair deal scheme for nursing home care. This issue has been bandied around for several years. The former Minister of State, Jim Daly, promised that the matter had gone to the Cabinet two or three years ago. It is unacceptable that the assets of farmers and self-employed people, of whom there are many, are being stripped when one of the family members, the father or mother, is the owner of the business and is sick and in need of proper healthcare. Will the Taoiseach give a commitment to introduce this fair deal scheme immediately?

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that it will be published in December.

Deputy Joan Collins: Last week, I raised the issue of two women workers in Spike Island Tours who were sacked by the board. I wish to bring it to the Taoiseach's attention that they were reinstated last week on the basis that the charges against them were absolutely ridiculous.

I have also been contacted by driving instructors who tell me they are still required to present themselves at various Road Safety Authority, RSA, centres across the country to enable driving test candidates to utilise their vehicles for the duration of the practical examination. They are forbidden to enter the RSA building for the duration of the examination or at any other time of the day. No seating or waiting area is provided and there is no shelter from the elements. There is no access to toilet facilities. The issue has been handed from the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to the RSA and from there to the HSA and back again to the RSA, but they are still standing out in the elements while their cars are being used. This has to be resolved. It is a public health risk.

The Taoiseach: I will check out the specifics on that. It seems to be an operational issue on the ground and should be dealt with at that level.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the fact that there will be a debate about what happened the other day and the decisions that have been made. In fairness, on Sunday everybody became incredibly frightened when they thought we were going straight to level 5. I hope that any information that is not in the public domain and that was known to NPHEt and to the Government will be given to all political parties so it could be part of the debate. Obviously, we are incredibly worried about our situation and we would like to think we are looking at a full deck of cards rather than half a deck so we can have a full discussion. We have had the worries about nursing homes and we are still worried about whether all infection control procedures that should have been learned from earlier have been operated. We must ensure this information is available so we can have a full discussion.

The Taoiseach: The two letters are published. The NPHEt-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There is no other information we do not have.

The Taoiseach: No. The NPHEt letters are published. That is the situation. It is either a graduated response from level to level or one goes the full hog. The issue on the exponential growth is whether one should close everything down now, with no guarantees at the end of the four weeks, although one would hope that it would come down significantly. The chances are it would come down to some degree but the impact on the economy would be quite enormous. The Deputy referred to the shock for some people. Self-employed people, hairdressers and the like across the board would have been in a really difficult situation. The worry is that we have

to plan these things, too. We have to work out the full implications of all of this. We would worry that some people would be permanently out of action as opposed to just being out of action for four weeks.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Rural pubs in Kerry and other businesses are to be closed again after 12 midnight tonight. On the Order of Business last week, I told the Taoiseach I knew the Government was going to close them down again even though we have very small numbers in places like Kerry and along the west coast and it does not merit a closure. I and a lot of people also knew that Dublin was not going to be let open after another week because of the massive numbers. To balance the thing out, ye have all the country closed down. It is going to have massive psychological and financial repercussions for the people, publicans and the customers, as well as the rural people in general, to close them down again. What are we going to do with them? Are they going to be given financial assistance? The talk about allowing 15 customers to be served outside in the open air, seated outside somewhere, tells me that there is no comprehension at all about rural Ireland, not even the weather. If people do not die with the coronavirus they will certainly get pneumonia and die anyway if that is all the suggestion ye have. It is absolutely ridiculous.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What the Taoiseach is in effect doing here is a total blanket shutdown because with our climate, the vast majority of these businesses will not be able to operate. That is a fact. What measures have been put in place by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to support the many thousands of people who are worried, upset and concerned today, the business owners and the people working in those businesses? It shows how little thought was actually put into this. We heard this morning on “Morning Ireland” and other programmes spokespersons for the Garda Representative Association saying that they were not even informed what powers they are actually going to have tonight. There is total confusion. I am asking the Taoiseach to really knuckle down to this job of work. He cannot just tell people they cannot go to work without making a clear path for where their income is going to come from next week and how they are going to pay their bills.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I refer to what happened with NPHET releasing its statement on Sunday and with the Tánaiste yesterday trying to get equal. I come from a Border county in Louth and we are very concerned about what is going to happen with the coronavirus. It is okay for us in Southern Ireland doing our restrictions at level 3 but are we going to work together as a united Ireland and get this sorted out once and for all? As for this thing about bickering between NPHET and the Government, we all have to put our shoulder to the wheel and work together. I am really frustrated. Every time I go to Carlingford or Omeath, all I see is yellow number plates coming from the North. We are busting our backsides in the South. If we look at all the coronavirus in the North, they are having an epidemic there at the moment. It is important that us in the South, us in the North, NPHET and the Government all put our shoulders to the wheel and work together to get it sorted out.

The Taoiseach: In response to Deputies Danny and Michael Healy-Rae, nobody in this House wants to close pubs and they need to accept that. Nobody here wants to close pubs. Do the Deputies honestly believe that people wake up in the morning asking how we can close more pubs? No one believes that. No one wants to do that. The real issue is that there was a recommendation that we go to level 5, which would have closed everything bar a number of essential services, or we would go along in accordance with the plan. There is an exponential growth in the numbers. It is low in about eight or nine counties, including County Kerry, but it is growing in those counties too. On the public health front, level 3 will assist those counties in

stopping the growth. There is a serious issue for hospitality, including pubs, hotels, restaurants, tourism, music, arts and culture. Covid thrives in congregated settings and where we have audiences. That is just the reality of Covid-19. It is Covid-19 that is doing this. The Deputies need to really be honest about it. It is easy to say “ye”, whoever these “ye” are who knew this and are balancing Dublin. The notion that we are doing this because we want to correspond with Dublin is just nonsense and it is unfair. It might play well locally but it is unfair. It is not the truth. No one wants to do this.

In response to Deputy Fitzpatrick, it is a very fair point. I spoke last evening with the First Minister, Arlene Foster, and the Deputy First Minister, Michelle O’Neill. I went through what level 3 meant in terms of movement across county borders. I asked that perhaps they would look at how they could take corresponding measures that would harmonise with the kind of measures we are taking in County Donegal and now nationally. They do not have the same schemes that we have here in terms of restart grants or wage subsidies. They have a wage subsidy scheme, a furlough scheme, but they do not necessarily have the financial firepower to underpin quite a number of the sectors. That is an issue for them and we will be keeping in touch with them on it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies Tóibín, Carthy, Bruton, Kenny, Cannon and Nolan have not been reached. We will give them priority tomorrow.

Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Amendment) Bill 2020: First Stage

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 and provide for related matters.

I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce this Bill. The purpose of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Amendment) Bill 2020 is to protect workers in their workplaces. The Bill makes a straightforward amendment to the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act to make workplace outbreaks of Covid-19 notifiable to the Health and Safety Authority, HSA. The proactive notification and surveillance of Covid-19 is key to ensuring that we do not end up with clusters of the virus in workplaces, as has been happening throughout this pandemic. Some might be shocked to learn that workplace outbreaks of Covid-19 are currently not notifiable to the HSA as occupational illness, due to a lacuna in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act. We are outliers in Europe in this regard and when we look at other countries like Spain, where Covid is classified as a workplace injury. In June, I published this Bill to make workplace outbreaks of Covid-19 notifiable to the Health and Safety Authority. I was compelled to publish the legislation due to the failure of the then Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to use her powers under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act to amend regulations to provide that occurrences of Covid-19 in the workplace would be notifiable to the Health and Safety Authority.

This failure has been compounded by the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, who is now responsible for workers’ health and safety and, I shudder to think of it, workers’ rights. He does the very opposite of what his title would suggest. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, has been to the fore campaigning for this change and has written to the

relevant Ministers on a number of occasions requesting that this simple change be made. On 24 July ICTU met the Tánaiste to discuss the issue of notifiable illnesses and diseases being reportable to the HSA. This, however, resulted in no change to the law and no additional protections. At the stroke of a pen, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, could make workplace outbreaks of Covid-19 notifiable to the HSA. Unfortunately he has point-blank refused to do this. This is in stark contrast to his performance last night, when he tried to portray himself as someone who has concern for workers. Thrashing public health officials and gaslighting the nation that he has concern for low-income workers is pretty counter-intuitive. He talks about workers and he refuses to legislate for protections for workers' health and safety. He talks about poverty and votes against Dáil motions to combat child poverty and introduce a living wage. He talks about mental health as if his party had not spent the last nine years gutting and underfunding our mental health services. Indeed, we will see how far the Government's concern for the less fortunate extends this week when we vote on restoring the cuts made to the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. The failure of the Tánaiste to do what this Bill seeks to do in making Covid-19 notifiable is proof of his attitude and the attitude of the Government to workers. One only has to look at the alarming rise in the rates of infection for health care workers which has trebled in recent weeks from 100 per fortnight to 300 per fortnight. This Bill is intended to protect workers who simply cannot work from home. These people work in meat factories, food processing plants and supply chains to get the food to our supermarkets, in nursing homes and hospitals, respite centres, shops and on building sites. These people are our gardaí, prison officers, Army personnel and many more. Ordinary workers have been put in danger because of the failure to legislate for this.

At the time of publishing the Bill in June I stated that given evidence of the incidents of Covid-19 in workplaces such as meat factories and health facilities during the lockdown period this change absolutely must be made and if it was not workers would again be put in danger. It is with great regret that we have seen this become a reality across countless workplaces.

The aim of this legislation is to protect workers in all workplaces whether they are in a meat plant, a care home, on a building site or in an office block in the International Financial Services Centre, IFSC. It can be done by statutory instrument but the Tánaiste refuses to do this. Therefore, I am left with no option but to table this legislation.

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 Louise O'Reilly: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Thirty-ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Right to a Home) Bill 2020: First Stage

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Constitution.

As Deputies across the House will be aware, the housing crisis has not gone away. Rents are still unsustainably high. In fact, the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, index published last week shows rents have increased 1.8% State-wide in the last 12 months and 3.3% outside of the greater Dublin area. Three counties in particular, namely, counties Carlow, Roscommon and Mayo, have seen rents increase in the last 12 months from 7% to 9%. It is now €1,226 per month to rent State-wide and a shocking €1,653 in Dublin. Indeed, new rents in many parts of the city are now above €2,000 per month for a standard two-bedroom apartment or house.

House prices are also still shockingly high. The latest data from Daft.ie shows house prices in Dublin averaging at €379,000 and €260,000 State-wide. The fact is that too many working people cannot access secure or affordable accommodation. An Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, report published last week looking at the impact of Covid-19 concluded that private sector output is going to fall, further widening the gap between supply and demand and pushing ever more working people away from owning or renting their own home.

When we look at homelessness the figures are equally bleak. Officially, 8,702 adults and children are classified as homeless in this State. The real figure, however, is more than 10,000 when one includes those continually trapped in direct provision despite having received leave to remain, effectively, using direct provision centres as emergency accommodation or, indeed, those many hundreds of women and children in Tusla-funded domestic violence refuges or those in hostels not funded by the State such as the Regina Coeli Hostel and the Morning Star in Dublin.

We have also seen an alarming rise in the deaths of people in emergency accommodation or sleeping rough. By the midway point of this year, the same number of people had been found dead than in all of last year or, indeed, the year before.

All this is a direct consequence of the under provision of social housing, a lack of Housing First tenancies, an over-reliance on congregated emergency accommodation and adequate addiction and mental health supports. Currently, more than 100,000 households are in need of social housing when one adds those on local authority lists and in receipt of short-term subsidies such as housing assistance payment, HAP, or the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. Indeed, the new need, that is, the number of families coming onto our local authority housing waiting lists every single year, still outstripped the total number of new social homes added to the stock on an annual basis.

None of this is an accident. Housing need is not a force of nature. It is the direct result of Government policies, failure to invest enough in social and affordable housing and over-reliance on the private market to meet social and affordable housing need. In short, Rebuilding Ireland, that is, Fine Gael's housing policy for the last four years, tacitly endorsed and supported by Fianna Fáil, has abjectly failed.

We urgently need a new direction and at the centre of that new direction must be a human rights-based approach to housing. The Bill I am introducing seeks to insert into the Constitution the right to appropriate and affordable housing as an obligation to eliminate homelessness.

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This is not a silver bullet. It does not guarantee every person in the State an automatic right to a free home. It does, however, place an obligation on the Government to realise the right to housing and to eliminate homelessness progressively.

In 2014, the constitutional convention on social and economic rights voted by 84% to support inserting the right to housing into the Constitution. Unfortunately, for five years the Government has ignored that recommendation. The programme for Government has an ambiguous commitment to hold a referendum on housing and in the view of Sinn Féin this must be a referendum on a constitutional right to a home. Inserting such a right, alongside a major and sustained investment in public housing on public land to meet social and affordable housing need, is key to ending our homeless crisis.

The time for prevarication is over; the time for action is now. I commend this Bill to the House.

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 Eoin Ó Broin: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

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

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move:

That, notwithstanding the Resolution of the Dáil of 10th September, 2020, adopting the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled 'Schedule of Dáil sitting week until 22nd October, 2020, and changes to the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business', unless it resolves or orders otherwise, the Dáil shall meet every Tuesday at 2 p.m.

Question put and agreed to.

Dáil Éireann
Ceisteanna – Questions

Departmental Administrative Arrangements

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the economic division of his Department. [25398/20]

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the status of the national risk assessment for 2020. [27098/20]

3. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the economic division of his Department. [27113/20]

4. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the economic division of his Department. [28555/20]

5. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the economic division of his Department. [28557/20]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 5, inclusive, together.

The economic division of my Department assists me and the Government in developing and implementing policy across relevant areas including economic growth and job creation, infrastructure and housing and climate action and social dialogue. This work is focused, in particular, on the delivery of commitments in the programme for Government, for example, the development of a new national economic plan as well as co-ordination of issues which will cut across multiple Departments.

The economic division supports the work of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment, the Cabinet Committee on Housing and the Cabinet Committee on the Environment and Climate Change. The division also leads Ireland's participation at the annual European semester process, liaises with the Central Statistics Office, CSO, and provides me with briefing and speech material on economic and related policy issues. In addition, the division jointly leads work on preparedness for Brexit along with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and other divisions of my Department.

Finally, the economic division is also responsible for publishing the national risk assessment, NRA, which has provided a high-level overview of strategic risks facing the country since it was first published in 2014. Given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and the priority attached to responding to the crisis within my Department and across Government it is not intended to publish an updated national risk assessment in 2020. However, I intend that the national risk assessment process will resume for 2021.

In doing so, the Department will consider any learning and examine options for further strengthening the NRA process including in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. The intention is to evaluate how best the process can be used with a view to ensuring it can continue to play a role in identifying these strategic risks facing Ireland. Given its role, the division works closely with colleagues in the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and with colleagues in other Departments which have legal responsibility for specific policy areas.

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Deputy Alan Kelly: First, yesterday at the Taoiseach's announcement it was strongly reported that he was going to announce a new bank holiday.

The Taoiseach: Was I?

Deputy Alan Kelly: Yes. He can deny it was even in his thoughts or part of his assessments but it was strongly reported. In fact, it was assumed for some reason. A date was even given out. It was to be around Christmas. He can come back and let us know if that was in his thoughts. If it was not, he should just say it out straight. If it was considered, he should tell us why he dropped it at the last minute.

Given where we have gone in recent days - I am not trudging over old ground - we need to consider how we plan to support people. I hope this Cabinet committee is considering that. What are the Taoiseach's thoughts about the pandemic unemployment payment? Have his thoughts on the €350 changed since yesterday? What is to happen with the ban on evictions? We are now in a different scenario from last week. What is happening with the payment moratorium on loans and mortgages?

The hospitality industry has a specific issue. Last week, on Leaders' Questions, I asked the Taoiseach about sectoral requirements in the hospitality industry, the events industry, pubs and restaurants. Obviously, the budget is coming up. Tourism and hospitality businesses are being affected more than others. I ask the Taoiseach to consider this.

On risk assessment, I know that the Taoiseach responded to me earlier on private hospitals. The previous Minister for Health left with an agreement on ICU capacity and private hospitals sitting on his desk. The current Minister never took it up and it is time he took it up or did something with it. That buffer zone would give the public considerable security. Obviously, there are issues with ICUs, but the two biggest risks which I want the Government to address in this pandemic are as follows. The first is non-Covid healthcare. The Taoiseach has until tomorrow to provide figures - at least I gave him a week's notice - on coronary care, cancer care, diagnosis and also how people are being treated versus last year. The second risk, the real one, is how the Minister, despite what he announced in the winter plan, will get 12,500 staff into the system by next April. That is the biggest risk. I do not know how it will be done based on what I have heard so far. I hope those two risks are at the top of the risk register that the Taoiseach discussed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Tánaiste launched a really cynical, politically motivated attack on the public health team in order to cover over the Government's failure to use the summer period to resource our ICUs to the level we need, our hospitals generally and a tracing regime that would allow us to chase the virus, rather than be chased by it, as is currently happening.

Regardless of the cynicism of the Tánaiste's attack, if infection rates continue even at their current level or if, as predicted by the modellers at NPHET, they get worse, the economic, human and social damage will be even worse. If the Government is to deal with that situation and take the measures that will be necessary one way or another to protect public health, it will need to protect the incomes of working people. The taxi drivers in their thousands will be on a socially distanced drive protest this Friday because along with other groups they have seen the Government slash their pandemic unemployment payments, forcing them back to work when there is no work. The same is true for those who work in events, the arts and music, along with

bar workers and hotel workers. Effectively, from a financial point of view, the Government has stabbed them in the back at the time when they need support. It has lifted the eviction moratorium and the mortgage repayment moratorium that would have allowed them to survive this period. It has failed to give them supports and has reduced their supports. Tomorrow, we will debate a motion calling for the restoration of those payments. Will the Government do that? Irrespective of our dispute with the Government about restriction levels and so on, if it wants public compliance, it cannot do anything other than restore the income supports for people who have lost their jobs as a result of this pandemic. Will the Government do it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Seven minutes remain in this slot and we need to bear in mind that the Taoiseach needs to have time to answer.

Deputy Mick Barry: I ask about the plight of two groups of workers, namely, the Aer Lingus workers and the Debenhams workers. The Aer Lingus workers have been submitting short-term working forms to Intreo offices to try to get the back-money due to them from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection from before 1 September. Why are they getting satisfaction in some offices and not in the majority? For example, the Intreo office in Drogheda will process the claims, but Intreo offices in other areas are not doing so. This is all wrong. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection needs to issue a directive to follow the Drogheda example and to process those claims. The workers are in dire need.

The Debenhams workers will have been on strike for six months this Friday. They are now forced to picket in the cold and with the virus on the increase. On 8 September, the Taoiseach told the Dáil that KPMG and Mandate should talk. Mandate officials are ready and willing to talk, but since then - a month ago - KPMG has not only ignored the Taoiseach's words, but it has introduced non-union workers into the shops, who have passed picket lines to pack the stock at the centre of the dispute. KPMG has also involved the Garda in the dispute on more than one occasion.

Given that the Taoiseach's first call was a month ago and given the actions of KPMG since then, is the Taoiseach prepared to amplify that call and tell the Dáil today very loudly and in no uncertain terms that KPMG must come to the table and negotiate seriously, in other words, put on the table an offer that is better than the paltry increase proposed the last time?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday, 12 trade organisations and 429 businesses from the hospitality and events sector wrote an open letter to the Taoiseach. I assume he has read that letter. He will know that the vast majority of these businesses are indigenous. He will know that they are now at their wits' end and are calling on the Government to make a series of emergency interventions to ensure their businesses are not lost. In next week's budget will the Government reduce the 13.5% VAT rate to 9% for the hospitality and tourism sectors? Will it extend the commercial rates waiver? Will it provide enhanced grants for the sectors worst affected by the Covid-19 restrictions? By that, I mean those sectors that simply cannot function or sectors whose turnover is down by much more than 30%. Will the Government grant aid those to ensure they survive?

We have moved to level 3 meaning that tens of thousands of workers will be laid off across the State. Given that turn of events is due to a Government decision, I ask it to revisit the wage subsidy scheme, particularly in respect of workers on very low pay, many of whom are students and women, but all of whom are low-paid and vulnerable.

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The case to reverse the Government's cut to the pandemic unemployment payment is now unanswerable. The Government's decision to go to level 3, the recognition that we are still in the grip of this pandemic with all the uncertainty and jeopardy that presents for businesses and workers, means that it must reverse that cut.

An Ceann Comhairle: I cannot call Deputy Paul Murphy because of the short time remaining. I will give the Taoiseach the three minutes remaining.

The Taoiseach: I must resist the attempt to underplay and undermine the progress that has been made in ramping up key aspects of the health service. The testing and tracing capacity has been significantly enhanced with an onshore laboratory capacity for 100,000 tests and 2,000 per day offshore. We are currently increasing capacity onshore for November and December and we will continue to have offshore capacity during the winter period. As such, there has been a very significant ramping-up of the testing situation. A total of 90% of our tests are completed end to end in less than three days, more than 91% of GP referrals get an appointment in less than 24 hours, more than 95% of people get the result less than 48 hours following the swabbing appointment and overall end to end, the period between the referral and the end of tracing median is less than two days. There has been substantial progress and it is time to acknowledge that. It is not where it was in March; it is far better. There are higher volumes. We are testing far more now than we did in the early part of the pandemic and that has to be accepted.

On the hospital system, there has been a 30% increase in ICUs once the winter initiative is implemented: 25% since March and a further 17 as a result of the winter initiative. Admittedly it will be challenging to get the staff but the funding has been made available. It is the largest funding for a winter initiative ever in the history of the health service. It is designed to try to increase capacity both on the ICU side and also on the general hospital side, to increase staffing and to release healthcare staff who had come to the rescue in the early phase of the pandemic back to their front-line services. Substantial recruitment is under way and as I said earlier concerning contact tracers and swabbers, very significant progress is being made on that front. No proposal was left on any desk on private sector capacity. The HSE has been continually negotiating and that is ongoing. There is a bridging agreement of €25 million. It has completed a new procurement agreement to deal with diagnostics and general services, and negotiations are ongoing about need in the event of a surge.

The PUP was originally meant as a 12-week provision. It has been opened to new entrants and, therefore, anyone who is laid off as a result of us going to level 3 will be able to avail of it; it has been extended out to April of next year. The Government has to look at beyond April 2021 to make the PUP sustainable. It also has to look at other social welfare recipients. There are 213,000 people on jobseeker's allowance on €203 per week and then there are carers and lone parents and the whole area of child poverty. There is a range of payments across social protection that we have got to look at as well in addition to all of the other commitments. Deputies are having an each-way bet. On the one hand, Deputy McDonald talks about thousands being laid off in hospitality because of a Government decision. Covid has forced that decision. The Government does not willingly lay off people or cause sectors to close. Other Members will say we should have gone to level 5, which would have meant hundreds of thousands of people being laid off overnight. These are the calls and choices that Government has to make.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have to move on to Question No. 6. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: The budget will hopefully deal with some of the issues to which Deputies

are referring but I cannot pre-empt it today and I do not intend to.

An Ceann Comhairle: A Thaoisigh, you cannot answer the questions. If Members consume all the time asking the questions, you cannot be expected to answer them so we have to move on to Question No. 6.

The Taoiseach: I will come back to it later.

An Ceann Comhairle: I again appeal to Members asking questions to please give the Taoiseach time to answer them.

Departmental Advertising

6. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach the amount spent by his Department on advertising online, broadcast and print advertising in each of the past five years. [25601/20]

7. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach the amount his Department has spent on advertising for online, print and broadcasting to date in 2020; and the expenditure plans for the rest of 2020. [26659/20]

8. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach the amount spent by his Department on advertising online, broadcast and print advertising in each of the past five years. [27115/20]

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the amount his Department has spent on advertising for online, print and broadcasting to date in 2020. [28894/20]

24. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if his Department or agencies working on its behalf monitor and report on social media content relevant to Government policy. [26660/20]

149. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he has engaged a third party company in each of the years, 2017 to 2019, and to date in 2020, to conduct online and or social media monitoring and or provide reports on social media coverage of his Department; if so, the cost of same; and if the name of the social media platforms being monitored will be provided. [28925/20]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 to 9, inclusive, 24 and 149 together.

The bulk of the spend in 2020 to date has been to deal with the Covid-19 emergency. Of the €11.4 million spent to date, €4.2 million was on advertising in publications and €5.8 million on broadcast advertising. Since March, my Department has co-ordinated communications for the whole-of-government response to the pandemic and this necessitated expenditure on a broad range of targeted public information campaigns.

The overall communications strategy for Covid-19 is based on a co-ordinated response that ensures maximum clarity for citizens, business and our wider community. This aligns both with WHO and European Centre for Disease Control, ECDC, advice, both of which emphasise the importance of ensuring the general public is aware of the seriousness of the Covid-19 outbreak and, further, that a high degree of population understanding, community engagement and acceptance of the measures put in place are key in preventing further spread.

It is also recommended that communications strategies should target different audiences and

provide the rationale behind the measures, also outlining the necessity of putting a support system in place to provide essential services and supplies, for example, food and medication, and to monitor vulnerable individuals. It was also necessary to run campaigns at each phase of the roadmap as restrictions were lifted. The campaigns associated with the roadmap were aimed at giving people time to prepare so businesses could be ready to open. Campaigns were developed to ensure businesses were aware of the broad level of supports being made available to them by Government and to raise awareness of the Return to Work Safely Protocol and the July jobs stimulus package which was focused on restoring confidence and investment in the recovery.

More recently, public information campaigns have been run as restrictions were placed, and then subsequently lifted, in regions such as counties Kildare, Laois and Offaly and when counties Dublin and Donegal were placed under level 3 restrictions. In all such cases, it is essential that citizens, business owners and communities are informed of the decisions being made by Government, and campaigns are developed and implemented to make the public aware of these decisions.

In 2019, the spend included €12,000 on online advertising and €17,000 on video and radio production. My Department paid for public information campaigns on budgets 2019 and 2020, public consultation notices for draft language schemes and for the Vótáil 100 commemorations. There was also expenditure for advertisements relating to the recruitment of judges and the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, IBRC, Commission, which is an independent statutory commission that contracted services to manage their public relations responsibilities.

In 2018, the €1.6 million spend was across online, print and broadcast advertising and production costs. This spend related to major cross-government public information campaigns that the Department funded centrally. These campaigns included Healthy Ireland, Global Ireland, Project Ireland 2040 and the self-employed benefits campaign, aimed at ensuring self-employed people are aware of the new and existing benefits available to them.

In 2017, the €40,000 spend related to cross-government public information campaigns on Healthy Ireland and self-employed benefits.

In 2016, the €10,000 spend related to the Home to Work information campaign.

A detailed annual breakdown of the advertising spend will accompany the reply to the questions. The Department does not engage third party media monitoring services. As part of the press office's normal operation, both traditional print and social media are monitored for content of relevance to the work of the Department.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Under the previous Government, the decision was made that all online advertising would go through the Taoiseach's office. Is that still the case? What controls are in place to monitor Government spending? Perhaps the Taoiseach will furnish us with a report on and breakdown of Government spending on this. There is no doubt that there need to be controls. A sum of €2 million is large and I am concerned there might be another agenda at play. We are all familiar with the CervicalCheck scandal, which was a shocking situation that happened in this country, and with the amount of coverage it received internationally. Strangely, if one Googles the words "cervical check Ireland" one will note the first page of results omits any mention of the scandal whatsoever in any news reports. The first page is all Government advertisements. Now perhaps that indicates a very ambitious Government looking to advertise the services available but it is strange there are just enough ads on that page to

push all news items to the next page. Again I figured that there was probably nothing wrong here, but it is worth considering that these ads were still being run during the pandemic when there was a Government decision that those screening services would stop. We had a full page of search-optimised adverts running right through the pandemic when women could not access those services at all. Why did the Government continue to spend money on advertising when those services were not available?

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Taoiseach ran out of time earlier but he might inform the House why he bottled the announcement of 21 December as a bank holiday. Last night, we were led to believe this might happen. If the Government were never even considering it, he can tell us that as well.

On the matter at hand, I have no issue with spending where it is appropriate but when the Taoiseach was leader of the Opposition he vigorously opposed the strategic communications unit. What is he doing differently? How much less is he going to spend than his predecessor *pro rata*? To date, in the 100 or days since his appointment what is that figure as a proportion? He was quite critical and we have to continue his critical analysis now he is Taoiseach to see what the money is being spent on and whether there is oversight of it because some concerns are emanating about it. I fully believe that money will have to be spent on informing the public about the changes that are taking place across the board as a result of Covid. We need to see that it is being spent in the right manner. I ask one thing of the Taoiseach, which I know he did not get to answer earlier. We have to communicate to the public and get across the difference between bloody visors and proper masks. There is a huge difference. I have stressed it for a week to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health. We really need to deal with this and we need to practice what we preach in here.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: If the Taoiseach wants an effective campaign of public information in the situation we are in, he should not have a control freak attitude, which is fearful of public debate. In fact, he should use the resources he is making available for online activity or announcements to actually facilitate debate and provide more detailed information than is currently available. There is a tendency for the Government to insult the intelligence of the public and not to believe in their wisdom. In the end, these debates are forced out. Last week, I organised a briefing about zero Covid at which it was argued that we need a debate about strategy. A week later, we are having a debate about strategy. It has been forced on the Government but there is massive confusion. Advice from NPHET says one thing, the Taoiseach dismisses it and the Tánaiste absolutely rubbishes NPHET but where is the information and the evidence? We need to put in the public domain the information and the data that led the Taoiseach to dismiss NPHET and put out NPHET's data, and let people adjudicate on the actual information and not be afraid to have a debate.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I reiterate the point just made. We now have access to the letter written from NPHET to the Minister for Health, which found its way into the public domain; I do not know how. Perhaps the Taoiseach knows but I do not know how it found its way into the public domain on Sunday evening. It was private correspondence. In any event, that is all we have. The production and publication of data are essential because data are the building blocks of the logic for the direction of travel in very important decisions that impact on people's lives. The right approach is to have this type of transparency and I ask the Taoiseach to publish the information. He received the letter from NPHET but he had a much deeper conversation with the Chief Medical Officer and others on modelling and all of the metrics. They are very skilled professional people. Let us have access to the information also.

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The Taoiseach: The data are being published. The data on ICUs are being published.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A lot of the considerations are not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I was talking about Philip Nolan's-----

The Taoiseach: Information on the case numbers is published on an ongoing basis. The NPHET letters are being published.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: At five weeks behind.

The Taoiseach: I am talking about the letters-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Sorry, the minutes are five weeks behind.

The Taoiseach: -----that were the key issue in terms of Thursday's advice and Sunday's advice. They have been published.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The minutes are always six weeks behind.

The Taoiseach: Everybody should wear masks as often as they possibly can.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Give out the guidance on visors please.

The Taoiseach: The guidance is out there-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is not.

The Taoiseach: -----on masks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Taoiseach to answer the question and stop the interaction please.

The Taoiseach: There was no bank holiday date in my mind yesterday. I do not know where that came from. There was a lot more on my mind yesterday than the awarding of a bank holiday. I do not know where that came from.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is an interesting one.

The Taoiseach: It was not in my head.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It was in someone's head.

The Taoiseach: There was a more fundamental issue about level 3 and level 5. Those were the issues yesterday.

To respond to Deputy Tóibín's points, I am perplexed by the suggestion. There is no media monitoring of Government criticism by anybody in the Government Information Service or the Department of the Taoiseach. There is no monitoring of any criticism by political parties. That does not happen. No public servant or anybody else is doing this type of work. The idea that advertisements are being put out to stop the bad news sounds extraordinary and bizarre to me and I certainly do not believe that is the case.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There were advertisements during the period-----

The Taoiseach: There could have been a contract that was entered into earlier. I do not know. I will check it out for the Deputy and get an answer on it. Perhaps contracts were entered into in advance for a set period. I do not know with regard to the specific issue raised by the Deputy on CervicalCheck advertisements.

The bulk of communications has been on Covid-19 with regard to the various roadmaps, which predate the new Government, and letting people know what was reopening and when, and the issues pertaining to that. Likewise, in terms of the various levels we went to in Kildare and so on, various campaigns have to kick in on all media platforms in terms of what is allowed and not allowed, what the new regime and new restrictions mean, the business supports required in order that businesses can apply for restart grants, how to apply for rates relief, how to apply for various schemes that can support businesses and so on, as well as information for the public. It has been quite comprehensive. We need to continue with these information campaigns at all levels to make sure the members of the public are aware of their entitlements and what the restrictions themselves mean. We will be giving a detailed breakdown on the spend and we will circulate it to Deputies.

There is no control freak approach on issues. It seems that the Business Committee meets on Thursday and, as I said earlier, every Tuesday there is a call for something to be added. This seems to be the stock in trade and the norm on how it operates. No matter what the Business Committee agrees on a Thursday, I can guarantee that on the following Tuesday when we open, there will be a demand for something else. I have no issue with having debates on aspects of this but the Oireachtas participated in a debate on the plan, which allowed for a graduated response.

We did not dismiss NPHE's recommendation. The Government published a plan three weeks ago. It has to take wider societal issues into consideration. It has to take the economy and employment into consideration. Of course, public health is uppermost. The whole idea of the plan is that people could anticipate or expect that if we are at level 2 and things are getting worse, we might go to level 3, then to level 4 and then level 5. Sometimes the virus may not respect that but everybody was taken aback on Sunday when there was a suggestion that most counties would move from level 2 to level 5 in one fell swoop. It would have had enormous implications for many enterprises and businesses and many people working. It would have been the lower paid and young people who would have suffered most if we had moved to level 5 in that way.

At this stage, the Government has taken a view that we did not think it would be proportionate or the right course of action to go to level 5. I have also said, and I said it yesterday to the Irish people, that we do need collectively and individually to work together to stabilise the numbers and get the spread of the virus under control.

Cabinet Committees

10. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee which addresses the economy will next meet. [25608/20]

11. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee which addresses the economy will next meet. [26731/20]

12. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee which addresses the economy will next meet. [28548/20]

13. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee dealing with transport last met. [28810/20]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 to 13, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment has been established and first met on 8 July. It has met on a total of five occasions, most recently on 22 September. The Cabinet committee is scheduled to meet next on 9 October.

Membership of the committee comprises the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and Minister for enterprise, employment and trade, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and for Transport, the Minister for Finance, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Minister for media, tourism, arts, culture, sport and the Gaeltacht. Other Ministers or Ministers of State will attend when required.

The Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment is responsible for issues relating to the economy and investment. Its initial focus was on developing the July jobs stimulus. The July jobs stimulus, a package of over €7 billion worth of measures, was announced by the Government on 23 July. It is designed to stimulate a jobs-led recovery and to build economic confidence, while continuing to manage the impact of Covid-19. It includes measures to extend income and employment supports to affected individuals and companies, to help people get back into work, training or education, to build confidence among businesses and support them through the months ahead, to invest in job-rich infrastructure projects in every part of the country and to invest in areas of future growth like the green economy.

Issues relevant to the transport sector can arise, as required, at a number of Cabinet committees, most notably the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment.

4 o'clock

They can also arise at the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change. Issues relating to the economy and to transport are regularly discussed at full Cabinet meetings where all formal decisions are made.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In the summer the Government had the opportunity to follow New Zealand and crush Covid. Instead, it turned a blind eye to the outbreaks in meat factories, ignored the calls for sick pay for workers and wound down the level of testing. It took the decision to accelerate through the phases and to reopen the economy, under pressure of lobbying from businesses and for the image of the then Taoiseach, now Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar. Unfortunately, the same approach of allowing the interests of private, short-term profit to stand before public health is being pursued by the Government. Despite urging others to follow medical advice, the Taoiseach is not following the recommendations of NPHET. What we saw last night from the Tánaiste was disgraceful. The result will be more outbreaks, more deaths and more lockdowns.

Does the Taoiseach not accept that it is likely that the Government will be forced to go to level 5 in any case but later, for longer and after more deaths? NPHET in its letter to the Government was clear that a gradual approach will not have a sufficient or timely impact. Some-

times people say this is the Government putting the economy before public health. It is actually only short-term profit being put first, however. The consequence of this roundabout and yo-yo of lockdowns and partial reopenings will be devastating not only for public health but also for wider society and the economy, from the point of view of ordinary people.

Deputy Mick Barry: From midnight tonight, the entire country will be at level 3. As the restrictions tighten, there could be and should be an increase in supports but there will not be. In fact, those on the pandemic unemployment payment have seen their supports cut. They are down between €50 and €100 every week, money needed to keep a roof over one's head, put food on the table and keep the wolf from the door. I put it to the Taoiseach that those cuts should be reversed more or less immediately and not later than next Tuesday's budget.

I want to return to an issue I raised earlier to which the Taoiseach did not have time to respond, namely, the hundreds of former Debenhams workers, overwhelmingly women, who, this Friday, will have been forced to picket for the past six months. Now, they must continue to picket in the cold weather with the Covid virus on the increase. KPMG ignored the Taoiseach's mild appeal four weeks ago to have talks with these workers and their representatives. Will the Taoiseach make a strong, clear and unambiguous call on KPMG to stop messing around and get to the table with a serious offer for these workers?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I echo Deputy Barry's call with regard to the Debenhams workers. It is shameful that 1,000 workers have to continue their protest for this length of time to get basic justice and decent treatment from the liquidator. Debenhams clearly does not care a damn about them. The Taoiseach must exercise the influence he has to ensure those workers get a just settlement. Martin in Blackrock, who I mentioned earlier, repeats his invitation for the Taoiseach to, in all seriousness, sit down with him, Eilish, Viv, Helen and others to talk to them about why they are there and what they expect of the Government to ensure they get just treatment.

I cannot understand why the Government will not restore the pandemic unemployment payment. There is no difference between now and March in terms of the bills, mortgages, financial pressures and so on facing people who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. How does the Taoiseach think people whose work has been stopped and whose income has been drastically reduced as a result of the pandemic are going to pay their bills? The Taoiseach must answer them. It seems to me that there is no other answer other than that the Government has to restore those payments and protections as a minimum measure.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach seems to have difficulty even accepting publicly or saying out loud that the Government did in fact cut the pandemic unemployment payment. We know it was initially envisaged as a 12-week intervention. We know now that this was not the case. We know this is a protracted period of a public health and an economic crisis for workers across the State. The cut that was made has to be reversed. It is not reasonable nor is it proportionate for the State to impose restrictions which keep people away from work. That is what public health restrictions do. They are a necessary intervention of last resort. One can do that on the one hand and then cut the supports on which people rely on the other hand. That is patently unfair. The letter I referred to from the hospitality and events sector makes that point around the pandemic unemployment payment. It is not just workers but employers who recognise that this was a mistake, as was the cutting of the wage subsidy scheme. The letter also stated that what was announced in the July stimulus was not enough. The sector needs more grant aid rather than debt.

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The Taoiseach: Is it the case that the Opposition Deputies are saying that unemployment assistance and jobseeker's allowance should be €350?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Personally, yes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It should certainly be higher than €203.

The Taoiseach: Is it the case that it should be €350? We need to call a spade a spade.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I am making the point that this is not sustainable. Carer's allowance at €350 a week could not be sustainable. If one elevates every social protection measure to €350 per week-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is in our budget statement.

The Taoiseach: The Deputies opposite are avoiding this all the way through. Deputy McDonald has avoided it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Deputy McDonald is avoiding nothing.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Boyd Barrett would tax the imaginary whoever to fund it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are not imaginary. They are corporations.

The Taoiseach: There has to be sustainability to what we do. We have to think ahead. The whole idea of the pandemic unemployment payment was to open it up to new entrants. We did that because of the acknowledgement that there would be further restrictions imposed. We also extended it to April. It is my sense that we will have to extend beyond that until we get a vaccine.

The Government has to take the overall view. We are borrowing over €20 billion this year, and rightly so. We will be borrowing large amounts next year. There are limits, however. There has to be fairness across the board. The majority of pandemic unemployment payment recipients receive very close to what they were receiving prior to going on the payment, bar those on a higher level.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach should not mislead the Dáil. That is entirely untrue. That is inaccurate. That is wrong information.

The Taoiseach: On the Debenhams workers, again, I am conscious of the efforts made by Mandate and others in terms of the liquidation. I am not happy with how Debenhams dealt with this. There are limitations, however, to what can be done. The Government will provide a statutory redundancy payment and will do whatever it can within its powers to get extra support for the workers where that is possible. That has been the Government's approach from the outset. I never promised something that I felt might not be achieved for the workers concerned. I am clear on that and have been when I met the workers. We will do what we can within the limits of the law to get some supports for the workers concerned.

I will speak to the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection on the rights of Aer Lingus workers being undermined. This idea that this is all being done for profit is nonsense. A lockdown destroys ordinary people's lives. The Deputy talks about ordinary people. Does he know what he is saying? Who suffers the most?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The virus kills people.

The Taoiseach: I know that. We have a set of criteria in the plan that we discussed with NPHET. They are broad criteria; I accept that. The bottom line is that everyone had an expectation of a graduated response.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It was not graduated.

The Taoiseach: Once there is a lockdown, there are unintended consequences. There is no point pretending it would not have a serious effect on many ordinary self-employed people who have grasped the period from the last lockdown to now to try and create viability in their business. They might employ four or five people. A lockdown on Sunday night could have spelled the end for them. These are the hard decisions we have to make and we are not making the call in terms of short-term profit. That is an outrageous and propagandistic assertion, which is more to do with ideology than reality on the ground.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The decision is about ideology.

The Taoiseach: Our reality is to protect people as much as we can, including lives and livelihoods. They are intertwined because a range of health consequences can emanate from people losing jobs or being unsure about their future. Their mental health can be undermined. We have to take that on board.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We agree with that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We will be back to level 5.

The Taoiseach: We may not. We still have it within our responsibility as people. We can impact on this, collectively and individually, if we pull together to try to get the numbers stabilised. If we do not, we may have to move to another level.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Then it will be later and longer. There will be more damage-----

The Taoiseach: We may have to do that. As I said last week, the decision was at this stage not to move to level 5. I have no guarantees, just as there were no guarantees that had we moved to level 5, it would all be fine in four weeks' time.

On the New Zealand strategy, we are not New Zealand, either geographically or in terms of economic construct. We are different from New Zealand. No other country in Europe at the moment has gone ahead with a lockdown, even though their numbers are far higher than ours.

Deputy Paul Murphy: But our ICU capacity-----

The Taoiseach: No, it is not to do with ICU capacity.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is not what NPHET says.

The Taoiseach: NPHET does not say that.

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Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is what it is worried about.

The Taoiseach: There is a range of criteria. The HSE says it has ICU capacity. We are obviously concerned and will monitor that but the HSE is running the service and the last time out, we managed. We created a surge capacity when it came and our hospitals managed.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: By stopping all other activity in the services.

The Taoiseach: We will have to readjust and I hope we do not get there but, if we do, we will do everything we can to protect people. There has to be balance to the debate and using language to suggest that short-term profit triumphs over everything is just propagandistic, ideological nonsense.

Sitting suspended at 4.13 p.m. and resumed at 4.36 p.m.

Estimates for Public Services 2020: Messages from Select Committees

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2020: Votes Nos. 34, 16 and 23. The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2020: Votes Nos. 7, 8, 9 and 10.

Covid-19 (Arts): Statements

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): Táim buíoch an deis seo a bheith agam chun plé a dhéanamh ar chúrsaí cultúrtha agus ealaíne. Aithníonn an Rialtas an tábhacht atá ag baint leis an gcultúr agus leis na healaíona don duine daonna, don phobal agus don tsochaí trí chéile chuile lá, chuile sheachtain agus chuile bhliain. Tá sé seo léirithe go rí-shoiléir ag an ngéarchéim Covid-19 agus cuireann sé i gcuimhne dúinn arís agus arís eile cé chomh luachmhar agus atá ár n-ealaíontóirí, ár scríbhneoirí, ár ndamhsóirí, ár n-aisteoirí agus ár bhfilí dár saolta laethúla.

The Government recognises the unprecedented nature of the challenge facing the arts, live performance promoters, producers and artists, not least from a financial point of view. For the past six months, the sector has experienced devastation due to the restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The performing arts have suffered considerably in view of the fact that much of the work done by those in the sector is face to face with the public and audiences. They were among the first sectors to close and will continue to experience difficult and challenging times long after other sectors have returned to work.

A particular focus of my approach and that of my Department is to engage in continuous and extensive consultation with all stakeholders, including individual artists, arts organisations, representative bodies, producers and art practices. This engagement is invaluable and has deep-

ened my awareness of the challenges that artists, performers and organisations face, and of the important role they have played in sustaining us all in recent months.

The Arts Council is the statutory body charged with supporting and developing the arts in Ireland. It is statutorily independent in its funding decisions and I, as Minister, cannot intervene in this function. The council received an initial allocation of €80 million in 2020. This has been increased by more than 30% to €105 million to allow the council to address the crisis in the sector. Among the measures introduced by the council are new and additional bursaries and commissions, including supports for freelance artists and those looking to develop projects on a collaborative basis.

I have a background in music and performance and am acutely aware of the challenges being faced by artists and musicians across the country as a result of this devastating pandemic. Many artists and musicians operating in the commercial sector have sought funding from the Arts Council this year. The council provides funding to professional artists in all art forms and genres. It is important to note that the council has reported that to date in 2020 a very significant proportion of its grants to individuals were made to artists who had never before received Arts Council funding. They represent people who would normally be fully employed in the commercial sector.

I will turn now to the July stimulus package and give the House a description of the work which has been done over the past few months in rolling out the stimulus. In the area of culture, creativity and the arts, the stimulus is designed to create opportunities for professional artists and creatives, and their support staff, through increased support for the Arts Council, live production, live performance and specific measures targeted at musicians. A key objective of this funding is to provide enhanced support for freelance arts workers who have been impacted severely by the Covid-19 public health emergency. The stimulus announced a new €10 million culture fund to include increased funding for Creative Ireland to employ artists through the creative youth and creative communities programmes and funding to support the commissioning of artists to produce creative content for national broadcast and for Ealaín na Gaeltachta for new artists bursaries and art activities in Gaeltacht schools.

Musicians and music performers across all genres face particular difficulties. The music stimulus package, which is part of the culture fund, is a dedicated fund of €1 million for musicians. It involves three funding schemes designed to help sustain the popular and commercial music sector across a diverse range of genres, including rock, pop, hip-hop, indie, jazz, country and western and traditional and folk. It is designed to stimulate areas of work which artists would usually fund with income from their own sources, including live event fees.

The three schemes are targeted at professional musicians and their teams and will support songwriting camps, recordings and album releases. The aim is to ensure Irish musicians, engineers, PR, media, agents, labels and publishers can continue to develop and share their work while Covid restrictions are in place. The music stimulus package schemes are being managed on behalf of the Department by First Music Contact and there was an extremely strong interest in the call which had a closing date of yesterday. Applications will now be assessed by an expert music peer panel.

The additional moneys allocated in this job stimulus package includes an increase in the Arts Council 2020 allocation from €100 million to €105 million, some 40% higher than in 2019. Among other initiatives, the additional moneys allow the council to increase to 164 the

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number of creative schools in the 2020-21 academic year. This brings the total number of participating schools to 314 this year. It also allows for an increase in the grants to each creative school from €2,000 to €3,100. Consideration for diversity and inclusion within arts initiatives remains hugely important and all of the additional schools entering the programme have been selected from applicant DEIS schools. Some 50 of the schools starting in creative schools this year have DEIS status.

A sum of €1 million in extra supports was made available to help key cultural organisations in receipt of annual funding from the Department to deal with the difficulties of operating in a Covid-19 world. These organisations house collections of movable cultural heritage of national importance or are unique in the country and relate to matters of national interest. They include Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, the Hunt Museum, Archbishop Marsh's Library, the National Print Museum and Foynes Flying Boat & Maritime Museum.

Capital funding of €6 million is available to accelerate the redevelopment and renewal of our national cultural institutions envisaged under the national development plan. Over the coming 18 months, we will seek to complete the design and planning phases of a number of these iconic buildings with a view to commencing construction in 2021. Highlights under this programme of capital investment include the reimagined and significant restoration of the National Library. The National Archives redevelopment will see our valuable trove of State archive material rehoused. Advanced design and planning works will commence at the National Concert Hall and at the Crawford Art Gallery to enhance this cornerstone building in a regenerated city plaza in Cork city.

The additional capital in the July stimulus has allowed me to allocate funding to the Irish Museum of Modern Art to invest in a new collections management system, as well as to the National Concert Hall for the purchase of video infrastructure for ongoing high quality live streaming, a particularly innovative response to the crisis. A sum of €10 million was provided for a pilot performance and production support package to support the live performance and audiovisual production sector. Of this, €5 million was allocated to a pilot live performance support scheme.

I am conscious of the unprecedented nature of the challenge facing live performance promoters and producers, not least from a financial point of view, and the wider impact that has on the sector's ecosystem of freelance performers, technicians and creative artists, particularly those dependent on its visibility for their income and livelihoods. It should also be noted that the live entertainment sector is worth an estimated €3.5 billion annually to the economy and employs 35,000 people. The pilot scheme is designed to assist and establish commercial promoters of live performances in music and theatre to provide employment to workers in the creative industries.

The scheme will help to de-risk the cost of preparing for new productions which may subsequently have to be postponed, cancelled or curtailed due to restrictions to safeguard public health. The main objectives of the scheme are to provide employment opportunities in the ticketed performing sector, allow commercial organisers of live performances to commence preparations immediately and allow productions to go ahead in the near future, while also complying with public health protection measures. This scheme has been developed in conjunction with the sector and will be managed directly by my Department. There have been a significant number of applications which are being assessed at present and allocations will be made on the basis of the number of people being employed. I hope to announce the recipients of this fund-

ing in the coming weeks.

The balance of the production support package was allocated to Screen Ireland, which put in place a pilot €5 million production continuation fund for film and television projects to assist production companies with the uncertainties caused by Covid-19. The fund will help to cover costs incurred where production must be halted as a result of an incident related to Covid-19 in circumstances not covered by other insurances. The maximum made available to any one production shall be €500,000. The fund will enable independent Irish production activity to return as safely as possible and help retain Ireland's talented creative workforce as the industry recovers and adapts to the challenges of Covid-19.

An amount of €3 million was allocated to Screen Ireland's television drama fund to support the production of new Irish TV drama content in line with the Government's audiovisual action plan and building on the success of Screen Ireland's support of "Normal People" last year. Last week, Screen Ireland announced details of the first tranche of this funding to five television drama projects with production set to commence in Galway, Cork and Limerick by the end of 2020, as well as funding for a number of joint development initiatives with RTÉ, Virgin Media TV and TG4.

I have given the House a very brief outline of the extensive work being undertaken by my Department and its agencies in the areas of the arts. It will take me many hours to give Deputies a good understanding of the breadth and depth of interventions. Perhaps Deputies may want to point to or ask for details in particular areas and I will be happy to oblige. I will finish by alluding briefly to two task forces under way at present. These are the arts and culture recovery task force and the night-time economy task force. Their work and reports will inform the direction of Government policy for the medium term.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus tá brón orm as ucht an mhoill - bhí mé ag cruinniú Zoom leis an gCeann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom díriú isteach ar an athrú atá tar éis teacht ó mheán oíche aréir.

While we are not at level 5 shutdown, the arts and entertainment industries have once again been shut down in many ways unless people can avail of online opportunities. For the vast majority of those in the arts and entertainment industries, online is not as feasible as it is for other sectors. This is a sector that has been on its knees since it was closed down for the first time in March. More than 5,000 workers in the sector having had their pandemic unemployment payment cut only a few weeks ago. They are struggling to survive and have been let down by the Government which does not seem to have the urgency or a plan to deal with those who have no other outlet for income. There are only cuts.

Sinn Féin has called for a clear plan from the Government to deal with the crisis in the industry since March. I raised this with the then Government in the Covid-19 committee back in May and I have raised it with the Minister on a number of occasions. I still hope that we will hear some news sometime of the PUP being restored to those in need of it at the rate it was prior to the cut a fortnight ago.

Like many other Members, I am sure that the Minister has received many emails about the need to support the live events industry. I congratulate those who have taken the time to share their experiences with us. These are not just normal emails. My office received 1,000 emails as part of a campaign organised by the Event Production Industry Covid-19 Working Group,

EPIC. It has highlighted the value of live events at €3.5 billion as well as the plight of the 35,000 full-time and part-time workers who have been left behind and are out of work. I congratulate EPIC and its campaign in galvanising the passions of thousands of people who would not otherwise write to politicians. They have written to me and probably to others in this House and outlined some of the harrowing stories of the dire straits that they are in. I have been trying to respond to every one of those emails over the past month and I apologise to those who I have not managed to get to thus far. Due to there being so many of them, some were caught in the email spam and releasing them, I discovered, is not as easy as it should be.

For instance, Adam from Ballyfermot says:

Just been out of work for so long and trying to get by on €350 a week and now €300 is hard. I've gone from working 60 to 70 hours a week to zero. I've been in a job since I finished school and I am lost without it. The events is more than a job for most of us. It's a lifestyle and mine has been taken away from me.

Steve wrote to me, and probably to others. He is from the band, The Stunning, whom many of us will remember, and we hope that we will hear from Steve and those in the band again in the future. The Stunning were marking 30 years this year since their debut album. He said:

I have been a professional musician with my band The Stunning for over 30 years. People in my industry have not worked since last March and I myself haven't gigged since December 28 2019. We had a huge year lined up for 2020 with festivals booked all over the country, and it's the 30th anniversary of the band's debut album. I'm also an actor and my last job I did with RTÉ was last year.

Jane from Blackpitts writes:

I worked for the events and marketing agency in Dublin with 22 of the most hard-working people I've ever met. Just before Covid we were experiencing our best quarter in years. We had grown a solid client base and were expanding our offering with new staff and departments. On March 15, everything stopped. Clients pulled out of events planned and the phone stopped ringing. 30% of our staff were let go and the rest were put on part-time hours. Thankfully, for the wage subsidy scheme, I was lucky enough to keep my job but with the support ending soon, I am terrified about my future.

It continues in the case of others. Dan from Walkinstown says:

I am stressed. I am under financial strains. I have borrowed and I am not sure I can pay it back. I have been abandoned by the Government and the Department of Social Protection. I and at least 35,000 others like me are part of an industry that has been destroyed, / this industry is one of the main reasons that our powerfully successful tourism industry is so loved by the people from around the world. Our artistic output and nightlife culture are vital to the Irish economy and the lack of support is killing us. It has already passed the point where it will not recover and return to what it was. You must take action now.

During a meeting I had with Mary Coughlan and the Musical Entertainment Alliance Ireland, MEAI, which represents 4,800 music and entertainment workers, she told us about someone she knows who is worried about not being able to afford to pay his rent on a reduced PUP and who is planning to sell his double bass as he sees no future in music after all of the years that he has put into honing his talents. We also heard at that meeting of people living in sheds

and cars because they cannot afford the rent anymore. Others are very stressed about the banks and mortgages and are not getting any relief.

The funding that has been provided thus far has been welcomed by Sinn Féin but it is nowhere near enough and it is also confusing. Even the funding announced by the Minister for some projects, it seems as if they are announced in June, announced again in July and announced again then prior to the budget. We will probably hear of them again next week. Clarity is needed on what has been announced and what will be announced so that we know whether such schemes as the €5 million live performance scheme is the same as the €10 million performance and production support scheme announced in the July stimulus package.

There are a number of issues. We need to look to, and learn from, other countries. In Germany, the self-employed artist is entitled to a 50% reduction, for instance, in insurance fees. The arts there have received much more, proportionately, than in Ireland. In March, the first thing that the government in Germany did was to provide a €50 billion package for small businesses and the arts. Their labour Minister intends to extend their version of PUP to artists until March 2022, not 2021. We should at this stage start looking at the industries, including the arts and entertainment industry, which will be last to open. The Minister acknowledged that in her contribution that it was one of the first to close, and possibly for many artists in that industry, will be the last to open. That means that there has to be a different approach for this sector of society, especially if we are trying to rebuild our tourism industry in the future, and to give a lift to all those involved.

Ba mhaith liom ar deireadh an deis a thapú chun tacú leo siúd atá tar éis cuidiú linn ar fad sa mhéid a dhéanann siad go dtí seo le linn na tréimhse seo, ag déanamh ceoil, drámaí agus gach rud eile ar líne agus atá ag tabhairt ardú spioraid dúinn ar fad san am deacair seo. Tá siad cróga agus ag déileáil lena lán deacrachtaí agus, mar a dúirt mé, na deacrachtaí ó thaobh ioncaim atá ag mórán díobh. Tá fadhbanna meabharghalair ag neart acu agus againn timpeall na tíre, áit a bhfuil daoine thíos leis an brú atá orainn toisc nach bhfeiceann siad bealach amach, nó i gcás a lán daoine lasmuigh de seo, conas is féidir leo gnathbhillí an teaghlaigh, ar nós an mhorgáiste, an árachais nó a leithéid sina íoc. Impím ar an Aire agus ar an Rialtas ina iomlán, agus go háirithe ar an Aire Gnóthaí Fostaíochta agus Coimircí Sóisialta, déileáil arís leis seo agus ardú a thabhairt don íocaíocht PUP, ach ní hé sin amháin atá i gceist. Tá i bhfad Éireann níos mó airgid ag teastáil le go mbeadh tuarastal ann agus rud éigin le déanamh ag a lán díobh siúd atá gafa faoi láthair. Gabhaim buíochas.

Deputy Duncan Smith: This is not the first time I have sat in the Chamber and listened to Deputy Ó Snodaigh speak before me on the arts. His family is steeped in the many different parts of the arts. We have debated the arts on a number of occasions in the short life of this Dáil. It feels like we are going over old ground. It is old ground, however, that is becoming more important and more severe for those who are unemployed and want to work again. These people are looking for hope that there will be light at the end of the tunnel. They will not have got much hope if they have been watching the “Claire Byrne Live” show last night when we saw our Deputy Prime Minister take our Chief Medical Officer and the entire board of NPHET to task. When we see incidents such as that, it is an embarrassment to the State but it is especially hard for people in sectors that are going to be, as they say themselves, the last to open. It is massively destabilising when one sees one of the major decision-makers in government engage in such personalised attacks.

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It is very destabilising and manifestly so for those in sectors that are on the edges of this pandemic.

Very little has moved. I listened to the Minister's contribution from my office and I am aware that funding is being given in a type of block, high-level format but the people in the sector who are most affected are not seeing it on a week-to-week basis. Those who have to pay rent, bills, support their families and themselves, as well as those who want to live with dignity are not seeing that. That is very worrying.

We should take this opportunity to state that there were issues with this sector prior to the pandemic that are being compounded by what is going on now. The Theatre Forum review in 2019 of pay and conditions in the performing arts indicated that working conditions had not improved in the decade since the living and working conditions of artists report was published in 2010. When parties were saying that they would keep the recovery going in the second half of the last decade when the economy was back up and running, that was not the case for some sectors and the arts was one of those sectors. In a country that professes to value the arts and hold it dear to our hearts, as many of us do, that has not been reflected in the actions of the State.

As we know, art and the arts sector travels extremely well to all four corners of the globe and is received very well. We are viewed as a creative people and as a country that values its creative people but is that really the case? When we look at what has happened in the past decade and the way it has been compounded by this pandemic, I am not sure we can over that statement with any credibility.

On a day where it is indicated that the national minimum wage will rise by a mere ten cent, 72% of artists in Ireland were earning less than the national minimum wage before this pandemic hit. One might ask what is the point in having a national minimum wage, if so many in a particular sector fall below that line.

That brings me to the pandemic unemployment payment, which was very important payment for many workers and very important for people in the arts sector. Deputy Ó Snodaigh spoke eloquently about the impact of the pandemic on a number of individuals. I echo those sentiments. The budget will be next week. We need to see something that is a little more creative and targeted, and people in the arts sector will need to be included in that. We must see the restoration of the pandemic unemployment payment.

We are 100 days into the term of this Government. I am not one for arbitrary targets and I acknowledge that the period of the past 100 days has been unique but those working in the arts believe that the first 100 days posed more questions such as whether it is worth it for them, if they should be breaking their backs in the hope that their sector will be allowed to recover and whether the Government will back them, their group, band, theatre group and industry. I hope it will do so. I am aware efforts have been made. I am not here to simply say everything is desperate and the Minister is not doing anything. I do sense that she is doing something but these workers need to be able to feel that in their pockets next week, the week after that and so on until this pandemic is over. They are struggling to survive and pay their bills and they need help from the Government.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I was working on my contribution yesterday evening when everything changed with the announcement that we are to move to level 3 but I want to raise a few points because the entire nation hopes that we will move out of level 3 in the near future. I am

a Deputy from County Clare, which is the home of traditional music and dance. Many groups involved in set dancing, Irish dancing and the other dance forms believe that they fall between two stools. The different guidelines that came out in recent months do not necessarily lend to them restarting classes or dances. We know that they cannot happen now because we are at level 3. That is acceptable but when we get beyond that, we need to look at those dance forms. I refer to lessons given in every school hall around Ennis and Shannon on a Friday afternoon. That has been a way of life for people for many years and it has been taken by Covid-19, so to speak. For many people, Irish dancing, set dancing and those other dance forms were their sport so I ask that during this period, that activity might be examined. It does not fully fit within the theatre sphere. For some, that form of arts is a form of sport. It is what keeps them active and energised. The Minister's Department might look at that as it engages with NPHE in the future.

The artist residency scheme is a very successful scheme administered by the Minister's Department. It gets artists into many schools throughout the country. I looked at the figures for my county in recent years. I do not know whether it was because of a low level of uptake or a low level of roll-out of the grant but only eight or ten schools benefited. This is an ideal year to consider significantly increasing the number of groups that would benefit from that scheme. This is a very tough time for artists. Their source of income and the various ways they show their talents and wares have been hugely restricted. This would be an opportune time to consider extending the artist residency scheme throughout the entire academic year to ensure that the artists of a county could hold various workshops in schools and invigorate the arts curriculum offered both in primary and secondary school.

Regarding festivals, Clare has a number of very famous festivals, all of which have been cancelled. That is not unique to Clare; it is happening countrywide. The Lisdoonvarna Matchmaking Festival would have concluded last weekend. The Willie Clancy Summer School normally takes place in Miltown Malbay in the month of July, and there is the Scariff Harbour Festival. I mention those three but dozens happen in Clare. To take the town of Lisdoonvarna, there is very little happening there at the moment. There are many for sale and to let signs along the main street. That one month in which the matchmaking festival is held buoyed up the entire town and gave it the financial adrenaline shot that carried them through many other months of the year. As the Minister prepares for the budget next week I hope that the many festivals that have been cancelled, which are gearing up in the hope of doing something in 2021, might be given some support that would make such festival planning for the new year easier for them.

The final issue I want to raise is tourism, which also comes under the Minister's Department. A man in Clare, Sean Kilkenny, has a business which is an art form in itself. He is very involved in equestrian activities. I believe he met the Minister some weeks ago when she was in Clare. He runs a jarvey business. He has some beautiful horses that tour the county and show at many events. He has often shown up at Bunratty Castle. He brings colour and pageantry to the county. He is one of the many business people who fall between the two stools. I spoke about Irish dancing and set dancing but into which area does his business fit? It is not farming. He believes that business restart grants and all the supports that have been wonderful for businesses in the past few months do not fully fit his mix of business because having performed at various venues around the country and county, at the end of the day he has to feed 40 animals and therein lies another struggle.

I thank the Minister and look forward to hearing what her Department will announce in the budget next week.

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Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire inniu agus roimh an méid a bhí le rá aici mar gheall ar an tacaíocht atá á soláthar aici don earnáil seo.

I spoke at length in the Dáil recently about the impact of Covid-19 on the aviation and travel industry in Cork. There is no doubt that the impact on the arts and culture sector has been just as detrimental and will last longer than that in many of the other sectors. In 2020, the recession in the arts sector will be between 34% and 42%. In terms of GDP, this is projected to cost between €250 million and €300 million. Covid-19 is forecast to put between 1,500 and 1,900 arts jobs at risk. I welcome that total funding for the arts and culture sector will increase from €183 million to €239 million, which is an increase of almost 30% this year. However, this sector is one of the most vulnerable in that it is heavily reliant on public consumption and participation.

I am a music lover. I enjoy attending gigs and concerts in my home county of Cork every year. I attend the Cork Jazz Festival. The festival is one of the most iconic events of its kind on the national cultural calendar. During last year’s jazz festival, Cork received a cash injection of approximately €35 million over a four-day period. Cork Jazz Festival is not only a cultural event; it is big business for the hospitality industry in Cork and gives the city a significant boost, with the festival attracting approximately 40,000 visitors to Leaside. Like so many other events nationwide and worldwide, the jazz festival was cancelled as a result of the pandemic. This year would have been the festival’s 43rd year running, which is a testament to its founders and all the stakeholders, such as Cork City Council, Cork Business Association, Fáilte Ireland and Diageo, including Guinness. I am delighted to see that Diageo is fully committed to continuing to support the festival because its importance to the local economy cannot be overestimated. Those within the industry must be praised for reimagining their programming to serve an on-line audience. The efforts made by many artists to adapt to and serve an online audience must be lauded but online substitutions cannot replace the live experience and they do not get away from the brutal reality facing arts and artists in Ireland. Thankfully, the Government has acknowledged the reality facing the industry and has put additional supports in place.

I welcome the establishment of the new task force for the recovery of the arts and culture sector, which was announced on 10 September. With the budget imminent, I ask the Minister to review and refine existing supports and consider any further measures that may be required. It is vital that the upcoming national economic plan provide a trajectory for the sector and its institutions so they may survive to the greatest extent possible in the years ahead.

Chomh maith leis sin, teastaíonn uaim labhairt ar son na gcoláistí samhraidh agus na mná tí a chuireann seirbhísí dochreidte ar fáil ní hamháin le linn an tsamhraidh ach le linn na scoilbhliana acadúla. In 2020, d’fhulaing an t-earnáil seo de bharr an víris. Chaill an-chuid gnólachtaí a n-ioncam don bhliain agus chaill muintir na Gaeltachta turasóirí agus daltaí scoile de bharr an víris chontúirtigh seo. Tá súil agam go bhfuil an tAire Stáit, Teachta Chambers, agus an tAire, Teachta Catherine Martin, chun athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an earnáil seo agus na céimeanna riachtanacha a thógáil i dtaobh na gcoláistí samhraidh agus na mná tí.

Ag an am céanna, is dóigh liom go gcaithfidimid infheistiú ceart a dhéanamh sa teanga féin. Tá ár dteanga agus ár gcultúr níos tábhachtaí inniu ná mar a bhí sé cheana. Is é an t-aon slí inar féidir linn é sin a léiriú ná trí infheistiocht sa bhuiséad an tseachtain seo chugainn.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: In my constituency, Meath West, I have spoken to many artists who have been affected by this pandemic. The arts and events industry has been shut down

since March. I have listened to stories about how the affected have been dealing with the stress during this time and about how they do not see any future owing to the closure of their business. Musicians are being forced to sell instruments and businesses are being forced to close shops for good as they cannot survive. Some may believe it is just artists, musicians and DJs who are suffering from this crisis but the problem is much bigger. What about the sound technicians, lighting and visual effects technicians, stage managers and stagehands? The industry never needed State support in the past.

Thousands of people have seen their livelihoods stopped, with no date set for a return. Although they try to remain upbeat about the possibility of a gig being given the green light, some artists are really down and depressed, and it is their families who have to pick up the pieces at home. It is the families who have to worry about the bills being paid, putting food on the table and preventing the mortgage from going into arrears. They now have the extra burden of knowing Christmas is around the corner. That is when most of the artists make their money. Our musicians need to know we are here to support them and that the employment wage subsidy scheme payments and pandemic unemployment payments will be restored to the full amounts to help those most affected by the closure. Arts Council funding does not cover artists or workers in previously unfunded live events and entertainment industries.

The events industry has been hit the hardest. It was closed in March of this year and those affected, who are highly skilled professionals, feel they have been forgotten by the Government and thrown to the side of the road. While we seek to get the economy up and running again, the industry still does not have a return date, nor does it look like it will get one. There seems to be more emphasis on ticket-touting legislation than on helping those most hit by the pandemic. Our artists have worked in bars, clubs, theatres and venues and when they are in work, it creates employment, including for cleaners and bar and security staff. It is important to remember the chain of workers associated with a simple gig. The great joy and comfort the artists bring to people all over the country should not be forgotten.

If it were not for the media printing what is happening to artists and the potential timelines for reopening events venues, artists would be completely in the dark. We need to engage more with the industry - an industry that wants to work in a healthy environment and with safety restrictions in place but that cannot do so because the Government has it fully closed down. If we stop those affected from earning a living, through no fault of their own, we should be able to compensate them and leave them in a position where they can at least survive.

Deputy Gary Gannon: As time is limited, I will raise an issue that has not been raised by any of my colleagues across the Chamber. On 30 June, the Arts Council advertised a tender for badly needed communications advice. Many of the major agencies in the country applied in good faith. The tender documentation stated the successful agency would commence work in August 2020. Even though the assessment and evaluations must have taken place, the Arts Council sent out a notice last week stating it had terminated the competition without awarding a contract. It gave a very strange reason that I and many others would be curious to understand in more detail, namely, that it was setting up a new communications group to produce a strategy for itself. This is curious because the very first paragraph of the tender document, as initiated, states, “Advise on and assist with the development and implementation of the Arts Council’s public relations, public affairs and media relations strategies, particularly in the context of the Arts Council’s 10-year strategy; design work plans for these activities, including the identification of stakeholders and pathways to interact with them; and, with the assistance of the Arts Council, review annually the delivery of the communications plan and devise recommendations

for improvement.”

For reasons I shall outline as my contribution develops, I believe the Arts Council has acted in bad faith to such an extent that an independent investigation is warranted into the issue. The inquiry should look for all the relevant papers and records. If that does not happen, the Arts Council will be inundated with freedom of information requests on this matter.

Agencies will have put a major effort into the very demanding tender application process. It will have cost them well into the tens of thousands of euro in terms of the commitment of staff and production. The agencies in question are all in the creative industry in these troubled times.

The last body one would expect to mess around with small businesses is the Arts Council, which deals with creatives, artists and small groups. What it has done, four months after the tender was advertised, is highly unprofessional and calls into question its board and executive. It disrespects those who spent time on a very demanding tender. At a minimum, they should be compensated for the time spent on the tender, which proved to be of no avail. This raises the need for the matter to be investigated by somebody independent. What went on in the Arts Council in this regard? What happened since the tender was advertised in June? What happened to the submissions made by the agencies who tendered? Were they assessed? Who assessed them? Was there an independent person or persons among the assessors? What have they to say about this? What did the assessors find? Why are the agencies being told only now? Will the Arts Council use the agencies' ideas? Is this just a free way to get the intellectual property and ideas of others? Is this a proper way to do business? What was the Arts Council's true reason for its actions? Has there been any potential conflict of interest on the board or executive? Did somebody not like the assessment? A multitude of questions need answers, and that is why I believe the matter warrants an independent inquiry.

If the Comptroller and Auditor General were examining this issue, his approach would be very technical and he would ask whether the Arts Council abided by the guidelines. That is the approach that is needed in this inquiry. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform needs to be asked for his view. As a chartered accountant, he might not be too happy to hear that the decision taken by the Arts Council to withdraw, after four months, a public tender that it advertised is adding to the very serious pressure already on small businesses. He might feel he has to do something to investigate activity that appears to be so incredibly unprofessional that it warrants further investigation.

The excuse given by the Arts Council for withdrawing the tender raises more questions because the first reference in the tender material is to the communications strategy. That is not something new that has just happened. To the bemusement and frustration of those creative agencies that made a great effort to put together a tender application, the excuse given by the Arts Council as to why the tender was withdrawn seems to be identical to the reason it was initiated in the first instance. The only grounds for the cancellation of a tender are exceptional circumstances. This hardly qualifies as such. The Arts Council is tone deaf to artists and agencies and it should not be allowed to get away with what it has done to artists, and now agencies.

Some local authorities have come under criticism recently for cancelling tender processes without good reason. This, too, needs to be examined. It underscores that the last thing one would expect from the Arts Council would be messing around with creative, indigenous small businesses at this incredibly precarious time. It is interesting to note that the three reasons set out by the Office of Government Procurement that State agents may cancel a tender do not in-

clude the fig leaf presented by the Arts Council last week.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: It is important that we all recognise the devastation of the arts industry, including writers, performers, musicians, technicians, planners, participants and the wider community. We have relied on the arts to soothe our souls. Those who create and work in this space have faced more sacrifices than most. In Carlow, we are fortunate to have the VISUAL Centre for Contemporary Art and The George Bernard Shaw Theatre, one of Ireland's leading contemporary arts spaces in Carlow town which opened in 2009 and comprises a beautiful gallery and performance area. It is an incredible amenity.

VISUAL houses a 335-seat theatre and the largest white cube gallery space where it produces a programme of commissioned and existing high-quality national and international contemporary arts and a host of performance of events in multiple disciplines, including theatre, dance, film, comedy, literature and music. In terms of values, inclusion and collaboration is at its core. The community in Carlow and Ireland have been gifted so much from this centre. In its mission statement, VISUAL commits to identifying and removing physical, social and economic barriers to accessing its work and to support, foster and provide opportunities for arts participation in our communities. However, a larger barrier to completing this work is a lack of funding. The unprecedented and ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic has been a great disaster for Ireland's arts. We need to examine ways to repair that damage to ensure that future generations get to enjoy all we have enjoyed.

Covid-19 has taken over our lives but it will not be with us forever. We need to prepare for that brighter day, the day when the children cut class for the pantomime at Christmas, the day when a new writer launches a book to a massive audience, the day local groups open the curtain on their plays on opening night and the night artists see their curated work displayed for the first time. These are times we have seen and, surely, times we will see again but they do not come free of charge. I ask the Minister to consider putting in place a funding stream for VISUAL, one of Ireland's leading contemporary arts spaces. VISUAL is an €18 million development and a joint project funded by the local authority with a grant of €3.17 million from the former Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism under the access programme. Carlow County Council and the Arts Council have provided funding over the past few years but Covid-19 has affected the resources of all local authorities and the arts.

The centre makes regular funding applications. We can support it in its work by bringing it under the aegis of the Minister's Department and provide it with an allocation from arts funding. This is important. I extend an invitation to the Minister to visit VISUAL in Carlow when the level 3 restrictions have been lifted. It is one of the most beautiful buildings in the town. The service it provides to Carlow county and town and throughout the country is unreal but it needs funding. I welcome the establishment of the task force mentioned earlier by the Minister, which is important. I also welcome the 30% increase in the Department's budget, which now stands at €239 million.

There is a particular area I am concerned about. Over the past few months, I have been contacted by many artists and musicians. I am not sure if the Minister is aware of The Backline, which featured on "Nationwide" two or three weeks ago. I met them with the Minister of State, Deputy Malcolm Noonan. These are musicians and singers based in Carlow-Kilkenny. They are fabulous and they play online to support front-line workers. The forum hosts online concerts most weeks. They are exceptional. When I raised the issue of funding for them with the Department and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, I was told no funding stream is available

to them. This has created significant issues for me in my area. These musicians and singers are very talented but they do not qualify under any specific funding scheme. I hope the Minister saw them on “Nationwide”. If not, I will forward some clips to her of their online concerts. We need to see how funding can be provided for them. That is the reason I raised the issue of the task force with her. I hope that funding will be provided for musicians performing online, who range from young teenagers to members of our older population. The Backline meet all the criteria and they work with musicians from all around the country. I ask the Minister to consider the provision of funding for them.

I have also been contacted by many dance schools in my area. While schools remain open, I am concerned that music and dance schools cannot open. We must urgently review this because arts education is as important as reading, writing and arithmetic. Dance schools, including Irish dance schools, have contacted me. Again, the operators of these schools do not qualify for any funding stream while out of work other than the PUP. I ask the Minister to consider providing a once-off payment to help musicians, artists and so on. We have a great culture. Arts is our culture. We are proud of our musicians, singers and everyone else in the music business. Now, more than ever, we need to support them. We need to look after them. I know from my dealings with them that some of them have mortgages they cannot afford to pay, they have families and they are under pressure.

I thank the Minister for being present. I know she will do her best in the context of the upcoming budget, but I ask her to take consider the groups that are in need of funding.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I welcome the opportunity speak about what is essentially a crisis in the arts, culture and entertainment industries. The Minister is correct that more than 35,000 people are employed across a range of professions. While much of this debate has focused on the front-of-house artists and performers, and rightly so, there is a panoply of people employed in these sectors, including producers, engineers, technicians, teachers, make-up artists, drivers, caterers, cleaners and administration staff. We should never forget that broad range of workers whose livelihoods are dependent on these industries.

There is also a lot of people who are not directly employed but whose livelihoods depends on large events, be they culture, arts, entertainment or sports. Taxi drivers are probably the most obvious that spring to mind. The €3.5 billion in revenue generated in our economy every year cannot be over-emphasised. The package of supports, particularly for certain sectors within this overall group of industries, is too small. Many of these workers are on low and average incomes. Some of the decisions, not taken by the Minister and her Department but by her colleagues, are having a disproportionate impact on these workers, including the cuts to the PUP and the wage subsidy schemes, lack of action, for example, on commercial rents or breaks for insurance policies for owners and renters of premises, stripping protections for those in the private rental sector and the failure to extend the mortgage payment holiday. These are compounding since because of the public health restrictions, necessary as they are, people cannot go to work.

The biggest problem for the people in the industry with whom I have spoken is the lack of a roadmap. Everybody knows that they cannot go back to work now but this is an industry which, in the main, operates 12 months ahead of the rest of us in terms of the planning of festivals, exhibitions, theatre performances, concerts, tours, etc.. The most frustrating thing for people involved in the industry is not only the lack of income support but the not knowing where they are going to be in six months or 12 months, not having clear targets and not having clear guide-

lines for where they may go. While the Government has developed its living with Covid plan, people are saying it is unclear to whom they go to get clarity on when they want to organise events of certain types or at certain stages. I urge the Minister not to deflect this to the task force to grapple with but for her and the Department to give industry some certainty and a roadmap and targets for the months ahead.

It gives me no pleasure to say this, but there has been a lot of angry reaction to the Minister's claim that the €5 million performance fund has been the product of consultation. What I am hearing is that the sector does not feel it is being consulted enough. I urge her, because I know it is her style as a politician, to engage with and listen to the people who will be recipients of this fund and future funds before final decisions are made.

To conclude, the budget is coming up. I know there are many demands and that the Minister is fighting with her colleagues for ever scarcer resources, but given the scale of this industry and its importance not just to the economic life of the State but also to the cultural and emotional well-being of people, I urge her to do everything she can to ensure this industry and its workers get every possible support in the future.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The true history of the attitude of successive Irish Governments to culture, arts, music and events, and to the crews that stand behind them, is a history of lip service without tangible support. That is most obviously reflected in the fact that we spend one sixth of the average spend across Europe on funding arts and culture. The events and music sectors have never received a penny, essentially, and there was even no engagement until they began to get themselves organised in the last few months through groups such as EPIC, the event production industry Covid-19 working group.

I sought the first debate in the House on arts and culture after the pandemic, and then requested that groups such as EPIC and the National Campaign for the Arts appear before the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. Since then, the level of lip service in the House to arts and culture has grown exponentially. There is no doubt about that. After the virtual silence about arts, culture, music and events, there has been a cacophony. The level of lip service and rhetoric that has been expended in saying how much people love the arts and music and how much they contribute to our culture and society is almost a cultural event in itself. Never have we needed them more than in the utterly grim situation we now face.

However, lip service has still not been matched by tangible support. In fact, apart from a few paltry million euro that was added to the funded sector, still bringing it nowhere near the European average expenditure on that, nothing has been given. One million euro for music is just an insult, to be honest, compared to the contribution musicians make. In fact, when one looks at the entire issue, the cuts the Government has imposed to the PUP and the wage subsidy mean it has given a little token and taken it all back. The PUP payment and the wage subsidy are the payments from the Government that reach everybody in those sectors, that is, all the crew people, the musicians, artists, performers and all the people who have lost work. It is the payment they all received. Frankly, it was not enough and it was not tailored in such a way that they could do some work on top of it, if they were lucky enough to get a little work. However, at least they all received it. That is the thing the Government has cut. All the groups representing arts, music and culture, including EPIC, the Events Industry Alliance and the National Campaign for the Arts, have asked the Government to restore and retain the PUP and income subsidy payments and, indeed, to allow people to earn a little above that. That is the key issue.

Beyond that, there is the question of whether the Minister will give grants to cover the ongoing costs of insurance, repayments and all the other ongoing costs people are still incurring even though there is no work for them. Is the Minister going to give scaffolding funding for the reduced capacities, or no capacity, in venues? That is the question. So far, it has been lip service rather than tangible commitments. Frankly, the engagements appear to be tokenistic and, according to some of the reports I am hearing, that is precisely what they are. Of course, all those connected to the industry in indirect jobs, the 35,000 jobs and others beyond that such as in the taxi industry, are all asking the same questions as to how they will be able to pay their bills and rent and whether they will be able to survive. One company involved in music wrote to me today. It gives work to 300 musicians and asked twice for the wage subsidy, but was refused twice. I do not know how it does not qualify. It is unbelievable that it does not qualify for these schemes. Let us stop the rhetoric and deliver the support.

In contrast, there is one exception to all this - the film producers. There is virtually no ongoing employment in the industry, but in the last number of years they have received €668 million in grants, tax reliefs and so forth. It dwarfs what the rest of arts and culture has received. I believe in the film industry, but that is shocking when there are no jobs. Let us support the artists, performers, crews and musicians.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I will bring it down a notch. First, I am here to tell the Minister again what a great place west Cork is. I take every opportunity to tell her that. After listening to the other contributions, I am fully aware that west Cork is not unique in its richness of culture, music and arts, but the reason I raise it is that it is part of us. It is important to everything we do. We are not paying lip service, but genuinely and constructively are trying to contribute to and support an industry that is, undeniably, on its knees because of the global pandemic.

Only a few weeks ago the arts industry was looking at innovative ways to get back up and running again. It was considering the potential of socially distanced gigs and events. In west Cork, socially distanced events were taking place quite safely and within the restrictions. I attended a couple of them and it was amazing to hear live music being played again. We realised what we were missing. However, level 3 restrictions have come in and the industry’s hopes have been absolutely dashed, as the Minister fully understands. It tried to be innovative as well by moving online, but Facebook and the big corporations changed their licensing. They make it more difficult at every corner the events industry takes in terms of trying to be innovative, change its approach and stream its music to the masses. Facebook has changed its licensing agreement and has put up obstacles and challenges. That puts extra pressure on us to intervene and give supports.

Unfortunately, last night’s news came like a hammer fist to an industry that was already on its knees. People in the industry are scratching their heads as to where they will go now. That is where the Government should intervene and provide supports. I was delighted that the Taoiseach met and listened to members of the events industry in my constituency office in Clonakilty. The Minister has met members of the events industry as well, including EPIC, and has given them a good hearing. She is not just paying them lip service. She is fully aware of their concerns and what has to be done. However, we have to walk the walk.

There are supports available. The song writing and recording grant is being very well received. I spoke to a couple of engineers who are getting work on the basis of that grant. There will not be enough work to satisfy everybody, but it is a step in the right direction. I hope the

Minister will listen to a couple of innovative measures which I believe could be implemented. First, as has been said, the fact that the events and music industry finds itself in such a unique position means that there should be measures or allowances whereby people in the industry can claim the PUP and take work when it becomes available. If it is put through the books and they are taxed on it, that is fine. At least, they will be able to stay in touch with the events industry and continue working. That is one measure that should be considered due to the uniqueness of the industry.

Second, there is the back to work enterprise allowance scheme. Under the scheme, people who are on social welfare and are seeking to start their own businesses can claim payments for a two-year period and also take in income from their new business. This could be applied to the events industry and allow people in the industry to take work where it arises. Those are two examples whereby I believe we can intervene, although many others have been strongly suggested.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Like many of us, I suspect, when we heard the sad news of the passing of Derek Mahon over the weekend I went to the bookshelf and pulled out a book to reacquaint myself with some of his beautiful and lyrical work. In reading “An Bonnán Buí” two lines jumped out at me:

the whole unfortunate country frozen over
and your voice stilled by enforced sobriety --

Those words really strongly resonate with the country at the minute, coming into the winter with increased Covid restrictions. Our towns and cities are increasingly locked down and quietened and how much we miss those stilled voices of our performing arts sector, who are among those most acutely affected by this pandemic and the public health measures it has necessitated. While we know that Covid-19 has had a profound impact across all of our society it is true to say that some sectors have borne the brunt of the storm while others have been relatively sheltered. Even within the arts community, there are those who have been able to continue their praxis – writers can write, painters can paint – but those within the performing arts have seen not just their income but their career progression and their artistic expression come to a dead halt. It is not just the performers who have been impacted. All the other professions that stand behind theatre, dance or live music, from sound engineers to set designers, are also at a standstill. Venues and festivals have been doing their best to push water uphill. The organisers of the Imagine Arts festival in Waterford, for example, were doing all within their power to have some live audience component in their upcoming programme, but the change this week in public health advice may well have put paid to those plans.

Two things come to me on this. The first is that in processing and comprehending the emotional impact of the pandemic; the grief of lives lost, of relationships sundered and the legacy of anxiety and isolation, it will be to the arts community that we turn. They are the lens through which we view ourselves as a society, and they are never so important as when society is in upheaval. The second is that artists want to create. While all workers should be rewarded for their work, for performing artists there is an impulse to perform that goes beyond the understanding of a traded wage economy. I would ask the Minister to consider this resource, a most human resource, that currently stands as a “country frozen over”, and consider how their creative impulse can be harnessed in this changed reality. There exists a great opportunity to leverage their skills and ability by using our funding of arts and culture in the coming months

to commission, to record and to archive. I refer the Minister to some of the past great projects such as the Doegen Records Web Project preserving sound recordings of native Irish dialects, or RTE's "Beckett on Film" of 2001. There have been times when we have chosen to invest in the national archive and to lay down for future generations a record of the current cultural or social context of our times. The Minister should make this one of those times. She should consider investing in composers, playwrights and performers during this period. She should allow our creative artists to create and the supporting industries to support. She should allow our social historians to record those stories and voices which may be fading away on our island. She should allocate resources to the National Archives, both to organise what already exists and to add to that great store. I doubt I will be alone in quoting Derek Mahon again to close, "The sun rises in spite of everything". At some future point, we will look back on this time of Covid. With the Minister's help, and I know she has a massive interest in and deep understanding of this sector, let us hope that we will still have a functioning arts community that will help us to look back and make sense of it all.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Government politicians do not just dine out on their arts; some of them feast on them. Hardly a speech has been made by a Taoiseach or Uachtarán that has not featured lines from Yeats, Heaney or Beckett. In their quiet times away from the camera, it seems some politicians believe such artists should go out and get a real job. This is usually latent but lately it has been blatant. It is as if years of learning, practice, discipline and finally performing as a musician, dancer, comedian or actor is not work. We know it is not only work but is work that keeps the rest of us relatively sane. So many of us have that special song we go to when times are tough, or lines from a story or poem that comfort us and lift our spirits. Our arts exorcise the ghosts in our throat, to borrow from Doireann Ní Ghríofa. However, while some politicians feast on the arts our artists are facing a famine. One would think we could do better for people who are worth €3.5 billion a year to the economy.

I did not realise quite how many outstanding artists we had living in north Kildare until they started contacting me over the last few months for help to keep going. The cancellation of the Forever Young festival in Johnstown in Naas left hundreds of musicians, lighting specialists, organisers, sound engineers and caterers out of a job. The same thing happened across the State. In addition to artists, I have had countless constituents, organisers of dance schools and acting schools, and musicians all raising the sign for help. I have tried to respond to everyone who has contacted me personally because they give so much and right now they are trying to survive on so little. I have been glad to be able to tell them that Sinn Féin is to the fore in seeking the retention of the pandemic unemployment payment and that we have been calling for the reversal of the decision to scrap the temporary wage subsidy scheme and replace it, which would leave those workers, and they are workers, with €50 a week less. That is big money when one is living on the edge. I have just finished a telephone call with Celine Garvey, who manages the Moat Theatre in Naas. As it is a not-for-profit theatre, she cannot avail of grants from the Arts Council. It is such a great amenity for the town. We have had it since 1954 and cannot lose it in 2020.

Sinn Féin was out front battling for the live events and entertainment industry to be attended to by the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. While I accept that the sector has been heard from to an extent, the vast majority in the industry still face an uncertain future. The supports that have been granted are welcome but fall far short of what is required to ensure the arts come out the other side of this. We must value them in more than words and quotes. They have given us a lot and it is time that we gave something back.

Deputy Noel Grealish: It has been a terrible year for people involved in the arts and the creative economy generally, with no end in sight to the suffering. It should have been an amazing year in Galway, showcasing the best of what the region has to offer, not just in culture and arts but in the tourism offering too. The Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture programme had been forecast to bring many tens of thousands of extra visitors and tourists from abroad to the west of Ireland and to pump many millions of extra euro into the local economy. It is a perfect example of how the creative economy is such an important part of economic success and even survival of an area. Of course, many events associated with Galway 2020 have gone ahead but in a very different way from what had been envisaged. I wish them the very best in the rest of their endeavours for the rest of the year and into the new year. I also extend good wishes to the organisers of Baboró, the wonderful international children's festival in Galway which got under way this week and runs until 18 October. It is a mix of in-person performances and online events. It has to be a struggle to put on such a festival in the middle of a pandemic but they have done a fantastic job.

The arts and culture sector is likely to be among the last to recover when the coronavirus pandemic is over. That is according to a report published by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation in August. The Focus on Sectors 2020 report on the audiovisual sector highlighted the fact that efforts to get film and television production back up and running would be complicated by social distancing requirements. It also forecast a bottleneck in demand for film crews and services. A particular problem it stressed was the inability to secure vital insurance for various projects. According to the western audiovisual forum, the creative economy is estimated to be worth almost half a billion euro in counties Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. It creates more than 7,000 jobs directly and indirectly. The prediction is that losses as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic in these counties will be at least 25%. In real terms, that is up to €150 million lost to the region's economy and the jobs of up to 2,000 people lost or in serious jeopardy. A report carried out by NUI Galway for the Western Development Commission a few years ago came to similar conclusions about the value of the creative sector, including everything from craft and culture to creative industries. The report, which is published as part of a wider European study, stressed that the creative economy plays a strong role in the enhancement of the local economy in the western region. In other words, this is not just about preserving and enhancing our cultural offerings. It is also very much about euro and cents and putting food on the table for thousands of families. The NUIG report stressed that the creative sector can generate important social and cultural impacts. These include a greater sense of community, the inclusion of marginalised groups, social interaction at creative events and regeneration of relatively deprived areas. The creative sector can also play a key role in improving the image of an area and increasing its attractiveness as a location to live, visit or set up a business.

A vital contribution to the growth of film and TV animation and creative documentary production in Ireland has been section 481, which provides a tax credit worth up to 32% of eligible Irish expenditure. An additional incentive called the regional film development uplift has been in place for such projects outside the main industry hubs in counties Dublin, Wicklow and Cork in an effort to boost industry in the regions. That provided an additional 5% credit on top of the standard rate for this year and last year. The problem is that the regional uplift is due to be reduced to 3% next year and 2% in 2022. In the dire circumstances the industry finds itself in, it is vital this regional uplift be maintained at its current 5% level. I urge the Minister and the Minister for Finance to include that adjustment in the upcoming budget and finance Bill. I hardly imagine there has been much take-up of the regional uplift or even the section 481 tax credit generally this year so such an extension will not cost the Exchequer much.

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It should be stressed that such aids and incentives such as this are not a one-way benefit. There is a return for such money as was highlighted in a report commissioned by the Government two years ago entitled *An Economic Analysis of the Audiovisual Sector in the Republic of Ireland*. The report showed that while Government support has played an important role in assisting the audiovisual sector to grow, the film tax relief delivers value for money on both the fiscal net benefit and economic benefit basis. Every euro of section 481 outlays generated an average €2.82 in economic net benefit for the economy and it returned a minimum of €1.02 in tax revenue to the Government.

I also support the budget submission of the western AV forum calling for the allocation of €1 million for the Project Ireland 2040 national development plan in annual funding to the Western Region Audiovisual Producers Fund, WRAP. The fund helps to sustain and promote regional audiovisual development across film, television, animation and games.

As I said at the outset, it has been a terrible year for everyone involved in the arts and the creative economy but nowhere more than in County Galway, which had such a promising year in store. I am aware there is a huge demand from all sectors for a share of the limited pie of the country's finances. It is, however, an area that badly needs support and will be among the last to eventually recover as the Government has acknowledged.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for the opportunity to contribute on the arts and the impact Covid-19 has had on the sector. I welcome the arts recovery task force that has been established to provide a detailed report on the issues facing arts in Ireland and wish it well in its goal of adopting a solution-focused approach. I welcome that it will seek input from across the arts community recognising the diverse range of stakeholders within this area. I hope this approach will best allow the arts sector to adapt to the environment we now find ourselves in and that no parts of the arts community will be left behind.

The arts has been an enjoyable part of my life and has added immensely to the make-up of my community. I have fond memories of learning music in my community in Youghal at our local Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann branch of Bru na Sí. Organisations such as this are an integral part of the fabric of our society and we must always look at ways to allow them to operate in a safe manner during times of Covid-19. Letting organisations such as this go will not only damage the organisations but the fabric of communities across the country.

Study after study has shown that culture has an impact on how people perform within a society. Individual cultural preferences shape how people respond to certain situations. How much trust people have in these institutions of the State, how a person views the outside world and how open he or she is to change are only a few examples of the impact culture has on society. Culture is hugely influenced by the arts and we cannot allow our society to become closed off from the rest of world or for it to be simply all work and no play. Life without any sort of pleasure and enjoyment would be a dull life indeed and if we want or people to remain dynamic, open and trusting of the State we must sure the arts can continue to as great an extent as possible. If we do not, it will make it much more difficult to be able to work together to overcome the challenges we face in light of Covid-19. We must ensure that cultural aspects of our society are not lost indefinitely because of the pandemic. The arts are an escape from the hassle of everyday life and are even more important in times of Covid-19.

I spoke in this Chamber many times about the need to protect our mental health in times of Covid-19. We need to look at the great work groups such as the RTÉ National Symphony

Orchestra can do to provide some uplift to people across country. Boosting morale at times like this is hugely important and ensures there is public buy-in for measures that are in place. We need to give people a sense of optimism that while today may be difficult, tomorrow will be better.

I look forward to working with the Minister and her Department in achieving these goals and congratulate her on her appointment to Cabinet with responsibility for a Department in which I have much interest. I look forward to working with her and helping people in my constituency who work and participate in the arts.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will start with a quote from President Michael D. Higgins:

As a society we must come to recognise the arts are as important to our infrastructure as roads, hospitals and schools ... When we support the artists we support a viable democracy.

I call for the PUP to be restored to €350 per week and the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, to €410 per week until the industry reopens without social distancing; a hardship fund created jointly by Arts Council and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection funded with 5% of the overall Arts Council budget and broader criteria to ensure the commercial live music sector can avail of council funding.

I will finish with a quote from Senator Frances Black:

The Irish have always used music as an expression of joy, sadness, struggle and resistance. Live music has been shown to lower stress levels, increase social bonds and generally increase well-being.

The Minister needs to now listen to the President and people such as Senator Black and help the well-being of our country.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Arts, culture and heritage are important all over the country but in no other county are they more important, in my humble opinion, than County Kerry. We are rich in the world of arts because we have produced so many important people who have made such an impact in Ireland. I will give just one example off the top of my head of Cill Rialaig Arts Centre in Ballinskelligs. It was the brainchild of Ms Noelle Campbell-Sharp who did great work with other artists. She brought thousands of people to that area. People have gone into a village that was derelict and falling into decay. There are great people like Mr. Nicholas Brown, who is the chairperson of a local committee, and all the others who worked diligently in ensuring that excellent facility was there for past, present and future up-and-coming artists and people who need to go to a special place to use their brains in only the way they can. We must support that type of work. I compliment people such Ms Kate Kennelly, who was our arts and heritage officer in County Kerry for many years, and our local authority, Kerry County Council, for the excellent work it has done in promoting the arts.

In all parts of the county, we have produced excellent people who have made a valuable and important contribution. Even during times of difficulty, the financial recession and the present difficulties we have, it is terribly important that we continue to support artists and to remember that during the present crisis we have entertainers who used to entertain every night of the week. Now they cannot perform what they are good at and we must support those people.

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Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I only have a short time but I could talk about this for the whole evening.

6 o'clock

Music, song, dance and our cultural artists are so important, and they have gone through a very tough time this year in Kerry. Sliabh Luachra, Nickie McAuliffe, Derry Healy, Neily O'Connor and others play music for free at events for the elderly. I had the pleasure of playing for an elderly woman the other night, Hannah O'Shea, who is 105 years old and lives on the Lewis Road in Killarney. She was absolutely delighted.

I have seen music played for elderly people, some with Alzheimer's disease, in groups and have seen them tapping to the music. They might be elderly, sick and suffering but when someone plays them a few tunes they start tapping to the music. It really makes a difference. The psychological well-being and mental well-being of people is so important.

We must do something for the artists who are on their knees at present and have nowhere to get funding. We must open up some avenues for them and ensure they get some social welfare payment because many of them are not getting it. I could say much more about the importance of playing music, song, dance and storytelling. All that kind of thing is so important, and I hope we do not lose it because of this pandemic.

Deputy Joan Collins: I will be sharing time. Working in the arts is probably the most precarious of precarious jobs. The sector has been extremely hard hit by the Covid-19 restrictions. The National Campaign for the Arts, NCFEA, has said that 68% of its members have been relying on the pandemic unemployment payment and have been severely impacted by the reductions introduced last month and in July. Many artists and those working in the arts make a living through a combination of self-employed income and PAYE income, probably through a part-time irregular job. However, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection does not allow them to combine the self-employed and PAYE income for consideration in calculating the pandemic unemployment payment.

A number of these workers whose payment was reduced to €203 after the July reduction contacted me. They had appealed on a number of occasions to the Department dealing with the PUP rerating. One woman had been in contact about six times and she contacted me. She had included her tax returns from 2018 and 2019. On the same morning I received an email from the Department's PUP team stating that she was rerated back up to €350, she got another email from the same team stating that she was refused again. I made representations for about 12 of these workers. Every one of them got rerated back up to €350 after they had appealed about six times, which is a very high rate of cases overturned on appeal. It would normally be about one or two out of ten.

It is important for the Minister to step in and support these workers or else they will be absolutely decimated. This will have an impact on them paying for mortgages, rent, electricity, food, etc. If we do not back these workers up now, they will not back us up in the future and they will not thank us for it. It is important for the Minister to intervene to do that.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I have received hundreds of emails from constituents across County Donegal who are involved in the arts and the associated live events industry, pleading for assistance. More importantly, they are looking for a simple recognition from the Government that their sector has been decimated. However, the Minister should dispense with the

usual bland lip service. From talking to performers, I know the hardships they face in making a living in the industry at the best of times. I am sure we have all seen the emails from the Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland, outlining the problems its members face. Nearly 20% of them say they are facing a decline in their mental health. Many have had to sell equipment or are in arrears with utility bills.

One of the major flaws with the Government is its over-reliance on reaction to questions and appeals from the Opposition, bombarding us with a plethora of generalised information on what it claims it is doing. Knee-jerk schemes for various things have been the order of the day. It does this without any apparent consideration as to whether these much-trumpeted schemes are properly funded to achieve the aims set. It never considers if these much-lauded schemes address the concerns or problems highlighted by the people they are meant to assist. Once the Government has created a press release, it has decided the aim from the point of view of the Government.

My message for the Minister is simple. To start with she should speak to the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection to ensure the Covid payments are restored to the previous levels. Based on the NPHET advice, we are nowhere near the end of the Covid crisis. It was a mean-spirited, naïve and premature to cut the payments. If she achieves that, she will have done some good.

She should look at schemes that will allow artists to produce content and put money in their pockets without reams of red tape because that is also a killer. This should be disbursed at a national, regional and local level but we must ensure the level of funding available is tangible and the innovation of the arts sector might just surprise us all then.

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I thank Deputies for their contributions to the debate. I recognise that everyone who has contributed is as passionate about the arts as I am. I looked across the House during the debate and I saw so many Deputies like me who have that background. Many Deputies are steeped in a great wealth of arts and music and I recognise the real knowledge they have.

I will try to respond to as many of the queries I can, given the time available to me. I am acutely aware of the difficulties facing the arts, culture, audiovisual, live entertainment and events sector. I have made it my business to meet the representative organisations across that sector to listen to their concerns and the proposals they have for alleviating the difficulties they face so that when we are designing schemes I am doing it having listened to the needs that are being pointed out to me. I have done it in consultation with them, which is key. There is no point in designing schemes unless consultation has happened with the musicians, performers and all those who work in the industry.

I have had several meetings with the National Campaign for the Arts, the Event Industry Alliance, the Arts Council, Screen Ireland and the national cultural institutions. Officials in my Department consult widely and continually with the sector and meet stakeholders on a regular basis. I am aware of the issues and am committed to ensuring the Government provides appropriate supports.

A number of Deputies raised the pandemic unemployment payment. I am conscious that the changes to it and to the wage subsidy scheme affect the lives of thousands of artists and workers across the arts, culture and live entertainment sector in a devastating way. I understand

these supports are needed now more than ever. I have raised these matters with my Cabinet colleagues in the context of the budget, recognising that there will be a long period in which we will have to live with the virus and the difficulties that raises, especially in the arts and culture sectors.

Several Deputies mentioned the live performance scheme. As I emphasised during Question Time last week, that is a pilot scheme of €5 million to see if it would work and that would inform me in my negotiations on the budget. It certainly did work because there was an enormous response to it. That scheme was developed in consultation with the sector and with EPIC. Over 100 applications have been received requesting funding amounting to over €15 million when €5 million was provided. That really strengthens my case as I negotiate for bigger and better, and what is needed. That is why it was a pilot scheme. The main objective of the scheme was the provision of employment for the artists, the creative technicians and their support staff. Deputy Cathal Crowe raised the issue of Irish dancing. As Minister, I have responsibility for both sport and the arts and my officials will examine the protocols for dancing. He also mentioned artists in the community. We have artists going into schools, which we called creative schools, and I agree with the Deputy that it is a wonderful initiative. That is why we have expanded it this year. It is a wonderful way of employing artists and letting them engage with and inspire children and young people. We have an additional 164 creative schools this year.

Deputy Gannon raised the Arts Council. He is not here but he may appreciate that I am not privy to operational matters. I give him a commitment that I will get back to him if he wishes to contact me or give the details to my officials.

Deputy Grealish mentioned the regional uplift. While budget 2021 is a matter for the Minister for Finance, I will take every opportunity at Cabinet to highlight the importance and value of the cultural and audiovisual sectors and the benefits of increasing investment in them.

Deputy Guirke raised musicians and we are looking at a number of initiatives to support them especially. I have met members of MEAI, and my officials are in ongoing engagement with them.

I assure Deputy Boyd Barrett that I am far from silent on this issue and I think my Cabinet colleagues will attest to that. We had a conversation last week about how passionate I am and I share the passion of so many Deputies who come from this background. We are fortunate to have a world-class animation sector. Due to the nature of the work, animation has largely been able to continue through the crisis by means of remote working. Earlier this year, in response to measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus live action production was suspended. This also has an impact on post-production and visual effects providers but since the end of June, this has started to recommence and I am pleased to note that within the period three productions successfully resumed and were completed. The audiovisual sector provides important employment and training opportunities and, therefore, it is of significant importance to the economy, to those working in the industry and indeed to audiences that productions return.

I will definitely look into Deputy Ó Cathasaigh's suggestion to commission, record and archive.

I completely agree with Deputy Ó Broin's analysis of the events industry. In particular, in my opening remarks I stated that it is worth €3.5 billion and it is very difficult for this sector which has never had to engage with Government previously. We are continuing that engage-

ment and since he queried it, my officials did consult EPIC on the live performance scheme. Some of the arrangements of the scheme were suggested by EPIC.

Regarding the points made by Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, the dementia-inclusive live azure tours are delivered via Zoom and are available to people living with dementia, their families, friends and professional carers. They are provided on a scheduled, monthly basis for individuals and are bookable on demand for nursing home groups. The programme aims to make art galleries and museums around Ireland dementia-friendly spaces and the tours will be delivered in collaboration with the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland and promoted through the HSE Dementia: Understand Together network. We know of the love both Deputies Healy-Rae have for music as they have brought it to the gates of Leinster House to celebrate their election. As an island, we will not take one county dominating in our arts and music as all 32 counties can claim their artists, their musicians and their actors. We are a country rich in such people and every county can claim greatness when it comes to that. It is the beauty of our nation and one of the reasons we need to protect it.

Deputy Boyd Barrett referred to a legacy of lip service being paid to the arts, musicians and actors. We had this debate last week and I fully agree with him on that. It is time to back that up with the supports that are needed right here and now. We have felt their value through the very tough times but it is much more than that as jobs are on the line and I am very conscious of that. As I said, there is no silence from me at the Cabinet table.

I agree with Deputy O'Connor on the make-up of the task force. I have appointed arts practitioners to the task force, including musicians such Mr. Martin Hayes, Ms Denise Chaila, Ms Eleanor McEvoy and Mr. Pearse Doherty. All members will be consulted widely.

I hope I have addressed all of the questions. If there are outstanding issues, Members should contact me or my officials and we will definitely follow up on them. I will conclude by referring to an interview with the assistant rector at Berlin State Opera, who is an Irishwoman. In a recent interview she was quoted as saying that the arts are seen in Ireland as a luxury whereas in Germany they are seen as a necessity. I have always believed that the arts are a necessity and always have done. During some of our darkest and longest days in the early months of the lockdown, the arts rescued many people from depression and despair. Many more of us were comforted, consoled and cheered by the inspiring performances from Irish artists, actors, singers, poets and songwriters. It is time for us to now rescue them. We cannot constantly have this one-way relationship with this community; they are much more valuable than that. They are invaluable to us and our very heritage. We need the arts like never before. Arts and culture define us as a people. They are at the heart of who we are as a nation. That relationship has to change so it is not one way. Supports are needed now not just to sustain it but to ensure it thrives. That is the determination I am bringing to this portfolio. It is the most challenging of times to be the Minister with responsibility for arts and culture but it is the right time to be here because I am acutely aware of the supports they need and I am determined to get those supports to them.

Tuigeann gach duine san Rialtas go bhfuil na healaíona riachtanach agus tá sé mar dhualgas orm a chinntiú go ndéanfar beart de réir briathar ó thaobh tacaíochta de.

6 October 2020

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

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

Priority Questions

House Purchase Schemes

28. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the affordable housing plan. [28829/20]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: On five occasions in July after he was appointed, the Minister made a very public commitment to announce both the details, targets and regulations of his new affordable housing scheme in September. That month has come and gone and we are very keen to hear as much about the scheme as possible. When he is going to announce it? Will he give us as much information as is possible at this stage about the scheme he is working on?

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I am committed to ensuring that affordable, quality housing solutions are available to all and that is reflected in the programme for Government. I believe in home ownership and I have restated that on many occasions. I will come good on the programmes made in the programme. The programme details a wide range of measures to be brought forward over the lifetime of the Government to firmly put affordability back at the centre of the housing system. This includes, for example, ensuring our local authorities are central to the delivery of housing solutions, the progression of State-backed affordable housing programmes and the development of a cost rental model that creates affordability for tenants. These are things most of us would agree with.

The Land Development Agency has also been tasked with working with Departments, local authorities, State agencies and other stakeholders, and it is assembling large and strategic sites to deliver social and affordable homes for rent and purchase. This is a key priority of mine and I have engaged extensively with key delivery partners and other stakeholders to foster a broad consensus on issues and, most importantly, potential solutions.

The Department is working to complete this required work to bring forward the detailed plans that will deliver on the programme for Government commitment. As I have said previously, including in the House, I will outline these detailed plans in the autumn, informed by the budget 2021 process. It is a firm commitment in the programme for Government. I believe in affordable housing for purchase and rent. I voted in the Chamber in opposition for this very thing when others opposed it. Working together we can deliver a good and robust affordable purchase and affordable rental scheme.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We will all judge the Minister by what he does and not what he says, and he would say exactly the same thing if the tables were turned. My question, however, was on when the scheme will be published and whether the Minister could give us more detail than

what he has said until now. My concern is that, on the basis of what he has been saying in the media recently, a large portion of what the Minister appears to be working on is not affordable housing. For example, with regard to the comments at the weekend on extending the help-to-buy scheme at its higher rate into next year, while that is of benefit to the people who access it, although according to the Government's own report, 40% of those people who got that very generous subsidy did not need it, the scheme does not make houses more affordable. It locks in unsustainably high prices. I am also very concerned about what seems to be a shift towards a Government backed shared equity loan. This is a secondary Government loan on top of very large and risky banking debt, again locking in unsustainably high prices and not delivering for modest income working families. All I hear with regard to the serviced sites fund is possibly some tinkering around the eligibility criteria rather than the type of increase in capital investment we need. Is the Minister in a position to give us more details? It would be very helpful.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy will appreciate we are just a week from the budget and negotiations and discussions on expenditure for next year are at a crucial stage. I am not, therefore, in a position to give him any further details. This is not by way of being evasive; it is just an issue of timing. There are other measures, including affordability measures, that help people buy homes, one of them being the help-to-buy grant that I have supported in opposition and in government. The Deputy opposed the help-to-buy grant, which more than 19,000 people have used to get on to the housing ladder. Many of these people would not have been able to do so without it. We know there is an affordability issue and supply is key to delivering affordability. This year will be very challenging on supply in the overall housing market. We are looking at between 16,000 and 18,000 completions. As demand grows and supply lessens, there will be acute affordability issues next year and measures will need to be taken to assist people. This is what we are committed to doing.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The focus has to be on bringing down prices, both to rent and to buy. I have made a number of suggestions to the Minister and his predecessor, including amending the capital advance loan facility, and allowing approved housing bodies to purchase turnkey developments, many of which would be available to purchase now because of the slowdown in Covid-19 private sector supply, to deliver them as affordable homes. It would be much cheaper than those purchased through help-to-buy or shared equity loans. Likewise, increased capital investment is needed by local authorities to build genuinely affordable homes and sell or rent them at cost. We should also stop using public land to sell unaffordable private sector homes. The Oscar Traynor Road site is currently before Dublin City Council and 50% of the homes to be sold are at unaffordable open market prices. That is not the best strategic use of the land in question. Why not fund the local authority and have this site as a fully public scheme, with one third social rental, one third affordable rental and one third genuinely affordable purchase? This is the type of measure that will tackle the crisis.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have to work very hard with local authorities to help them to deliver faster on the land they own. I agree with this and I have made and restated that point here. It is a priority for me as Minister. The Deputy mentioned the Oscar Traynor Road site. Four times, that site has gone out for expressions of interest. It is a fine plot of ground that could house hundreds of people. It is frustrating for me when I see these things taking so long.

The Deputy mentioned the serviced sites fund. The fund can be used better and to better effect. The concept behind it is good. It uses State-owned lands to enable people to buy affordable homes, with an equity stake as well within elements of it. We will look at other options. We will look at options around affordable purchase and affordable rental, which has not been

mentioned yet this evening. We are well advanced in publishing a national affordable rental plan. This is what is needed. We will have a pilot this year. The Enniskerry Road scheme, which was announced in 2015, is not yet concluded or tenanted. It is about getting on and doing things and helping people to get onto the housing ladder with permanent housing solutions.

Housing Provision

29. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way in which the number of planned Housing First places compares with the identified need; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28488/20]

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: As the Minister is aware, internationally the Housing First model has proven to be very successful in tackling homelessness, providing housing for people and housing tenancies. What is the difference between the number of Housing First tenancies identified as being needed under the national Housing First plan and the number of Housing First tenancies that are planned to be provided as matters stand?

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: I thank Deputy O’Callaghan for the question. Addressing homelessness, as we mentioned at a committee meeting earlier, is an absolute priority for me and my colleagues in government and, no doubt, everyone in the House. The programme for Government commits to reducing and preventing homelessness and provides details on how the Government will approach this challenge. The national implementation plan for Housing First was published in September 2018. The plan, which includes an overall target of 663 tenancies in the period from 2018 to 2021, is a joint initiative of the Department, the Department of Health, the HSE and local authorities. Background information, national targets and regional targets are available in the Housing First national implementation plan document.

As of the end of June, the most recent figures for 2020 show that 449 individuals were housed under the Housing First programme, including 302 individuals who have been housed since the publication of the national implementation plan. The programme for Government further commits to a continued expansion of the Housing First programme. I agree with the Deputy that it is a model we should be following. It is one that is already working here and it should be expanded further.

There will be a focus on construction and acquisition of one bedroom homes and the provision of the relevant support services. I put that out through the call for housing earlier this year within four weeks of taking over as Minister. We need more one bedroom properties and we need to ensure that wraparound services are available.

An assessment of need is being undertaken to examine the number of individuals experiencing homelessness who require the supports of Housing First. This assessment will inform the future expansion of Housing First, including any increase in targets for individual local authorities and where we expand the Housing First initiative into other regions of the country.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: When is the assessment of need due to be carried out or completed? As the Minister said, the national Housing First implementation plan identified 1,349 people with high support needs. They are people who have been sleeping rough or who have been homeless over the long term. It identifies a particular group of people who could really benefit from Housing First. The strategy also planned to provide places for half of these people

who really need them. I welcome what the programme for Government says about expanding Housing First but what I really want to ask is whether the Minister will expand the initiative so that all of the finite targeted group with high support needs, who have been identified as those who would benefit from a Housing First tenancy, will be supported with a Housing First tenancy, instead of us continuing to put €4 million a week into emergency accommodation.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will get the date of publication and send it on to the Deputy. The Housing First data are published quarterly and are as up-to-date as we can get them. It is expected that services delivered in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Dublin will be extended to the south west, mid-west and west. That is the plan. We have to ensure the requisite services, particularly health services, are in place. I mentioned earlier that I chair a regional drugs and alcohol task force. I see on the ground the importance of ensuring we have HSE and health services available, particularly for those with addiction and-or mental health issues. I have met the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, at a formal bilateral ministerial meeting on the commitment in the programme for Government to bring health and housing together in delivering these services.

In the HSE winter plan, which has just been published, there is a commitment by the HSE for an additional €5.5 million focused on rough sleepers and the most vulnerable in our community. We need more and I am committed to address that in budget 2021. I hope we will have further opportunities to discuss it next week.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On the need for supports, there has been a 13% cut in the HSE funding for the ACCES community health team which works with people who are homeless in terms of mental health. Will that cut be reversed?

As the Minister knows, Housing First can be delivered as it is within the capacity of the State. Will the Minister secure the funding to ensure we can get Housing First tenancies in place for that finite number of people, instead of continuing to plough large resources into emergency accommodation? This could be a cost-neutral measure if it were implemented in time, or thereabouts, in terms of use of resources.

The quality of the supports, as the Minister said, is important. There are some concerns that some of the roll-out has not put enough emphasis on the quality of support. Will the Minister look at this?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I cannot give the Deputy a commitment today. I have engaged intensively with the HSE in this regard. One of the first things I did when I was appointed Minister was set up a homelessness delivery task force. It meets every week and is made up of the stakeholders such as the homelessness NGOs and the tenancy advocates, as well as senior officials in my Department. From that has evolved a formal team set up between my Department and the Department of Health. I want to see that engagement at a much greater level.

I agree with the Deputy that we can do much more in this space. Housing First has been successful and needs to be expanded further. We have to keep an eye on this over the winter. That is why we are at a detailed stage in the preparation for the winter plan with regard to additional capacity for emergency accommodation should we need it.

The focus has to be on providing the wraparound services. The Department of Health has a big part to play in that. I am glad to report to the House that it has been open in that regard in the first three months of this Government. I want to drive it on further.

Homelessness Strategy

30. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his policy response to the increase in the number of deaths of persons accessing emergency homeless accommodation and-or sleeping rough. [28830/20]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister knows, we have had a significant increase in the number of tragic and untimely deaths of people accessing emergency accommodation or sleeping rough. By August of this year, we had 39 reported such deaths in Dublin city alone. That is more than the 30-odd people who died last year and the year before in the city. We are also hearing similar reports from Galway and Cork. What is the Government's response to this serious deterioration in the situation for this particular group of homeless people?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for his question. Every single death in this regard is tragic and a loss to a family, as well as the support network looking after those individuals and the many committed volunteers working in homeless services.

Tackling homelessness is an absolute priority for me. Since taking office, as I just said to Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, I have met a wide range of stakeholders and have established the high-level homelessness task force which I chair. I have also engaged regularly with the Minister for Health, given the linkages with the health services, along with homelessness charities and NGOs and tenancy advocates. That helps to inform not just policy but action every day and what is required across cities and towns.

There have been several tragic deaths in recent months of individuals who have been accessing homeless services. It is vital we continue to deliver the appropriate measures to ensure that all individuals experiencing homelessness are supported to exit homelessness into permanent housing solutions. The programme for Government includes measures targeted at the complex needs of many of those experiencing homelessness. These include measures to help rough sleepers into sustainable accommodation, the continued expansion of Housing First, as well as a focus on the construction and indeed acquisition of one-bedroom homes. I have specifically asked our local authorities, through the housing agencies, to acquire any additional one-bedroom properties that may be on the market this year.

Importantly, we must ensure the necessary health and mental health supports are provided to assist homeless people with complex needs. The provision of addiction and mental health supports features prominently in the discussions which I am having with my task force and in my bilateral meetings with the Minister for Health. The task force will continue to focus on the Government's homelessness response as a matter of absolute priority.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister for his response. We need something more and specific on this particular problem. We have had some of the most appalling deaths. We have had rough sleepers beaten to death on the streets, allegedly for their mobile phones. We have had people taking their own lives in emergency accommodation or people dying through overdoses because of an inability to manage their addictions.

What connects all of these deaths - the Minister is right that each is an individual tragedy - is that the young people in question have an added vulnerability. The fact that they are rough sleeping or in emergency accommodation puts them at greater risk. This needs a focused response by the Government, separate from but within the overall response that the Minister

outlined. We need to see an accelerated withdrawal from the use of congregated and dormitory style accommodation. That is a commitment in the programme for Government and I would like to hear more about that. We need a greater focus on the small number of individuals whose homelessness, addiction and mental health concerns overlap to make them most distanced from emergency accommodation. Crucially, we need to look back at these particular deaths. In Britain, they use a measure known as adult safety reviews. It is a good mechanism for learning the lessons from these unnecessary and tragic deaths.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree with the Deputy. I am focused on doing whatever we can to ensure that the deaths in our homeless community are reduced as much as possible. It is obvious that we need to do that. That is why the first measure I took was establishment of the homelessness task force which I chair. Addiction services are important, as are mental health services and health teams.

We have seen through Covid is that the better response to more vulnerable in our community, particularly the homeless sector, with better health outcomes for many is due to the wrap-around services being available with people not actually having to deal with the bureaucracy that they may have had to in the past. That requires a HSE, Tusla and local authority response in the relevant areas, as well as from my Department. I am confident that with the programme for Government and the measures we have taken already, we will make strides in that area.

Each individual case is an absolute tragedy. Some of the cases are incredibly complex. It is my job to do everything I can to reduce that as much as possible.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: A good place to start would be to establish the number of these deaths annually. The information is based on media reports. While we have some data for Dublin, we do not have data from other cities. I encourage the Minister to look at that.

I also encourage the Minister to look specifically at the recent increase in those deaths to see if there is something underlying it and if it requires more specific attention. It is six years since Jonathan Corrie tragically lost his life only a stone's throw from the front of Leinster House. That generated significant public anger, as well as protests and a demand for action.

While much has happened, some of it good and some bad, in housing and homeless policies, the number of people dying has increased. In the context of his engagement with the NGOs and his officials, will the Minister please give this specific attention, help us quantify the level of problems and what level of additional interventions is required to ensure next year we have fewer deaths as we are moving those people, rightly, into Housing First tenancies?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is something we do in the context of every death that takes place. The issue of quantifying such deaths is that there is then a push to comment on each individual death. We have to respect the privacy of the individual and his or her family, as well as the fact that in many instances there are issues other than homelessness, such as serious health issues. We have to be cognisant of that. I understand how people feel when they see someone dying on the streets in a modern country like Ireland. It is not something any of us want to see. We want to see it stop. There is sometimes a rush, however, to comment on each of those cases. That would be counterproductive. We need a decent and good policy response.

In the short term and as winter approaches, as I have said to Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, the HSE winter plan, which I have been involved in on the housing side, includes an additional allocation of €5.5 million for service enhancements for people who are homeless. That is up from

€3 million in 2020. We have to look at targeting the resources in the places they are needed most but I take the Deputy's point on board.

Rent Controls

31. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the ban on evictions will be reinstated in view of the reinstatement of Covid-19 restrictions and the increase in cases. [28327/20]

Deputy Paul Murphy: We have a frightening second wave of coronavirus. The country is moving to level 3 tonight and I believe it is only a matter of time before we move to level 4 and then level 5. The Government took the decision to lift the evictions ban and a wave of evictions has restarted. In my constituency, I could give many examples. Does the Minister not agree that now is the time to reinstate the evictions ban to prevent people being made homeless at a time of coronavirus and of restrictions?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for the question. The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provided a temporary moratorium on tenancy terminations, other than in exceptional or limited cases, and on all increases in rent during the period from 27 March to 1 August 2020. The emergency measures aimed to assist in restricting the movement of people to suppress the spread of Covid-19 and applied to all tenants irrespective of their financial circumstances. The Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 targets enhanced protections to the most vulnerable tenants until 10 January 2021 and respects the constitutionally protected property rights of landlords. As we learned to live with Covid-19 these provisions enabled the residential rental sector to resume activity in as near normal a manner as possible.

With effect from 1 August 2020, the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 introduced protections for those tenants who are facing rent arrears and, as a result, are at risk of losing their tenancy. If a tenant's ability to pay has been impacted by Covid-19 and the tenant meets specific criteria new procedures and protections apply by way of a very simple self-declaration. Tenants who follow these procedures cannot be required to vacate their rental accommodation before 11 January 2021 and are not required to pay any rent increase in respect of the period ending 10 January 2021.

These protections are having a significant effect on the level of tenancy termination. Of the 844 notices of arrears issued since the protections were enacted on 1 August, less than one in four has led to a notice of termination actually being issued. One in five tenants have availed of the protections available under the Act and their tenancies cannot be terminated until 11 January next year. The remaining 487 tenancies have not yet received any notice of termination. As the pandemic may or may not become more prevalent within society, I and the Government will keep a very close eye on the situation and bring forward any additional protections that are required at that time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister is trying to tell us black is white. He lifted the eviction ban. The consequences are beginning to come through now and all the spin in the world will not change that reality. The second Act of 2020 that the Minister brought in is extremely limited and only relates to situations involving arrears, inability to pay and so on.

I will give a concrete example that shows how landlords will continue to get around this. A woman, let us call her Jane, who lives in Knocklyon was subject to an eviction attempt by her landlord. She is a taxi driver and she lost her income as such. The Government then cut her pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. She then fell behind in her rent and so established rent arrears. Her landlord then attempted to evict her but he was smart enough not to say he was evicting her because of rent arrears due to Covid. Instead, all of a sudden a relative wants to move home. She does not get protection under the Minister's legislation and there are more and more situations like that. The chair of Threshold has warned that, unless action is taken, we face a homeless crisis worse than anything we have seen to date.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The facts simply do not bear that out. The Deputy voted against these protections in July this year that we brought forward to put protections on tenancies. These were not just temporary protections relating to the pandemic but also in relation to dealing with rent arrears, the extension of the rent arrears notice, the fact that if a landlord issues a rent arrears notice, it has to go to the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, and the fact that the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, is now linked into the process to assist tenants at the very beginning of any arrears that happen. The Deputy voted against those measures and others on the hard left did likewise. This wave of evictions the Deputy refers to is not happening and the figures do not bear that out.

I have said to the Deputy already that, should there be an escalation of the pandemic in this country, I as Minister with responsibility for housing will be watching that very closely and will not be found wanting in bringing forward further protections should they be needed.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have another two cases in Tallaght of people who have notices to quit from their landlords. In this case, the excuse the landlord is going for is that they are selling the property. I do not necessarily believe that they are selling the property. I have seen this many times in the past. There are definite holes in the Minister's legislation, which is why we favour a reintroduction of the full evictions ban. We are bringing forward legislation to do precisely that. We know that a ban on evictions works. We have the proof from earlier this year when the ban saw the number of homeless families drop by 1,500. The number of homeless children fell by over one quarter in the six months that the ban was in place. That is why the ban was introduced in the first place, it is why the ban is needed now and it is why all of the major housing and homeless groups are calling for it. What the Minister has provided is not a ban on evictions. It is just another mechanism that landlords can walk around to get away from. What we need is the complete ban on evictions that we had previously in place. We need it right now.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: If the Deputy has any information or facts around landlords who are trying to circumvent regulations, he should bring it to the attention of the RTB. Since the RTB was empowered to initiate sanctions against landlords, it has processed information in relation to 704 tenancies and this has led to commencing investigations on nearly 200. That is what needs to happen. That is why we need to beef up the RTB as well, not just giving it the additional powers but the additional resources it needs to carry out its work and we are doing that.

The premise of the Deputy's argument that we have had a wave of evictions or homelessness since this legislative came in is just not true. Homeless numbers have continued to drop. I want to see them drop further but that is the fact of it. They are the facts and the numbers and behind all of those numbers are people. There will always be individual cases and that is why we need the RTB and orders to be tooled up to assist it. That is why I have MABS involved now at a very early stage in the legislation that this Government brought forward that the Deputy

opposed in July.

Housing Policy

32. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a commitment will be given that public land to be developed for housing can only be used for public housing. [27756/20]

Deputy Joan Collins: According to housing statistics from Dublin City Council, the council housed 517 households last year, most of whom had been waiting for a home since the mid 2000s, according to the documents. That is nearly 15 years. The average waiting time was more than 12 years and one of the households had been on the list since 1996. We are in a housing crisis in the middle of a pandemic. Will the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, give a commitment to build public housing on public land?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy for her question. The programme for Government commits to the State playing a greater part in directly providing affordable and social homes with a focus on middle income earners and developing sustainable mixed tenure communities. These principles will guide our housing policy and the work of the Land Development Agency, LDA, in assembling strategic sites in urban areas and ensuring the sustainable development of social and affordable homes for rent and purchase. This will include ensuring the public housing rental stock on public lands is under the control of local authorities, approved housing bodies or similar bodies. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issued an update to the public spending code in October 2019 to include a requirement that, prior to seeking approval from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to dispose of land and buildings on the open market, all non-commercial State bodies must first consult with the LDA in relation to the appropriate disposal of these lands. This requirement will further be strengthened by a commitment in the programme for Government that any State lands offered for sale will automatically be offered first to the LDA. This would mean that these lands could be acquired by the LDA, ensuring they remain in the ownership of the State and are used to provide appropriate housing within its mandate. Nine sites have been initially prescribed to deliver 3,600 homes. It is clear in the programme for Government that the basis for this will be enshrined in social and affordable housing and cost rental to ensure that we have a significant increase in the housing supply.

Deputy Joan Collins: We have a situation in the Central Mental Hospital site in Dundrum which the Land Development Agency is supporting. That is a significant project. The agency should be supporting and developing public housing on public lands. The Donnybrook Partnership plans to sell 14 apartments in a development at Eglinton Road to Dublin City Council for €9.18 million as part of its Part V obligation to allocate 10% of any new private development to social housing. That is a mad situation because on what should be substantially discounted housing units, it puts an indicative price tag of €762,916 on each of the nine two-bedroom apartments and €469,000 on each of the five one-bedroom apartments in the development. We are paying money to private developers when we have land. We have seen what happened with O'Devaney Gardens and what will happen with the available land on Oscar Traynor Road, which the council will try to dispose of to the benefit of a private developer. This has to stop. We have a housing emergency and the Government needs houses for people on the housing list.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy. It is clear that the Land Development Agency wants to deliver public housing on public lands. The make-up of that is clearly directed and includes affordable housing, cost rental and social homes. Actions speak louder than words. Planning permission has been granted for lands at Shanganagh, the application for which was submitted by the Land Development Agency, in tandem with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. That development will comprise 597 homes, 34% of which will be social housing, 54% will be cost rental and 15% will be affordable purchase. The key issue underpinning the Land Development Agency is to try to get affordability into the sector to ensure that we can provide homes at affordable prices. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is working hard to deliver a scheme to underpin that over the coming months. It is obviously important that we get affordability into our housing market.

Deputy Joan Collins: There are lands belonging to the Dublin City Council at O'Devaney Gardens and Oscar Traynor Road. There are lands across the country belonging to other local authorities. We need to build public and cost rental housing on those lands. We do not know what "affordable housing" means because no one has ever given us an idea of the cost of an affordable house and I would like to see that soon. We cannot clear housing lists in Dublin City Council and all local authorities while, at the same time, more than 10,000 families are in emergency accommodation, others are in the streets, the Housing First initiative is ongoing and all of that. We have to be much more vigorous in targeting these public lands for public housing and strategically building units for people who need them. I believe the Land Development Agency can play a crucial role but there must be a clear indication of what "affordable housing" means and we do not have that indication.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Land Development Agency will play a key role. The Deputy mentioned O'Devaney Gardens in Dublin. The project has been approved under the second serviced sites fund. That project and another in Killinarden were approved in August 2019. Those two projects will assist in the delivery of 465 affordable homes, with 165 in O'Devaney Gardens and 300 in Killinarden. The Department is constantly working with local authorities to progress projects like those, as it should.

The key thing is that when the State is in possession of significant land banks, we have an agency that can drive the delivery of these projects at a time of crisis to ensure that we are providing cost rental, affordable and social homes. That is how to ensure that our citizens have the best possible chance to get secure accommodation in the future.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Local Authority Housing

33. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if it will be ensured that substantial financial provision is made for the voids programme in 2021 due to the valuable and important work being undertaken under the programme in 2020 and the need to make further progress in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28448/20]

Deputy Brendan Smith: It is disheartening to see council housing stock that is vacant, boarded up or both, when many people remain on our local authority housing lists. I compliment the Minister on making two substantial financial allocations to our local authorities for this year's voids programme. Those allocations will make a real difference in the two local authorities in the constituency I represent, namely, Cavan County Council and Monaghan County Council. Bringing houses back to habitable use will make a difference to each estate. Most importantly, it will give individuals, families or both a new home before the end of the year. I am anxious that the voids programme will be strengthened even further for next year.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank my colleague, Deputy Brendan Smith, for raising this matter and agree with him completely. It is a frustration for all of us to see housing stock that is not in use and that is why, in July this year, I announced €40 million in funding and a targeted approach for all 31 local authorities to bring voids, which are vacant stock, back into use. We set each of the local authorities a target and asked them to make their submissions to the Department.

I am pleased to tell the Deputy that 2,411 properties have already been returned by local authorities and are currently being worked on. I have instructed each of the local authorities that, under this funding, any property that is brought back into stock must be occupied or allocated by the end of this year. Some of these properties are long-term voids that have been out of the market and out of use for over 12 months. There will be a targeted approach to this. I have a housing delivery team that I chair each week and we get a report on voids every week. Our housing delivery office is in contact with all local authorities. I know the Deputy is already doing this in Cavan and Monaghan but I ask all Deputies to be aware that this scheme is in place and to put positive pressure on local authorities to bring vacant units back into the housing stock.

We also need to look at the mechanism by which properties are brought back into the housing stock. The de-tenanting of properties needs to be looked at. We need to examine how long a property remains vacant when someone moves on or the property is handed over. We also need to look at the work that is required to give that property to a new tenant because sometimes it is far too extensive. We must look at other certifications in those situations.

We have made a good start. I am trying to negotiate funding for another voids programme for next year but I encourage our local authorities to deliver on the targets I have set this year because it will mean 2,500 families who would not get a home without this stimulus measure will get one. It is the largest voids programme that has been introduced in a long number of years.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply. This was the first issue about which I spoke to the Minister when he was appointed. I and Fianna Fáil councillors in Cavan and Monaghan are constantly in touch with the housing divisions in both of our councils. We are working with council officials to ensure that we get maximum turnaround.

Each of us in this House and everybody in society wants to see more public housing becoming available. There is a quick turnaround in upgrading voids because, by and large, those houses are in areas where housing is needed and services are already in place. It also helps employment, in that it makes work available for small-scale building contractors.

There can be a quick turnaround in returning these houses to habitable use. It also is im-

portant that tenants who are frustrated at living alongside dilapidated houses for some time are given consideration. We all know of the pride that the vast majority of people take in their houses and estates. When we go to the annual local authority estates award ceremony, it is heartening to see the interest that people take in their homes, estates and communities. For a quick turnaround and provision of more housing to ensure we are using existing public housing stock, the voids programme is a great investment. I sincerely hope the Minister can strengthen what has been a good programme in 2020.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. He has raised the important point that the voids programme provides local employment. The programme provides housing for local people and a lot of the work involves smaller local contractors. The scheme that the Government brought forward in July created 750 jobs across the country. We need that to be sustainable into the future.

I mentioned earlier that we need to revise how local authorities assess properties before they are re-tenanted. That needs to be done and I am asking officials to do it now.

I am committed to driving on with another voids programme next year. We are now in the middle of negotiations for budget allocations that will be announced next week. This has been one part of that. We have existing properties and, while we want to increase our housing stock and are committed to doing that as a Government, as am I as a Minister, we need to make sure we are using our existing homes well.

7 o'clock

This year 2,500 people will be in homes who would otherwise not have been. That is something we need to build on, if the Deputy will excuse the pun.

We also need to make sure there is a targeted approach to this and that each local authority has a specific target. That has worked very well. They know exactly what they have to deliver, how they draw down the money and that we will work in co-operation with them. I commend them on the work they have done and the manner in which they have responded to my request to get these properties back into use.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister. I work closely with all of the councillors in counties Cavan and Monaghan, my Oireachtas colleagues and the officials in the housing divisions in both councils. I know they value the two allocations that were made in the latter half of this year. They have a substantial programme of work for next year once the funding is made available. It is both good value and is visible to the public at large, because nothing is more frustrating for a tenant in a local authority estate than seeing houses lying idle that to a layperson's eye appear to be good structural homes that need very little upgrading and modernisation. We all know of top-quality young people and families who need their own homes but are living in hovels and, in many instances, are paying exorbitant rents. I have seen the quick turnaround that can be achieved through maximising the potential of the voids programme. I look forward to an even better voids programme in 2021.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To conclude, it is a priority. We want to build more new homes. Covid has had an impact on output this year. I mentioned to colleagues earlier that between 16,000 and 18,000 house completions will happen this year, half, or even less, of which will be local authority completions between acquisitions, leasing and builds. There is even greater pressure to use the existing stock we have in a better way.

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The frustration people feel when they see empty homes although they have been waiting for eight, nine or ten years on a housing list is palpable. I have visited many fine local authority developments that need to be refurbished. I recently visited one not too far from here, St. Mary's Mansions, which is a magnificent scheme run by Clúid. Fifty-six 70-year-old apartments have been fully refurbished and another two floors have been added to the building to create 80 apartments. People are again living in quality public housing in the centre of the city. That is what we want to see. We need to use the existing stock we have better.

Local authorities have responded. The local authorities in Cavan and Monaghan have responded very well to this, as have others. I encourage them to do as much as they can between now and the end of the year to bring these properties back into use.

Tenant Purchase Scheme

34. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he plans to amend the terms and conditions of the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28223/20]

67. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the criteria for the tenant purchase scheme will be reviewed to permit pensioners to purchase their local authority house in cases in which they can show the means to be able to do so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27757/20]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: My question relates to the tenant incremental purchase scheme of 2016. This is the most unsuccessful tenant purchase scheme ever. The Minister of State will probably agree with me. Can he let me know when he will bring in the radical changes to the scheme that are urgently needed?

Deputy Peter Burke: I propose to take Questions Nos. 34 and 67 together.

I thank Deputy Ó Cuív for the question. The programme for Government commits to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their own homes with some changes to eligibility. The current tenant incremental purchase scheme 2016 is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €50,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year. The minimum income level was introduced to ensure the sustainability of the scheme. Applicants must demonstrate that they have an income that is long-term and sustainable in nature to ensure that the tenant purchasing the house is in a financial position, as the owner, to maintain and insure the property for the duration of the charged period.

A review of the operation of the first 12 months of the scheme has been prepared. The review and the commitments in the programme for Government are being examined. All of these issues raised, including the position regarding pensioners wishing to purchase under the scheme, are being considered. My Department is preparing a submission on this and other social housing reform matters, and we expect we will be in a position to make decisions and changes to the scheme in early course.

The Deputies will be aware that under the programme for Government, a number of issues

were raised. As Minister of State, they are the guide rails I have to go by. Under the programme for Government, as in the Act, there is a requirement that local authorities have first call on the purchase, that the discount rate be revised and that the applicant has resided in the home for over a year, a period that should be increased.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I thank the Minister for his reply. When was the review completed? He said he hoped to bring proposals forward soon. I have heard that for three or four years. I mean no disrespect to the current Government, but the word “soon” is one of the most misused words in the House. Can the Minister of State tell me whether “soon” is before Christmas, before Easter or before this time next year?

Can the Minister of State tell me how has the Department decided that a pensioner who can put cash on a table to buy a house would be unable to subsequently pay for the insurance and maintenance of that house? There are people, in particular in rural areas, who are living in council houses built on their land who can buy a house because they have worked hard all of their lives. They cannot buy houses because of the rules. Can the Minister of State explain what is the logic in believing that someone who can buy a house for cash would not be able to maintain and insure it?

Deputy Brendan Smith: I wholeheartedly endorse every comment my colleague, Deputy Ó Cuív, has made. I recently wrote to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, about two cases. I was involved, as a public representative, in getting two pensioners a council house almost 30 years ago. They provided a site. Neither applicant ever had the State spend one bob on the house since it was built by the council nearly 30 years ago. They have the cash to buy the house. It is in the middle of the small bit of land they have, which is a typical small farm in County Cavan. They should not be deprived of the opportunity to buy their home. I appeal to the Minister and Minister of State, along with my colleague, to change that crazy regulation.

Deputy Thomas Gould: A person who recently retired received a cash payment, but when she wanted to buy her council house she could not do so because she has no income and is in receipt of a pension. She is in a catch-22 situation. She thought she would be able to buy the house when she retired. Another lady, who unfortunately was in a severe car accident and is now in a wheelchair, received a large sum of money but as a result of these criteria cannot buy a house. I agree with the two Deputies that something has to be looked at.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank each of the Deputies for their questions. In line with the programme for Government, the review which had been commenced has to be refined, because of the agreement that was made regarding the three issues I alluded to in the programme for Government.

We have to be very careful as Deputies when we are talking about cash buyers buying local authority housing. We have to be very careful about the rules we set. They have a knock-on effect on every applicant throughout the country. While there are very genuine cases, we have to be very careful about the rules we apply to ensure that they are fair in terms of the local authority stock and that they are giving pensioners who have money, resources and certainty a chance to purchase their homes. It cannot be the case that someone who has cash can buy a local authority house. People should know the reasons for that.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister of State did not tell me when the review was completed. A review was completed. The Minister of State did not give me the definition of the

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magic word in the English language, “soon”. I would like a definition of what he calls “soon” because I have heard the word for three years. I do not know if that is because it rhymes with zoom, but we need to get zoom into this soon.

He seemed to imply that I or anybody else thought any person other than a tenant or joint tenant could buy a house. Is the Minister of State saying there should be restrictions on the ability of joint tenants or tenants to buy a local authority house? Nobody is proposing to widen the eligibility criteria applying to those who can buy those houses, certainly not me.

Can the Minister of State explain why the Department believes maintaining and insuring the house creates unaffordability given that in many cases involving people with part-time jobs, the repayment would be less than the rent?

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Minister of State have his Collins English Dictionary with him?

Deputy Peter Burke: Yes, it is ready and present. To be clear, the review had been completed and has to be revised to take into account what was agreed by the three parties and unanimously adopted by their membership. That will happen shortly. I cannot give an exact timeframe for that because I do not know. That is the honest answer.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Are we talking about three or six months?

Deputy Peter Burke: We are talking about three months. We are doing the budget at the moment which takes priority but it will be as soon as possible. Politicians are mad for people to put an exact date on things, but things can happen beyond our control, especially in this Department. We have many matters to respond to every day and we are trying to negotiate a significant budget.

I am not proposing to change the terms of the scheme to preclude any tenants or joint tenants from taking part in it. However, we have to be very careful in the rules that we have. Any income thresholds that are set need to be sustainable. No one wants to put people into an unsustainable position where they cannot service their repayments.

Deputy Brendan Smith: If I may make one point, please. The Minister of State seemed to cast some doubt in suggesting we need to watch out for a person with cash to buy a house. I was talking about the case of honourable persons who, through hard work and support from other individual family members, are in a position to buy out their house. There would be no question mark over the authenticity, provenance or source of the funding that they would use to buy their local authority house.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is an important clarification.

Deputy Peter Burke: That is why I said that the majority of cases are genuine. I was at pains to point that out.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move next to Deputy Richmond. Níl sé anseo. We will take the next question from Deputy Paul Murphy.

Question No. 35 replied to with Written Answers

Dáil Éireann
Housing Policy

36. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will ensure that public land is reserved for the building of public housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28326/20]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I presume the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, will take this question. This is the same question that Deputy Joan Collins asked a moment ago. I am somewhat bemused by the answer, which seemed to be saying the Government was for public homes on public land. The Government is gaslighting us. It is not building public homes on public land. It is proceeding to privatise public land and hand it over to private developers. That is what is actually happening. A little honesty would help in having a debate on this issue.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Did Deputy Murphy ever vote for a development plan?

Deputy Peter Burke: He was never a councillor.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is clear what the Government is doing.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and Deputy Murphy for his question. As I pointed out earlier, it is key that the Land Development Agency is developing a model of housing which is social, affordable and cost-rental housing. From the applications that have been received by the LDA, actions speak louder than words. For example, the matrix for the applications in Shanganagh and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is that 34% are for social housing, 51% are for cost-rental and 15% are for affordable purchase. The work we have to do in the Department is to deliver those schemes now to ensure there is sustainable housing and an increase in supply for social tenants and that this supply is on public land. The kernel of the Land Development Agency's role is to deliver that.

We must also prioritise the legislation to place the Land Development Agency on a statutory footing and ensure that this work is prioritised and carried out. As I pointed out, there are currently nine sites under the control of the LDA on which it aims to deliver 3,600 homes. The agency is partnering with a number of local authorities and working with them on the ground to ensure we make the best possible use of public land to deliver public homes. The legislation will make clear the tasks the Land Development Agency will carry out to ensure we have sustainable tenancies in future for our citizens. I look forward to working with every Deputy in the House to achieve that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The truth is that what the Minister of State has put forward is some public homes on some public land with the rest of it to be used for private homes. That is what the Government is doing. To take example of the Oscar Traynor Road site, 50% of the houses on the site will be fully private homes on the open market, a further portion will be affordable, although they will not be affordable, and 30% will be social housing. Of 500 homes in Killyarden, 100 will be fully private. We have a housing crisis in this State. The public, through the State, owns a limited amount of land. The cheapest way by far to provide public housing to address the housing crisis is for the State to build on that land. Every single piece of land that the Government gives over to private developers is land that will not be used for public housing. The Government should commit to building public homes on public land instead of pursuing the continuation of a process of privatisation pursued by the previous Government.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is important to note that on the Shanganagh Castle site, which

predates the Land Development Agency, we do not know if the purchase homes will be affordable because the LDA does not yet have a purchase price for them. The LDA has told Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council that the rental units will cost €1,300 a month, which is not affordable for many of the cohorts. On the Central Mental Hospital site in Dundrum, the original proposition for the LDA was that 60% of the homes would be sold at open market prices. If the Minister of State is saying that is no longer possible and that all the sites in which the LDA is involved will be solely social affordable rental and purchase homes, that would be a big shift and one that many of us may welcome. Let us remember, however, that in O'Devaney Gardens, which is a Dublin City Council rather than an LDA site, 50% of the homes will sell at prices of approximately €470,000. The so-called affordable homes will be sold for €310,000, plus an equity stake of €50,000, which amounts to €360,000. That is not affordable. I hear what the Minister of State is saying and we will judge the legislation when we see it, but we have developments today where public land is being used for unaffordable open market price houses and allegedly affordable homes that are unaffordable. That is a problem not just for our voters but for the voters of all of the parties in government as well.

Deputy Peter Burke: From reading the programme for Government, the delivery mechanism of the Land Development Agency is very clear. It will be through mixed tenure of social, affordable and cost-rental housing. That is the mechanism that will be employed and the legislation that will come through the House will make very clear that no privatisation of the LDA will be allowed. It will be very transparent in how it does its business. There are nine sites in the agency initially, with the explicit objective of delivering 3,600 homes. As I mentioned, when one looks through the planning process one can see the action on the ground through various applications. In the case of the application for 597 homes I mentioned, it is very clear that these homes will be available to people who will qualify for affordable, cost-rental and social homes. This will ensure there will be increased supply in the area in question and secure tenancies for our citizens.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can I have a simple answer, please? Is the Government committing to having zero private, open market houses built on all of the LDA sites? If that is the case, I will welcome it but I do not think it is the case and I will be very surprised if it is. That is the only way the Minister of State can say the Government will build public homes on public land. Even within the framework of the programme for Government, the Government talks about providing homes for affordable purchase through the LDA, in other words, selling off housing on public land. Useful information was published recently by Orla Hegarty outlining that the cheapest way by far to provide housing to address the public housing crisis is for the State to do it on public land. It costs less than €250,000 to build quality homes on public land versus a much higher cost of giving the public land to private developers and then buying a portion of that back to be used as social housing.

Deputy Peter Burke: It is absolutely not the only way. I made that very clear when I spoke about the sites in the ownership of the LDA and cited the example of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. In Columb Barracks, in my town of Mullingar, the Land Development Agency, LDA, has taken over a site which will be the mechanism to deliver social and affordable housing to the town at an increased level. It is key that we deliver that through the State agency to ensure that mixed tenancies are delivered for people through social and affordable homes. I gave the clear example through that planning application of the make-up of the various homes in the scheme. It is key that the Land Development Agency increases supply, gets those 6,300 homes from those initial line sites on the ground and ensures that we have-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: On all the line sites.

Deputy Peter Burke: I have given a very clear example in terms of the planning application that was submitted for Wicklow. I gave another clear example in my town.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Does the Deputy oppose the supply of 597 homes?

Deputy Peter Burke: We have to be very clear. The Deputy can try to shout people down but the key point I am making-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I am not trying to shout down the Minister of State. It is just-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No. Please, do not interrupt the Minister of State.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Does the Deputy oppose the provision of 597 homes?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister should not interrupt the Minister of State either.

Deputy Peter Burke: I have given a clear example where 597 homes will be delivered in that matrix by the Land Development Agency, and it will continue to do such good work.

Covid-19 Pandemic

37. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the relationship between the new Covid-19 levels and the protections for tenants; if the protections will be enhanced if the levels change; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28425/20]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Minister said this evening that he will closely monitor Covid-19 case numbers and that he will take action to protect renters, if necessary, if numbers increase. Given that we have five levels containing a range of measures, would it not be appropriate to specify in those five levels the sort of measures the Government would take and the levels at which they would do that?

(Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Deputy for his valid question. All of us hope that we do not have to move up further through the levels. Work is ongoing with regard to other measures that may have to be taken in the future, particularly if it was a level 5 event. I earnestly hope that will not be the case.

I know the Deputy is aware of the protections that are in place under the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020. Even though some do not want to accept it, there has been a significant tapering off of terminations of tenancies. There has been a continued reduction in homelessness, particularly family homelessness. There is still an issue with singles, and we need to focus on that. What I want is a sustainable rental sector. That is why the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, mentioned other housing measures like the affordable rental plan, which the Government is committed to delivering. The Enniskerry Road and Emmet Road developments are the two pilot projects of the previous Government but I would like to see that expedited further.

To answer the Deputy's question, it is being monitored closely, not just within my Department but by the Cabinet sub-committee on housing. We want to make sure that tenants are

protected. I might use this opportunity to mention that in respect of the new protections that have been brought in for tenants, I have asked the RTB to engage in direct communication with all tenants from next week. Some 430,000 contacts, in terms of landlords and tenants, will be sent an information sheet advising them of their new rights, who they can contact and their recourse to the Money Advice and Budgeting Service and to the emergency rent supplement that many people are not accessing. That will be followed by a full national advertising campaign on radio and television to get the word out because more work needs to be done to highlight the protections that are available for people under the current legislation. We are monitoring this. Preparatory work is being done within my Department in conjunction with the Department of the Taoiseach.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I welcome that the Minister is indicating that this work is being done. I take it from the answer that if we do go up to level 5 measures will be introduced. It is important that that work is finalised as quickly as possible in case we find ourselves in that situation and that it will be communicated to people, preferably in advance. That would be the way to do it.

Work has been done by a team of epidemiologists at Harvard University, the University of Illinois and the University of Pennsylvania which has shown that the rate of evictions can substantially increase the number of cases and the spread of Covid-19. Has the Minister or his Department examined that modelling? Has any modelling been done in Ireland on the impact of evictions on the spread of Covid-19? If not, will he or his Department undertake such modelling on the public health repercussions of evictions?

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: The Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, published its quarterly report on 2 October and within that are some of the facts that pertain to the positive effect within the market of the new protections and the new legislation the Government brought forward. As a result of the legislation we are now able to track the number of 28-day warning letters for rent arrears issued. We were not able to track that previously but it is now in law. We can do it because once a warning letter is issued the landlord must copy it to the RTB. There used to be a 14-day notice. We changed it to 28 days in the legislation that others in the Chamber opposed. Some 844 warning letters were issued. Some 182 notices of termination were issued but of those 182, 174 self-declarations were made also. The numbers with regard to homelessness in June, July and August indicate that there has been a stabilisation. I want to see it reduced further. We have got to operate on a primary legislative footing. The primary legislation we have in place is a much sounder footing on which to be able to build. I will come back in when the Deputy has asked his supplementary question.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I agree with the Minister that that primary legislation should be on a sound footing. One of the most effective things the Minister could do, which is a long-term reform but would also be welcome in terms of Covid-19, is to reduce the grounds for eviction through primary legislation, which would bring us into line with other European countries. Will the Minister do that as a matter of urgency in terms of Covid-19 but also with a view to it being a long-term reform?

I asked the Minister about modelling in terms of the impact of evictions on Covid-19. We have international research and evidence showing that there is a relationship between evictions and the spread of Covid-19. Has that been looked at here? If not, will the Minister make sure that such modelling is undertaken at some level within Government?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: From the medical advice that we are given there is no question that people moving through society during a virus pandemic enhances the risk of its spread. That is the reason measures were taken by the previous Oireachtas and why further measures have been taken here to protect tenants. It is something that we will watch. Significant permanent changes were made in the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 relating to arrears, assistance and notification periods, which is very important, and also to determination notices. Further strengths were brought in with that Act that, unfortunately, did not receive the unanimity I felt it deserved. That said, we will still need to work to protect tenants' rights further and I and my colleagues, the Ministers of State, Deputies Noonan and Burke, are committed to doing that. We had a good initial meeting of the Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage earlier today where I committed to working in a collaborative way with colleagues from all parties and none to ensure we can bring forward workable, realistic solutions that will not have a negative impact on the market or drive people further out of it, which is an issue that is not discussed. The knock-on effect of the intended or otherwise unintended consequences of some of the measures that are put forward as simplistic solutions would lead to more tenants becoming homeless and in emergency accommodation, which is not what I want to see happen.

Local Authority Funding

38. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if additional financial support will be made available to local authorities to make up for the shortfall in non-rates revenue and additional expenditure due to Covid-19. [28369/20]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As Sinn Féin has stated previously, we welcomed the significant revenue the Government is providing for local authorities to fill the loss of rates revenue. We are still unclear about what will happen with the loss of non-rates revenue and additional Covid-19 expenditure. I know the Minister cannot tell me how much may or may not be in the budget because he is still negotiating that but he might be able to tell us what the County and City Management Association has told him is the shortfall both for the non-rates revenue and for the additional Covid-19 related costs so that we can have a sense of the scale of the problem.

(Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank Deputy Ó Broin. Funding local government is a serious issue and something all of us want to ensure because they have had a very tough time. I take this opportunity to thank the staff in the 31 local authorities across the country who have gone above and beyond the call of duty during this pandemic. Our citizens saw the commitment of the women and men in local authorities to serving their communities. That is admirable and, therefore, I want to make sure our services are not diminished in any way.

Earlier at the meeting of the Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, which Deputies Ó Broin, Cian O'Callaghan and Gould attended, members dealt with the Revised Estimate for 2020 – an additional €600 million, amounting to a rates waiver of 100%. It will be dealt with in the House tomorrow and I expect support from every Deputy. Once the Dáil agrees on the Revised Estimate, we will be able to disburse the €600 million to the local authorities. We have already paid the local property tax for the full year.

To answer the Deputy's question, local authorities have incurred other Covid-related losses and additional costs. I am working hard to make sure this is addressed. I cannot give an exact figure yet; I am not being evasive about that. I am dealing with the County and City Management Association, CCMA. The amounts mentioned by the CCMA and the Local Government

Management Agency, LGMA, vary. Some local authorities have been hit worse than others, particularly regarding rates. In this regard, there are differences between local authorities. Local authorities may face different pressures. Suffice it to say we are doing everything we can to ensure the hole in local authority funding is plugged for this year. The Ministers of State in my Department, Deputies Peter Burke and Noonan, are committed to doing this. When we have an agreement with the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, I will be required to bring a Revised Estimate to the committee and the House. I hope to be able to do that in the short term.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister for his reply. As he knows from what I said at the committee meeting, we will support the Revised Estimate tomorrow. I understand the CCMA has, in very detailed discussions with the Minister's officials, given ballpark figures for the non-rates revenue and the additional Covid-19 expenditure. They are not absolutely accurate. I would have thought it would have been helpful to share the figures with us so we would have a sense of the quantum of need.

The Minister is correct to emphasise that not all local authorities are affected in the same way. Smaller, rural and more tourism-dependent local authorities, such as that in Kerry and others along the western seaboard, will be much more negatively affected if additional funding is not provided to address the non-rates revenue shortfall as well as that in respect of Covid-19. Some of the larger urban local authorities, mine included, can probably absorb the cost a little better. Without the Minister telling us the exact amount, could he give us at least a ballpark figure from the CCMA? We will find out eventually so why not tell us now rather than in a week when I have to ask again?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I would not want to ruin the surprise for the Deputy. To be serious, because this is serious, staff and services are being provided to our citizens across the Twenty-six Counties. A couple of points arise. The €600 million waiver provided is not insignificant. Colleagues will agree that significant work and negotiation were required to ensure a waiver of 100%.

In early April, we advanced €136 million of the local property tax allocations that were made to local authorities. The full allocation of local property tax, some €517 million, was paid to local authorities in September. The only reason I do not want to give the Deputy a ballpark figure is that there are variations in scale and I would be setting an expectation, either low or high; suffice it to say that officials in the Department - very committed civil servants whom the Deputy and colleagues will know very well - are engaging daily with the local government sector. The sector is well aware that we are supporting it and that we are in discussions with other Departments to ensure no deficit in local government funding this year. That is what we are endeavouring to achieve while we negotiate a budget for next year.

We need to be flexible because circumstances will change. Local authorities will need to change and adapt as we continue to live with this pandemic. They perform a crucial role, particularly through the community call initiative there will across the country.

Homelessness Strategy

39. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on the causes of the recent increase in homelessness; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [28322/20]

46. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures he will take following the recent release of homeless figures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28553/20]

47. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if, in the context of Covid-19 and particularly rising infection rates, his views on whether it is unacceptable from a public health point of view to allow families and persons to become homeless; the measures he plans to take to ensure this does not happen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28542/20]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I would like to ask the Minister about the recent increase in homelessness among single adults. The number increased by 171 nationwide between February and the end of August, with the majority, 133, in Dublin. What is the Minister's view on the causes of the increase? What action is the Government taking to deal with it?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I propose to take Questions Nos. 39, 46 and 47 together.

I thank the Deputies. The programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to reducing and preventing homelessness and provides detail on how the Government will approach it as a priority. This year, we are seeing a reduction in the numbers of people in emergency accommodation. That is to be welcomed. Deputy Murphy's assertion that homelessness figures are rising is incorrect. The statistics do not bear that out. We have seen a slight increase in the homelessness rate among single adults. We are watching that but what I must watch, in particular, is the number of people who have been homeless for a sustained period. One of the issues that arises is the lack of availability of properties appropriate for single people. That is why I issued, in early July, the call for housing, which involved asking each local authority, through the Housing Agency, to acquire properties, particularly focusing on those experiencing long-term homelessness. I refer not just to single people, who are a concern, but also to larger families. I apologise to colleagues who attended the meeting of the housing committee earlier if I am repeating myself because we went into this in a little detail. Approximately 50 larger families have been homeless for four years because the requisite, appropriate properties have not been available to them. I have again asked through the Housing Agency that we source such properties as a matter of priority to focus our efforts on those who have experienced long-term homelessness. We also need to ensure that we prevent people from going into homelessness. We need to ensure, therefore, a sustainable supply of public properties. We must also ensure that people do not fall into homelessness itself.

I thank the local authorities, the delivery partners and the Department for all their work this year on sourcing homes and dealing with the threat of Covid-19. Significant numbers of individuals and families are exiting homelessness every week. On 25 September, I published the monthly homelessness report for August. It showed that a total of 8,702 individuals were in emergency accommodation, representing a decrease of 26 on the figure from the July report. Indeed, the figures from August 2020 represent a decrease of 1,636 individuals, down 16% on the 10,338 recorded at the same point in 2019. The August report also confirmed the lowest number of families reported in emergency accommodation since June 2016 and the lowest number of dependants recorded since February 2017. That is not to trumpet a success because I will not be happy until the homelessness figures are driven down to the bare minimum.

My Department also published details on the number of adults exiting homelessness to a tenancy on a quarterly basis. Based on the information provided in the performance reports from the local authorities, the report for quarter 2 showed that, in the first half of this year, 3,033 adults exited homelessness into a tenancy. This represented a 7% increase on exits over the same period in 2019. There are, however, still too many households in emergency accommodation, many of whom I have visited since taking over as Minister. I am committed to addressing this.

One of the key measures we are implementing to resolve this crisis involves increasing the supply of housing. To this end, the programme for Government commits to the increased supply of public, social and affordable homes. In particular, we will increase the social housing stock by more than 50,000, with an emphasis on new builds. In the short term, as part of the July stimulus I considered how we could use our existing properties better and get them back into use. I refer to the void stimulus, the objective being to have 2,500 homes back in use this year. A sizeable proportion of them will be for the homeless, which is to be welcomed.

The programme for Government also recognises that many of those experiencing homelessness have additional support needs, which we have discussed this evening, and it includes specific measures to address these needs. These include measures to help rough sleepers to enter sustainable accommodation, the continued expansion of Housing First, to which we are committed, with the focus on construction and acquisition of one-bedroom homes and, importantly, ensuring there are dedicated resources and funding to deliver the necessary health and mental health supports required to assist homeless people with complex needs. I am working closely with my colleague, the Minister for Health, to make progress on the measures to be taken to enhance the health supports provided to homeless households, with a particular focus on Covid in the short term.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister was given five minutes to respond.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I apologise.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three questions being taken together and in those circumstances the Minister gets additional time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There are two issues, the first of which is the general homeless figures. I welcome that they are decreasing. That is a consequence of the eviction ban for which we have called for many years. Unfortunately, it has been largely lifted and I think we will see an increase in general homelessness as a consequence of that because evictions of private tenancies are the number one cause of homelessness and the number one reason for evictions is landlords selling, which will return and will drive that increase. There is a particular issue which should not be lost, namely, the issue about the increase in homeless single adults. The organisations involved are crying out about the crisis in this area. Anthony Flynn of Inner City Helping Homeless says that winter is going to be a major issue for that organisation and that deaths will skyrocket. Simon has warned that the figures in Dublin will go over 3,000 by Christmas and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is getting 15,000 calls a month. Within this general picture, we have a particular crisis in this regard which needs to be addressed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister mentioned Housing First and said there are certain individuals who fall into homelessness who require additional supports. I have always welcomed the Housing First programme, particularly in Louth County Council. There are also

family situations that need whatever supports can be provided. Can the Minister provide any detail or a timeline in regard to the roll-out of family-orientated Housing First, in particular as regards Louth County Council?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: While I welcome the call for housing, although we will have to wait to see what it produces, the real problem is that we are not producing enough one-bedroom units in the social housing pipeline. In my own constituency, the housing waiting list is over 4,000 households. The demand for one-bedroom accommodation is a staggering 43.5% of that figure. It was previously 33% but it has gone up. If that trend is replicated in the other urban areas and one compares that to the low number of one-bedroom units in the social housing pipeline - the Minister was not responsible for that pipeline but he is responsible for the future pipeline - we need to look at increasing the overall number of one-bedroom units in the direct delivery of social housing as well.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will take the last question first. I agree with the Deputy. I have already met our delivery partners, the local authorities and the approved housing bodies. In any schemes that are brought to us, I want to see designs for community schemes that provide for a mix of units. I visited one such scheme yesterday with the Taoiseach in Balgriffin. More than half the units there are one-bedroom and two-bedroom units. There are also three-bedroom family apartments. We want a mix.. It is true that that is what we need. We are playing catch-up.

The call for housing was never going to be a panacea. It will bring in extra stock in the short term but we need to build more and we need to design for a community. I will come back to Deputy Ó Murchú's question in a minute. Deputy Paul Murphy is correct that there is a specific issue with single adults who are homeless. We need to focus our attention on that issue. The homeless task force, which meets every Monday and is chaired by me, is focused on what we need to do. The Deputy mentioned a number of the agencies and homeless charities. Two of the three are involved in the task force which I chair. There are a number of delivery partners and organisations that I am dealing with and listening to in terms of their experiences on the ground. We need to do that.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are running out of time on these questions.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: On Deputy Ó Murchú's question on Housing First, our priority is to expand it into the rest of the country on a singles basis first. Where local authorities such as Louth County Council have other plans, they should bring them forward and we will have a look at them. Our focus must be on tackling homelessness and expanding Housing First as it exists.

Referendum Campaigns

40. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the preparations that have been made for the right to housing referendum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28424/20]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: What work is under way to prepare for the referendum on the right to housing, has the Minister been looking at a wording for that referendum and what timeline are we looking at in respect of it?

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Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The commitments in relation to constitutional reform in the programme for Government provide for the holding of a referendum on housing. My Department has begun the initial work on scoping the complex issues involved and will in due course make recommendations on how we might progress such a referendum. I do intend to, and will, consult with my colleagues in government as to the proposal that should be put to the electorate and the appropriate timeframes that should apply to the process. Having regard to the breadth of commitments on housing in the programme for Government, as alluded to earlier by the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, my immediate focus and priority is the delivery of homes and the question of a referendum on housing will be addressed over the course of the lifetime of the programme for Government. It is an issue I worked on in opposition too. People and organisations such as Mercy Law Resource Centre have done substantial work in this regard. We need to look at constitutional protections and protections and rights under legislation and to examine the legislative protections in other countries such as Scotland, Wales and others such as Finland. There is a basis for how we can structure it. There is also a reality issue into next year in terms of whether we could hold referendums. We need to use that time to prepare in that regard.

I thank the Deputy for his question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we leave this question because I would like to allow Deputy Verona Murphy in? She has two questions and she has been here a long time.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Yes.

Residential Tenancies Board

41. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of queries and complaints made by landlords and tenants to the Residential Tenancies Board (details supplied); the average wait time for a response to the relevant queries in the last nine months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28437/20]

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan. One of the functions of the Residential Tenancies Board is to deal with complaints made by tenants in regard to the behaviour of landlords and complaints made by landlords in regard to the behaviour of tenants. Given the obvious importance of having such disputes and complaints dealt with swiftly, can the Minister outline the number of queries and complaints made by landlords and tenants to the Residential Tenancies Board, and the average wait time for a response to the relevant queries in the last nine months?

An Ceann Comhairle: We have time for a very brief response.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Murphy for her question.

The Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, was established as an independent statutory body under the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004 to 2020 to operate a national tenancy registration system and to facilitate the resolution of disputes between landlords and tenants. The service provided by the RTB is quasi-judicial and all of their mediators, adjudicators and tribunal members have independent decision-making powers, in the same way as judges have within the court system. To ensure impartiality, transparency and fairness, adjudicators are independently

appointed and they undertake their functions in an autonomous capacity.

In 2019 the RTB received 6,185 applications for dispute resolution, of which 3,515, or 57%, were made by tenants and 2,539, or 41%, were made by landlords and 131, or 2%, by third parties. The average processing time for an adjudication in 2019 was 16 weeks, with 60% of adjudications closed within 12 weeks. The average processing time for mediations was 12 weeks, with 77% closed in eight weeks.

For quarter 1 and quarter 2 of 2020, the RTB received 2,435 applications for dispute resolution, of which 1,415, or 58%, were submitted by tenants, 947, or 39%, were submitted by landlords and 73, or 3%, were submitted by third parties. The average processing times for quarter 1 and quarter 2 are not available at this point in time. Processing of cases was impacted by the pandemic lockdown in March, with all staff working from home and consequently it is expected that timelines will be impacted by this.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Paul Donnelly - to discuss consideration of all options in relation to closing level crossings on the new DART+ line to Maynooth; (2) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss the commencement of a senior executive officer to work on Drogheda's development; (3) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss the funding deficit in Wicklow County Council following delays in local property tax, LPT, reform; (4) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss school bus capacity and the failure to enforce mask wearing on school buses; (5) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the budget deficit in Cork City Council as a result of Covid-19; (6) Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh - to discuss the decision of the National Transport Authority, NTA, to maintain the Barrow Bridge in the open position; (7) Deputy Sean Sherlock - to discuss the need to improve the N73 Mallow to Mitchelstown road; (8) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the errors in the leaving certificate grade system and implications for those seeking third level places; (9) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss the lack of school transport for approximately 100 children in Glenville, Watergrasshill and Whitechurch; (10) Deputy Steven Matthews - to discuss an update on a timeline for a school building for Greystones Community College; (11) Deputy Mattie McGrath - to discuss the impact of new Covid-19 restrictions on the hospitality industry; (12) Deputies Matt Carthy and Sorca Clarke - to discuss the European Commission REACH committee's recent adoption of a regulation on the use of lead gunshot; (13) Deputy Carol Nolan - the need to prioritise the introduction of reforms to the nursing home support scheme - the fair deal; (14) Deputy James O'Connor - to discuss funding for Cork County Council for upkeep of areas taken in charge within private estates; (15) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss planning issues and the proposed development of the Shannon pipeline; (16) Deputy Catherine Connolly - the imminent closure and necessary funding for the public swimming pool at Leisuriland, Galway and all public pools in County Galway; (17) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the designation of Garrylucas Bog in Cork South-West and other sites as natural heritage areas; (18) Deputies Gary Gannon and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the need to improve pay and conditions of school secretaries; and (19) Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne - to discuss the issue of class sizes in primary schools.

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The matters raised by Deputies Paul Donnelly, Ó Cathasaigh and Connolly have been selected for discussion.

Sitting suspended at 7.50 p.m. and resumed at 8.10 p.m.

Estimates for Public Services 2020: Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration has completed its consideration of the following Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2020: Vote 40 - Children and Youth Affairs (Revised).

Disability Services: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Pauline Tully: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

acknowledges that:

— families, carers and service providers have been stretched to incredible lengths, many to breaking point throughout the course of this pandemic;

— the personal toll and long-term impact of the withdrawal of care and supports for people with disabilities, their families and their carers is deeply worrying;

— due to Covid-19, disability services that rely on voluntary fundraising to meet operating costs have been unable to do so;

— services are suffering from chronic underfunding which has resulted in unmet need exacerbated by Covid-19;

— reopened disability day services are operating at approximately 40 per cent capacity;

— service providers submitted their funding requirements to the Health Service Executive in mid-June; and

— the Government’s allocation of €10 million in additional funding to day services and home support services for disability service users is insufficient and will not meet the urgent Covid-19 related costs for service providers, community and home support;

recognises:

— that Ireland’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires progressive implementation; and

— the innovative and committed response of disability and dementia service providers in the delivery of care and support for people with disabilities and their families throughout this pandemic; and

calls on the Government to:

— provide the funding required to fully reopen day and other essential disability services to implement all Covid-19 related protocols; and

— provide the additional funding, resources and capital investment required to guarantee sustainable capacity within disability and dementia services.”

I am sharing time with Deputy Funchion. I am pleased to propose this motion, which has the support of all Opposition parties and most Independent Deputies. This is a significant motion that demonstrates a collective acknowledgement of the disability and dementia funding crisis. I commend my party leader, Deputy McDonald, on taking the initiative to invite all parties and Independent Members to come together on this issue, but it is disappointing that none of the Government parties responded to the invitation.

From mid-March, day services and respite services were closed, as were most other sectors in society. This proved difficult for many people for a variety of reasons, but it is fair to say that people with disabilities were disproportionately affected. Many service providers have told me how they have noticed since reopening that the people they care for have regressed over the past six months. This sector, through no fault of its own, has been extremely slow to reopen, with most services not resuming until mid to late August or in September. Day services such as training and education facilities are only operating at approximately 40% of the capacity before Covid-19, again through no fault of theirs. I commend service providers on the terrific job they did both during the lockdown and since reopening.

I have consulted service providers and advocacy groups and they have identified a number of challenges that are prohibiting the full reopening of services. These challenges are transport, accommodation, staff and Covid-related costs such as PPE. The issues with transport are a result of the 2 m rule, which means that only a small number of service users can travel at one time. Even if this is reduced to 1 m, it would still present a problem. For example, a bus which could have carried perhaps 15 people before Covid-19 can now only transport a total of five people. This means that either the number of buses or the number of runs by buses must be increased. Either way, investment is needed to cover the cost of hiring another bus or asking existing buses to do additional trips. Some service users are not being offered any form of transport and are depending on family members to bring them to the day services. If that is not possible, they are unable to avail of services.

While some premises are sufficiently spacious to allow social distancing, many are not. Funding must be provided immediately to enable services to acquire additional space, where necessary.

Staffing is a major issue. As a result of distancing rules and to accommodate all service users, additional staff are needed in practically every service. Some services have sufficient physical space to allow all service users to attend, but more staff are needed as those attending services will be placed in pods to comply with public health guidelines. They also have the added burden of replacing staff who might have to self-isolate. Many services have had to resort to employing agency staff, which has proven very costly. The ongoing issue of section 39

pay restoration means that retention of staff is being impacted harder as a result of Covid-19. People in residential units cannot attend day services so staff in those units must provide the day services as well. Service users with underlying health conditions cannot attend services, so home supports should be provided to those people. Again, staff will be the main problem. There is also an urgent need for infrastructure, home care and community support for people affected by dementia. Their sense of abandonment runs deep.

Every service has spent a substantial amount on PPE and sanitation. Providers have not been recompensed for this, and have no idea whether they will be. Business cases for Covid-related expenditure were submitted to the HSE in June. The sector estimates the true cost of Covid-19 is €120 million, but the Government has yet to provide any funding to meet this additional burden on services. Respite care provision was suspended, too, and has only reopened on a much-reduced level recently, if at all. People need a break. For six months people with disabilities and their families have been trying to cope in what are sometimes impossible circumstances. I also note the current inadequacy of the provision of personal assistant hours for people with disabilities. This inadequacy must be addressed urgently.

I have outlined the immediate challenges facing the full reopening of day services and respite and community care. Covid-19 will be with us for some time. The necessary funding to allow the acquisition of additional transport services, accommodation, staff and other essentials must be made available immediately. The Minister's meagre €10 million funding announcement last week was met with shock and dismay by the disability sector. I should not have to remind the Government that policy development and funding of disability services must be rights-based, as determined by the State's obligation under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. There are numerous reports on the implementation of what needs to happen, but very little has happened. Immediate action is needed across all Departments to ensure accessible transport, a move away from congregated settings to suitable housing for independent living in the community, educational supports to allow people with disabilities have full access to education and more employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

I urge the Government to support the motion.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I commend my colleague, Deputy Tully, on bringing the motion forward. Unfortunately, people with a disability and their carers have been relegated to second-class citizens in this State. In every sector there are delays, waiting lists and, in many cases, a complete lack of services. It has become acceptable and the norm for people with a disability to have to fight for every service that others take for granted. I refer, in particular, to schools, school places in autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes and transport for both school and adult day services. There is also the issue of the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, and the fact that schools have to battle for a handful of appointments every year and must try to pick the children the schools believe need the service most. It is an impossible situation in which to be placed.

I wish to draw attention to an issue in the Carlow and Kilkenny region with the provision of occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy, particularly for children. There is an average waiting time of 18 months to two years for an appointment. There are also long delays in assessments and often people are delighted when they finally get an assessment, thinking they will finally get their services. However, in many cases, they must wait 18 months to two years for a follow-up service. Many people tell me they are getting one appointment per

year. I stress that it is not due to the existing staff who are working in that sector. I honestly do not know how they keep going and keep their morale up when all they see are growing waiting lists of children. There definitely must be greater investment in this area immediately. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, specifically to examine the situation in Carlow and Kilkenny. I was thinking about this earlier. There has been a lot of media attention recently on the appointment of special advisers and additional advisers. When a need is perceived for such a role it can be filled immediately. However, we are waiting years for occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and physiotherapists to help children in the Carlow and Kilkenny region.

I refer to the optional protocol of the UNCRPD. We need to ratify this without delay as the only way the State is finally going to sit up and take action is because it will be forced to do so. I appeal to the Minister of State because I feel that she wants to do the right thing here and I have seen some statements she has made since taking over this role. I hope she will follow this up with action and do the right thing by all those with a disability and their carers. They are totally exhausted and they need assistance, funding and investment. The sector has been underfunded and has suffered from under-investment for years. Covid has highlighted that and thrown it into stark contrast. Now we have a situation where people are trying to reopen services. If someone finally gets a place or a couple of hours of assistance, the next thing is a battle for transport. There are major issues to be addressed. I do not think anybody is looking for an overnight solution but people want to see that the issue is being taken seriously and services are going to be delivered.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I think there might be a misunderstanding with respect to speakers. I am not sure if certain Deputies understood they were speaking. We will move to the Government side.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Is it not the case that in the first round, the parties that tabled the motion get to speak?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is normally the case but there was an arrangement by which Sinn Féin would share time with other speakers first.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: We are sharing with the Social Democrats, in fairness.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am told Sinn Féin was sharing with Deputies Pringle and O'Donoghue. I can only go by the list I have.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I will use this ten minute slot and Deputies Pringle and O'Donoghue can take mine.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Cairns can speak now if she wants.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Deputy O'Donoghue and whoever else can use my time later.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes, Deputy Cairns will not have that slot later. She will have used her slot.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Yes, perfect. Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Here is what we know. Since before Covid-19 arrived in Ireland, people with disabilities have experienced higher rates of discrimination than people without disabilities. That discrimination is more likely to occur and be more serious. People with disabilities are more than three times likelier

to experience poverty and deprivation than people without disabilities. Ireland has the lowest employment rate for people with disabilities in the EU. People with disabilities are less likely to attend further education. An estimated 1,300 plus people with disabilities under 65 are being inappropriately accommodated in nursing homes. I say “estimated” because the HSE has not been able to provide me with the actual figures yet. It took Ireland over ten years to ratify the UNCPRD, and the Government still has not ratified the optional protocol. Carers and voluntary organisations do incredible work out of love and dedication and receive very little assistance for filling a gap that the State should have filled and can fill. Disability health and support services were already underfunded, and were due to be cut by a further €20 million earlier this year by the then Government. I could go on. The work of bodies such as the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Inclusion Ireland, and the Disability Federation of Ireland let us all know how disgracefully people with disabilities and their families are treated by the State.

It is fair to say that the group most profoundly impacted by the pandemic is people with disabilities. That is on top of all the existing issues I mentioned, and now Covid-19 and the Government’s response have added considerably more challenges. Day services have been closed for months in many cases and some are still closed, leading to regression, isolation and distress for people as well as additional hardship and a lack of respite for their families and carers. As in other sectors, contacts between services and people moved online in some cases. However, Inclusion Ireland research shows that many people with disabilities cannot use or do not have access to IT equipment. There are increased rates of anxiety and loneliness. The nearly 3,000 people with disabilities residing in settings of ten or more people have been put at unnecessary risk by the State during the pandemic due to their living arrangements. School and college students with disabilities have additional needs that were not adequately addressed by the online systems. Many people with disabilities who work in hospitality and other industries either lost their jobs or cannot attend work due to health concerns, which affects not only their income but their independence and personal dignity. Disability services staff, medical therapists and dentists are among those who have been redeployed to contact tracing, which has seriously affected the capacity of the State to provide essential services. Furthermore, for workers in this sector, the inequalities between section 39 and section 38 organisations have been highlighted, with section 38 employees being eligible for Covid sick pay while section 39 employees are not.

This is the cumulative reality for people with disabilities in Ireland. Before Covid people faced innumerable hurdles which have been magnified during the pandemic. Our challenge and our job is to immediately respond to these issues. This sector needs the resources to ensure a range of supports is provided to enable everyone to live dignified, independent lives. The impact of Covid continues to resonate for people with disabilities. Here is just a snapshot of issues I have been contacted about in the past week. A young man who cannot access speech and language therapy in west Cork has to travel almost two hours to the city, including stops because he cannot be in a confined space for too long, to get 30 minutes of vital therapy. People in west Cork need to be able to access therapeutic services locally. It is completely unreasonable and, to be honest, outrageous to expect people to travel two hours for 30 minutes with a speech and language therapist. An occupational therapist highlighted the chronic lack of hoists and other supports without depending on the physical strength of family members or carers, which in any case is not advisable. As a result, one family is unable to travel more than 20 minutes from home due to toiletry needs. With the easing of restrictions during the summer, the rest of us could travel around but families like this one remained in a *de facto* lockdown.

While the addition of outdoor dining has saved many small cafés and restaurants, a lack

of consideration for people with disabilities in mobility or those with visual impairments has resulted in new and additional barriers. A woman with a visual impairment contacted me to highlight this issue as it creates uncertainty and erodes independence. In towns like Bandon, seating has been put on reclaimed street space so that it leaves the footpaths free, which is great. These matters were highlighted during Make a Way Day two weeks ago. Any actions from national or local government need to be implemented through a disability lens to ensure basic mistakes like this do not arise. There are countless other examples I could give from across west Cork and beyond from people who have contacted me since I was elected. The common thread in all these stories is a State that is unwilling to accept its responsibility to address the needs of all citizens and residents.

The motion rightly calls for funding to fully reopen day and other essential disability services and to guarantee sustainable capacity within disability and dementia services. This responds to the calls from people with disabilities. They are the experts and we have to listen to them. The Government prioritised the opening of schools and colleges in roadmaps and “living with Covid” documents. It needs to do the same for people with disabilities. We need healthcare services locally at the point of need, therapeutic supports in schools and training centres, vastly improved accessibility in transport and towns, and to see an immediate move from congregated settings to community-based housing. We also need to properly pay medical and support staff, including carers, and provide employment opportunities for people in all communities.

Funding is central here. The State outsources its responsibility to charitable organisations and the goodwill of communities. However, the weakness of this model has come to the fore since fundraising capacities have collapsed, with an average loss of 40% in income for members of the Disability Federation of Ireland. These losses are even more significant for small to medium community-based disability organisations that rely so heavily on fundraising when they should be able to rely on the State. These organisations need those funds matched, at the very least, to maintain services. They will need even more to be able to operate under Covid protocols and to develop innovative approaches to providing services. For example, CoAction West Cork, a support service for children and adults with an intellectual disability and-or autism, needs money to recruit, retain and fully pay its staff. The Government will need to invest in CoAction and other smaller organisations to cover the full costs of Covid expenditure in disability services.

An issue I have raised before, and will continue to raise, is the shameful lack of appropriate housing. Article 19 of the UN convention guarantees the right to live independently in the community with a range of in-home, residential and other community support services, rather than in institutions. Successive Governments have failed to ensure this right is provided for. In west Cork it is practically impossible to access independent supported living. Ordinarily, this is a breach of people’s rights but during Covid-19 this puts people, some of whom have underlying medical complications, at greater risk. This is not a symptom of the pandemic but of poor policy decisions and priorities over decades.

As Dr. Frank Conaty of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission outlined to me at the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response last July:

It is not the pandemic that has caused this, but the pandemic is giving rise to greater risk for people in these congregated settings. ... The fractures in the policy architecture we now see this pandemic showing up have always been there, but it is clearly within our gift to address and correct them.

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The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the means by which many of these issues can be addressed and I look forward to working with many Deputies on the Committee on Disability Matters when it is formed. A rights-based approach is absolutely essential. However, in the meantime, the Government must commit to providing the funding and resources necessary to support people with disabilities and their families in living with Covid-19, and with dignity.

Almost 70 Deputies from across the Opposition benches are behind this motion. I thank Sinn Féin for enabling us to do this. Deputies from across the political spectrum may not agree on many things but we are all united on this and I find it hard to believe the 80-plus Deputies in government do not agree with us.

People with disabilities and their families deserve more and are also entitled to more. It is their right and is a right the Government must fulfil.

The pandemic has been hard on everyone. It has brought suffering, loss, unemployment and upset but a disproportionate burden has been placed on people with disabilities and it is essential we do everything we can to lighten that burden.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“acknowledges that:

— the Covid-19 pandemic has had significant impact on the delivery of all health funded services, and services for people with disabilities have been particularly affected;

— since the onset of Covid-19 the focus of service providers has been to mitigate its immediate impact on the disability community and the World Health Organization (WHO) anticipates that Covid-19 will be with us for a further 12-18 months;

— the implementation of Covid-19 restrictions has led to the reduction and suspension of services for both children and adults across disability services and while these restrictions have been introduced as protective measures, they have resulted in significant stress for individuals with disabilities and their families;

— the reintroduction of services is now underway, as detailed in the Health Service Executive’s (HSE) roadmap to reopening services, in line with public health guidance;

— since the outset, the HSE Community Healthcare Organisations (CHO) and disability service providers worked collaboratively with families using creative and innovative models of care to support service users where the need was greatest;

— the Government is very aware of the impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities, their families and their carers;

— children’s services, respite services and adult day services are all resuming, having been reimaged and redesigned to be delivered in line with new guidance published by the HSE;

— health and social care responses to the current public health emergency are un-

der continuing review, including specific measures such as those to support vulnerable people; these available supports may change over time and the HSE is aware that the needs of people with a disability and their families will also change over time; and

— in line with the Government's Resilience and Recovery Framework (2020-2021): Plan for Living with Covid-19 (Plan for Living with Covid-19), the HSE regards the provision of disability services as essential to maintaining a response to people with a disability, in the same way that schools and creches are, and importantly, the Government's intention is that disability services will remain open at each level of the Plan for Living with Covid-19, subject to public health guidance, including the prevention and management of Covid-19 related infection;

notes that:

— the HSE have consistently worked to engage with individual service providers throughout 2020 citing difficulties in service provision and sustainability due to historical financial deficits and new financial challenges, and the requirement for disability service providers to achieve a financial efficiency target of 1 per cent of their budget in 2020 has been removed;

— substantial additional funding has been allocated to the Health Estimate Vote to meet the costs associated with the implementation of the measures outlined in the National Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 (Coronavirus), and the HSE have put measures in place to address both the financial and non-financial challenges of disability service providers in dealing with Covid-19;

— investment in disability services is significant with an overall budget for disability services exceeding €2 billion in 2020;

— the financial implications of measures taken to mitigate Covid-19 infection are matters which the Department of Health will continue to keep under review in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, as the situation evolves;

— children's disability services will continue to progress in all areas, and all CHOs are putting appropriate arrangements in place to resume assessment of need and intervention therapy services in line with public health guidance; guidance documents have been circulated by the HSE to all CHOs to support clinicians in decision making regarding disability assessments in the context of Covid-19 and support the return to more normal levels of service provision for children with disabilities and their families, and funding of €7.8 million has been provided to the HSE specifically to reduce the current backlog in the assessment of need, which will help reduce waiting times both for the assessment and for any therapeutic services required;

— adult day services reopened throughout August and September at 40 per cent of their pre- Covid-19 capacity and to augment this, on Monday 28th September the Minister for Health and the Minister of State with responsibility for Disability, announced that €10 million is being made available in 2020 to support the resumption of day services and enhanced home support services for disability service users and that this funding is being drawn down from the National Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 (Coronavirus);

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— of this, €7.5 million will increase disability day services by one day a week for over 14,000 adults, however, capacity in day services will remain at a reduced level; the guidance developed to support the resumption of adult day services has had to take account of social distancing rules which has meant that there is a reduced number of people in each service location and the HSE is committed to maximising the support that can be provided within these restrictions; this involves a balancing of protective measures with as much available access to day services as possible, and the full year cost of continuing these services in 2021 of €30 million will be sought as part of the Estimates process;

— residential services for people with disabilities have continued throughout the pandemic and new guidance issued at the end of September in respect of visits to residential care facilities reflects the different levels of the Plan for Living with Covid-19; as with previous guidance, this emphasises that such facilities are the home environments of individuals residing there and as such the importance of maintaining family connections with loved ones from a holistic person-centred approach;

— respite is an important support mechanism for many families and short-stay residential and emergency/residential respite began to reopen from July to August as the first stage in a three-phase plan, and activity is now increasing for the next two phases – the September to November phase and then the December 2020 to February 2021 phase;

— the allocation of additional funding to disability services is only part of a range of complex barriers to the full resumption of disability services; challenges include the physical limitations of the buildings available and the continued restrictions imposed by social distancing guidance, and the HSE is building increased capacity for day services, including building refurbishment to provide extra space and access to community building and facilities;

— a key commitment in the Programme for Government is the implementation of the National Dementia Care Strategy, which aims to improve how we provide care for people living with dementia, and that in line with the Programme for Government commitment to expand the dementia advisor service on a nationwide basis, an additional 10 dementia advisors are being recruited this year with support from the Sláintecare Enhanced Community Fund;

— there has been a continued focus on meeting the needs of people living with dementia who were impacted by the suspension of day care services during the Covid-19 pandemic;

— the HSE, in collaboration with the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, has developed a range of initiatives and resources to ensure that people living with dementia stayed safe, well and connected during the crisis;

— the Government's approach to meeting the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is one of sustained and ongoing improvement, and work is continuing on the reforms needed for an optimum level of compliance with the UNCRPD's requirements; and

— the Programme for Government also commits to the development of an implementation plan to coordinate implementation of the UNCRPD, and furthermore, the Programme commits to work with other parties in the Oireachtas through an Oireachtas

Joint Committee to assist in monitoring and implementing the provisions of the UN-CRPD, and work will commence on the development of an implementation plan shortly; and

commits to:

— a continued whole of government approach to improving access to and quality of services for people with a disability in line with the HSE’s Transforming Lives Programme and the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021;

— preparation of Ireland’s Initial State Report to the Oireachtas Joint Committee, which is at an advanced stage of drafting and, in addition, the consultation phase on the State Report is being planned; key to this is the involvement of, and consultation with, persons with a disability on the State Report;

— the ongoing establishment of A Disability Participation and Consultation Network which will move Ireland towards meeting its obligations under the UNCRPD to consult and actively involve persons with a disability and their representative organisation, and one of the first tasks for this Network will be to partake in the consultation process on the Initial State Report;

— the full implementation of the Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019- 2024, which sets out a long-term vision for communities in Ireland and a general direction of travel for Government policy in relation to the community and voluntary sector for the coming years;

— strengthening the State’s relationship with the voluntary sector through meaningful participation in the new dialogue forum between the Department of Health, relevant health agencies and representation from voluntary organisations in the health and social care sector; and

— moving to a population-based planning approach to service delivery, in line with the Sláintecare vision, based on demographic and geographic considerations that reflects both the health and social care needs of those within our population, including those who require specialist disability services; this will afford the opportunity to prioritise and design the health and social care services that need to be developed for each region, so the population can get the right care, in the right place, at the right time in line with Health Information and Quality Authority standards and available resources.”

I thank the Deputies for raising this motion in the House. Although I will be opposing the motion as it is set out this evening, I welcome the chance to restate the Government’s commitment to supporting people with disabilities and their families, particularly, at this time when we are dealing with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current restrictions it causes.

I wish to start by acknowledging with sincerity how difficult the last few months have been for people with disabilities and their families. The impact of Covid-19 on their lives has been and continues to be significant. I am aware that families across the country have had their routines upended.

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Covid-19 has presented a huge challenge for disability services. While we all want our services to return to pre-Covid levels, the collective aim of the Department of Health, the HSE and the service providers must be to restore services in a safe way. Tonight, I wish to outline the significant work that is under way to achieve this.

The HSE provides and funds a range of day services and rehabilitative training. We engage with approximately 19,000 adults with disabilities in almost 1,000 locations across the country. These services are essential for adults with disabilities and their families who avail of them.

As the House will be aware, because of Covid-19 the majority of disability services closed in March. They have now reopened. They have not, however, resumed at the level at which they had been pre-Covid. The impact of social distancing inevitably limits the number of people who can be present in any service, as well as the numbers in community settings.

I can completely understand the intense frustration of the day service users and their families at this moment. The fact that day services have not resumed to pre-Covid levels is far from ideal. My office has been inundated with queries about adult day services. The main question people ask me is when services will increase. Answering the question has been my absolute priority since taking office. I was pleased last week to announce that €10 million is being made available in 2020 to support the resumption of adult day services and enhance home support for people with disabilities. Of this funding, €7.5 million will increase the level of day services by one day a week for over 14,000 adult day service users.

The resumption of day services has been a welcome and hugely necessary development for service users and their families. The additional day of service it will provide is a step in the right direction. It will improve the situation for people using day services, and their families, as we face into tougher winter months. Ongoing challenges we face are things like the physical limitations of the buildings available and the continued restriction of social distance guidance. The HSE is building increased capacity for day services and will maximise the support that can be provided with these restrictions.

The allocation of additional funding to day services is only one way of addressing the complex barriers to the full resumption of services. Children's services, respite services and adult day services are all resuming. They have been reimaged and redesigned to be delivered in line with the new HSE guidance. Crucially, the Government's intention is that similar to schools and crèches, disability services will remain open at each level of the resilience and recovery framework subject to public health guidance.

Residential services for people with disabilities have continued throughout the pandemic. Approximately three quarters of those in disability residential care live in group homes in the community. The remainder are in congregated settings or campus settings where there are ten people in a group. Smaller settings have proven to be safer when it comes to Covid-19. Other protective factors are a shared proactive response to the public health teams and service providers working together.

People in disability services are, on average, younger than those living in nursing homes but they do not have an average number of people with clinical conditions. Those conditions could increase their vulnerability to serious illnesses if affected. Sadly, 13 people living in residential disability services have died due to coronavirus. There have been no further deaths since early summer but that does not allow for complacency. We owe it to our vulnerable fam-

ily members to observe public health guidance to keep this figure as low as possible. We must also remember that these residential facilities are people's homes. We must not and nor should we forget the importance of maintaining family connections with loved ones from a holistic person-centred approach.

The Government recognises that there is a need to address the financial sustainability issues facing the disability sector and is committed to publishing the disability capacity review. We also intend to use the recent research into the cost of disability to individuals and families to properly inform the direction of future policy. However, moving forward towards a more sustainable model of service provision will also mean finding out what factors are causing sustainability challenges and I encourage disability service providers to work with the HSE to address these underlying issues.

Investment in disability services is significant with an overall budget for disability services exceeding €2 billion in 2020 with additional funding allocated to meet the associated costs of dealing with Covid-19. The HSE has consistently worked to engage with individual service providers who are having difficulties in service provision and sustainability due to historical financial deficits and new financial challenges. The House may recall that over the summer, I asked the HSE to relieve section 38 and 39 disability service providers of the obligation to achieve the 1% cut. This was to ease the burden of service provider challenges in the context of Covid-19, which was worth €20 million to the sector.

I do not underestimate the scale of these challenges and I have previously acknowledged the commitment of these services in supporting and protecting those with a disability who attend health and social care settings. When I addressed the House last month, I mentioned during statements on disabilities that my colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and I had asked that the establishment of the proposed Oireachtas joint committee on disability matters be prioritised. I am pleased to note this will happen soon and that our colleague in this house, Deputy Michael Moynihan, has been appointed Chair. I know he will be an excellent and dedicated Chair. I advocated for the establishment of such a committee. I believe it is our responsibility as public representatives to hear from people with disabilities, their families and their advocates. Legislation and policy must be sculpted with their input.

I have heard and absolutely understand exactly why this motion is here before us tonight. I understand and feel the frustration of the families, their advocates and the service users. It is also, however, important to realise that when I took office last July, all these services were closed. We have slowly and within guidance worked with the Department and the HSE to ensure the services could open up and keep people protected. I have travelled around the country. I started in St. Joseph's in Charleville where I discussed respite in Cooleens House. I travelled to Wexford and Kilkenny. I have been in Galway. I have been around, and I have been listening.

Deputy Tully is right. The same issues of staff, transport and accommodation come up repeatedly. However, we could not turn on the switch overnight to ensure this happened because we needed to have staff and find the accommodation that meets HIQA requirements. For it to work it needs to be done on a piecemeal basis, which is happening. To be fair, the providers have worked with the HSE and the Department. I spoke to the chief executive of the HSE, Paul Reid, yesterday and I now understand that I will no longer have to rely in respite units to be isolation hubs. They are being stood down and the HSE will use the €5 million to ensure we have isolation hubs and that we no longer need to draw on valuable respite services to ensure

that people are protected.

When the €20 million saved by scrapping the 1% cut, the €10 million for reopening services and the €7.8 million to tackle the assessment of needs backlog are added up, I have secured a €37.8 million investment in the sector since I took office 98 days ago. That is far from small money. Everyone in the House knows the disability sector is the poor cousin in health. I fought for every euro of that €37.8 million for the families, the services users and the providers, and especially for the children who are awaiting assessments of needs. This is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to the disability sector and a tangible example of my commitment to fighting for people with disabilities during my time in this office.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will share time with Deputy Sherlock.

I thank the Minister of State for her contribution and I thank the Deputies who tabled this joint motion. I must comment on the way the Minister of State finished. I know she is a formidable person. I like her style and I compliment her on getting the €37.8 million. However, it says a lot about the Government that she had to fight so hard to get it. If the Government was going to prioritise people with disabilities in the way in which it should, she should not need to fight as hard as she did. Fair play to her. She is unique. It is obvious that the Government does not place a priority on disability in the first place if it took that level of fight to get it. I give my best wishes to the new committee that has been established, members of which are here tonight.

As the Minister of State knows, I have spoken about his subject many times since the start of this Dáil. I have probably spoken more about it than any other topic because I have been fighting for people with intellectual disabilities, about which I am passionate. We live in a republic and the best way to show that we live in a republic is by looking after those who are most vulnerable during this pandemic. The simple fact is that those who are being given day services were just let down. I understand residential services were protected, but day services and respite are gone. They lost the will because they were forgotten about.

On numerous occasions I have spoken to the Minister of State about Philip Kelly, who is not a relation and who lives here in Dublin. He is my friend. He is 29 and has Down's syndrome. He used to beg me to come in here and talk to "the boss". At the start it was the then Taoiseach, the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, and then it became the current Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin. Then he met the Minister of State on the bridge by the convention centre and now she is the boss to get him back to his day services. He gets four hours twice a week. After I leave here, I will ring him and talk to him because he is watching now.

I have spoken to many families who are watching tonight to see if the Minister of State can deliver more in next week's budget. That is why this motion is so timely. It is not sustainable for Philip and all the other people who deserve the services. They are thankful for the €10 million and the total of €37.8 million. They need capital funding because their buildings are too small. They need PPE and they need many more buses. They need them now. We live in a republic. They cannot be discriminated against. They are the most vulnerable. They were left at the bottom of the pile and it is not bloody well acceptable. We need to have Covid protections, but we also need to provide services for our most vulnerable and particularly day services.

I do not have much time, but I want to make two more points. I spent some years on the Committee of Public Accounts and was also my party's spokesperson on health. The situation with section 38 and section 39 organisations is not sustainable. The Covid pandemic is a

disrupter, but this was not sustainable before the pandemic. All the main organisations are in serious trouble. We need a plan that goes beyond the term of the Minister of State and lasts for a decade. We outsourced all these services for the most vulnerable people in this country to private organisations and now we will need to take them back. What is going on is not sustainable. These organisations are beginning to fall over.

I refer to a newspaper article today. It is not because it was written by a Labour man but because his passion for disabilities is more important to him than being a Labour man. If colleagues read one article tonight, they should read Fergus Finlay's article on St. John of God's in today's *Irish Examiner*. It is not because his daughter is there; in fairness to him he has been passionate about this for many years. We cannot have €155 million given out in services for 2,709 people. This organisation owns considerable property that we all know about. There are issues with workers which we all know about. After years of giving out secret payments with 11 people getting more than €180,000 a year - to give balance because the State cannot always deal with everything - it has decided that it now wants to throw all the services back on the State. We heard a lot this week about frightening people and this frightens people. The reason they are in that position in the first place is we outsourced it all.

There are two issues. First, the Minister of State needs to have a hell of a week. I congratulate her on the €37.8 million. However, it says an awful lot about the Government that she needed to do what she did. She needs to have one hell of a damn week because these people cannot be let down. We need capital and current funding. Second, all of us need to make a plan for the State to take back control and ownership of disability services for people who are vulnerable.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I express our sadness at the passing of Dr. Martin O'Donnell of Charleville, father of Deputy Kieran O'Donnell, our colleague in the House. Dr. O'Donnell was one of the founders of the Charleville and District Mentally Handicapped Children's Association, which was the forerunner of St. Joseph's Foundation as we know it today. I was particularly heartened to hear the Minister of State tonight mentioning Cooleens House and St. Joseph's Foundation. I take some solace from her speech that she is very much aware of St. Joseph's Foundation and its work, thanks in no small part to the late Dr. Martin O'Donnell and his team. A lovely article in the *Limerick Leader* today contained a quote from a local who said that the late Dr. O'Donnell brought children out of the attic in 1968. We are still here tonight discussing these issues, which may be an indictment on all of us. There has never been a greater consciousness around these issues and around ensuring we can advocate for people and continue in the spirit of a man who was truly respected, who had great passion and compassion for the people he served as a GP. The article speaks of the 50th anniversary celebration of St. Joseph's Foundation where it is said that he remembers Dr. O'Donnell saying the highlight of his career working with those with special needs was when it was recognised they could get their first holy communion. We have come a long way since then but we have a long way to go.

I recognise the Minister of State's integrity. I note that Deputy Michael Moynihan, who will chair that committee, is also present. We can do good work and we are already seeing an evidence base for an increase in resources. That is plain for everybody to see. This is a non-partisan issue. If we can continue in the vein of people such as Dr. O'Donnell, we will do some good work. I am particularly heartened that the Minister of State mentioned Cooleens House. That is evidence she is across that specific issue in north Cork and is cognisant of the impact of the loss of respite care and the effect it is having on, for instance, the 33 people who use it in the context of Cooleens House. I pay tribute to Dr. O'Donnell and his family, to Mrs. O'Donnell

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and their five children and offer condolences to our colleague, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell, on his loss.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I also offer my sympathies to Dr. Martin O'Donnell's wife, Veronica, to his daughters and sons and to Deputy Kieran O'Donnell.

In 1968, Dr. Martin O'Donnell was one of the co-founders of the St. Joseph's Foundation in Charleville. Today I heard many stories of him going from house to house looking for funding to open a place for people to go. The first place they went was the parochial house in Charleville. I have been involved with St. Joseph's for many years and I was one of the people who helped them get Liskennett Farm in Granagh. It has an equestrian centre for people to come to and was built in a forest of 80 acres. It is absolutely fantastic. What St. Joseph's Foundation have stood for in our area is huge.

St. Joseph's has a lot of houses throughout the country, in counties Cork, Kerry and Limerick. What they do is unbelievable but they need supports and funding to go forward. Everything has now changed for them. People who could previously go to the likes of Liskennett in Granagh cannot go there now because of the restrictions. Before the pandemic, some of them could travel there in a bus but now they cannot. They have small minibuses with six or eight seats and they cannot do this with social distancing. It is heartbreaking because it is an absolutely fantastic facility, run by fantastic people. One group we have got to look out for in all this is the volunteers. Dr. Martin O'Donnell was one of the co-founders of the St. Joseph's Foundation in 1968. These people volunteering their time and effort.

More than 1,250 carers in Ireland are over the age of 70, with 400 aged over 80. Capacity in day services has lessened due to social distancing, which impacts centre-based day services. People with disabilities were identified as high risk by NPHE. Services responded extremely quickly and kept the numbers extremely low but this meant restricting day services and providing support in residential settings. The National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers said it is now providing 40% of pre-Covid care. Most people are getting between two and three days of day services per week. Due to the fact that capacity in day services has lessened to meet the regulations, it is not possible to accommodate the pre-Covid numbers in centre-based day services. How many people using disability services are prevented from working because of an underlying condition? We have seen people working in shops and in the restaurant in St. Joseph's Foundation. Everyone is working together like a community. However, because of their underlying conditions they no longer have that service and they cannot go out and meet other people. What is there for them? They have not been able to work and there is no alternative in place for them. This is very difficult for them and their families.

I will conclude by mentioning Dromcollogher and District Respite Centre. It comes under the same regulation as nursing homes. It has been in contact with the Minister of State. It needs to be open, it needs funding and it needs to expand so it can cater for people in need of respite. It has even converted an office to make extra room for respite care. Again however, many volunteers are raising funds for this and we need the Minister of State's help. I wish Deputy Michael Moynihan very well as committee Chairman. I know he and the Minister of State will do their best to help and that their hearts are in the right place.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I apologise for not being here for the earlier slot. I was not aware I was speaking in that slot as there was some confusion over the speaking arrangements for tonight. On foot of all that I ended up with two and a half minutes extra so I will have to try to

fill that time as well after preparing for two and a half minutes only. I will try to make it up to five minutes now anyway.

I am happy to contribute on this motion because it is very important. It is with a sense of pride that I support it but I do so with sadness as well. I feel pride because this is a vitally important motion and it is important that my name and signature is on it. I thank Sinn Féin for offering the motion to all Opposition Members to sign. The sadness is due to my having spoken about disability services 23 times in the previous Dáil. I spoke then with the help of an activist who has since died without seeing the full implementation of the UNCRPD. Perhaps it was naivety as well. We will probably end up speaking about disability services 23 times in this Dáil and 23 times in the next Dáil and, unfortunately, we will still be in the same situation. That is sad. It is no reflection on the Minister of State. She will do the best she can with what she has but as a State and as a Government overall, we do not give people with disabilities the respect they deserve.

Sadly that has been seen with the implementation of UNCRPD which was ratified by Ireland 17 or 18 years after it was introduced. That is an absolute disgrace and we should all be ashamed of ourselves that that is the situation we got into. The previous Minister gave many perfect and great excuses as to why that happened and why the wait was necessary and all of that kind of stuff. I do not believe it was necessary. If we had been serious about it we would have adopted and ratified the convention on the very first day and then worked to implement it. Instead we said we would ratify it and then dawdled along implementing it and every time it was raised we perhaps got a little more until eventually we got to a situation where it could be implemented. That is sad and we should not have to do that. Hopefully, we will get to a situation in this Dáil or in the next where we do things because they are the right thing to do, not because they will cost money or impact on the budget.

9 o'clock

We should do them because as a society they are the right thing to do. It would make a huge difference if we get to that.

The motion speaks about the impact Covid is having on services and it is impacting hugely on people with disabilities and disability services. As the Minister of State and all of us in the House know, it is having a huge impact. With regard to the wider dispute in recent days with NPHET and everything else, how we deal with Covid will have a huge impact and it will have an ongoing impact on people with disabilities because at the rate we are going, sadly, we will be dealing with Covid and going into and out of lockdowns for the next three or four years. Will we be sitting here during that time waiting to see whether the Government will get disability services back up and running? I do not think we can wait that length of time. It is important that we do not do so and that we get ourselves together and do this now. They are depending on us to provide the services and we are not doing it. That is sad. I hope we will get beyond that and that we provide the services.

How we treat our weakest members is a sign of us as a society. People need our support to lead their fullest lives and that is all the motion is talking about. What we are doing at present is restricting these people from being able to get the most out of life that they can. We do not have to do this and it does not have to happen. I hope the Minister of State will deal with it on her watch and that it will not move on to the next Minister of State and we will not have to stand here in the next Dáil speaking about the same thing. I hope it will not come to that. This falls

on the Minister of State. We will try to make sure it happens.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I apologise to the Minister of State. I did not hear her opening comments because I was at a meeting. I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion and making it an all-party effort. It is absolutely imperative that we discuss the UNCRPD and its full implementation, particularly given the huge impact on disability services that Covid-19 has had. As Deputy Pringle just said, we signed up to the UN convention and 11 years later, only after long hard campaigning by disability activists, with protests every couple of months two years ago by various disability, activist and advocate groups, the Government was eventually forced, and it really was forced, to do what it should have done 11 years earlier and ratify the UN convention.

Even when the Government was dragged kicking and screaming to ratify it, it left out the critical part, which was the optional protocol. I do not know whether this was discussed earlier and whether the Government has given a commitment that it will adopt the optional protocol. I will not say the UN convention is not worth the paper it is written on without the optional protocol but it is not far off it. That is the thing that really forces accountability on the Government and gives a mechanism to people with disabilities to hold the Government to account as to whether it will ensure real equality at every level for people with disabilities, who are clearly denied this at a whole range of levels, whether transport, employment or education. In just about every sphere of life equality is not a tangible reality.

When I think about things that have happened recently in a campaign in which I have been involved with St. Mary's Telford on the Merrion Road, it is shocking that the Government is allowing them to happen. The Sisters of Charity have just decided to get rid of a convalescence centre nursing home for people with disabilities and effectively turf out women, some of whom suffered at the hands of the Sisters of Charity, who have lived there for 60 years with visual impairment and disability. They were just told their homes are going. They have waged a massive campaign and the Sisters of Charity are now speaking about leaving them for a little while but essentially they have been told to get out. This is funded by the HSE with taxpayers' money but because it is the Sisters of Charity they can do this for reasons unknown. The Government is just saying it is not its affair. It is just not on that this should be allowed to happen.

I should mention St. Monica's Nursing Home in Belvedere Place. I do not know it as well. The workers there have just been dumped and are not getting paid proper redundancy. It is shocking. In recent days, I received a letter about St. John of God. I do not know whether this issue has been raised. Disability services should be publicly delivered and not delivered through religious organisations but as it happens St. John of God delivers pretty much all of the intellectual disability services in my area. It is stating they are all going. Such is the level of underfunding from the HSE that there will be no services. They will just have to walk away. At the bottom of it are the austerity cuts that were imposed back in 2008 and the years afterwards. It has never really recovered from them or the failure of the Government to provide the funding. There is the threat to St. Joseph's dementia care in Shankill, which nearly went under other than big campaigning. That is just not on. We are not putting the resources into make equality a reality.

I think about my friends Sean O'Kelly and Bernard Mulvany who run the Access for All campaign to ensure that lifts on the DART line are fixed. A bit of extra money has been given but there is still a long way to go to ensure access to the DART. We have a lot more to do so let us get a commitment on the optional protocol and let us actually put the resources in to make

equality for people with disabilities a reality.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Covid is brutally exposing existing vulnerabilities in individuals but also in our society as a whole. This is very true in terms of our disability services and the effect the coronavirus is particularly having on people with disabilities. The pre-existing conditions are there for all to see with regard to the brutal facts of the treatment of people with disabilities in the State. There are close to 650,000 people with disabilities in Ireland and their poverty rates are 10% higher than the average in the EU, with Ireland among the five worst European countries. Ireland has the lowest employment rate for people with disabilities in the entire EU, 20% lower than the EU average. People with disabilities have double the average rate of homelessness, with 27% of the homeless population having a disability.

All of these are the consequences of ideology and of underfunding, underinvestment over decades and a model based on the hollowing out of public services and, in reality, giving responsibility to private organisations. These are partially funded by the State and then have to fundraise themselves because the funding they get is inadequate as opposed to the State taking responsibility itself. Coronavirus hit along with all of the restrictions we know about and as a result services almost came to a total stop. They have been partially restored and now they are approximately 40% of what they were, which is completely inadequate.

There are many issues. Disability services are in crisis and I echo the point made by Deputy Boyd Barrett on Saint John of God services. That is not our model but the fact that it is speaking about withdrawing entirely and transferring responsibility back to the HSE because of continuous underfunding speaks to the level of crisis that exists. A particular point was drawn to my attention by a constituent, Lorraine, about a meeting that the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers had with the Minister of State looking for extra necessary funding in light of Covid. I understand €10 million was granted. I heard the Minister of State say that this was €10 million on top of this money and that money. These are the people who know which resources are needed. From their point of view, it is completely inadequate. Lorraine told me that this shortfall is concerning and that words fail her in terms of dealing with it.

I pay tribute to those campaigners who have fought and continue to fight on the issue of disabilities and dragged this State to sign the UNCRPD. I also pay tribute to groups such as Enough is Enough representing carers who have enough troubles in their lives without having to fight for the very basic services to which they should be entitled. They are responsible for coining the slogan “Nothing about us without us”. That is the model of disability services and assistance we need in the State. It is based on independent living, along with the right of people to choose the care and assistance most appropriate to them.

As Deputy Boyd Barrett asked, will the Minister of State ratify the protocol to give people the right to complain about breaches of the UN convention and to take legal action on that basis? Will she commence the full Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act and the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act fully to ensure equal access to education and health services for people with disabilities? Will she increase the disability allowance? Will she provide assistance for carers? Will she, at a minimum, suspend the reviews of carer’s allowance until the impacts of Covid-19 have been fully considered or at least for a year? Will she raise the basic rate of carer’s allowance?

Deputy Seán Canney: I am delighted the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has been appointed to this area of responsibility. She is colleague of mine in the Galway East constituency.

She has taken on a role in which, from her own experiences she knows well, there are many challenges. I also look forward to working with the chair of the disabilities committee, Deputy Moynihan. I look forward to working with all in a proactive way to ensure we make changes that will improve the lives of people.

The programme for Government states what it will do about disabilities. There are two particular funding streams involved. There is the capital funding stream required to provide facilities for our people with disabilities and their families. We also have to look at the fact that there is a growing demand, whether we like it, from two particular streams. First, there are more cases of young children coming forward with more diagnoses. We then have older people who are caring for a special needs person in their family. These parents are getting older and are in need of care themselves, meaning they are trapped. We need to have a two-pronged attack to deal with these issues.

We need to make sure facilities are in place. I congratulate the Minister of State on the amount of funding she is putting into service. However, I term that as reactive funding. We need to ensure we have funding to provide for what is needed, as well as for emergencies. We must be doing that on a multi-annual budget basis.

No Member will disagree with any of this debate tonight. However, we need to get the funding in place and get over the barriers involved. Transport was mentioned earlier. In our constituency, we had five families who needed to find their own way to disability services every day. That issue has been resolved temporarily until next Christmas. That is not the way, however, we should be treating children who need day services. We must ensure we deal with this in a way that is truthful with ourselves, with the families involved and the people who need the help.

We know the effect of Covid on many people. I know for sure that in my constituency office since Covid arrived, we have had more people contacting us, reaching out and crying for help because they were completely stuck. We left them stuck. I regret that we have done that as a society and we have left them to fend for themselves. We need not ever do that again.

The Minister of State must ask the Minister for Finance why he has suspended the primary medical certificate scheme. I know a legal case had been taken. I questioned the Minister here several weeks ago about this but he did not tell me he had suspended the scheme. I have people who are in need of the scheme. We need to expand the scheme to help people. As the Minister of State knows from living in rural Ireland, not everybody is living beside a service. To be able to access a service, one needs to have a car adapted but there is a huge cost in that. There is a scheme in place and we should get on with it. It is one of the biggest indictments that the Minister has actually suspended this scheme. If that is the policy, we are going no place fast with all the nice talk we have about disabilities. That issue needs to be rectified as a matter of urgency.

I thank Sinn Féin and all the other parties which co-signed this motion tonight. It is an act of solidarity with people with disabilities.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: A few days ago I watched a heart-breaking RTÉ report in which a couple said that they did not know what would happen to their special needs daughter if they died before her. They said no parent ever wants to bury their child but the reality is that they dread what would happen, not if but when, they cannot simply manage. That is an experience for many families across the country.

Another person emailed my office in recent days to inform me that the early intervention services for their three-year old son are non-existent. They explained their son is non-verbal and is not walking. They feel the lack of disability services is having a huge impact on his well-being. The early years of a child are so important, even more so for a child with a disability.

It is not acceptable that highly skilled therapists have been redeployed to Covid-19 testing. I understand that move in the initial stages may be necessary but six months later it is unacceptable. This is a big waste of training skills and experience.

Another woman I know with Down's syndrome with whom I have been working used to have full-time day services. They disappeared for many months. The services have now returned but it is two days one week and three days the next. I know another two women in my constituency who have Down's syndrome but are only getting six hours a week. Another woman who is in residential care has no services provided. There is no stimulation, development or interaction. All of these services have either collapsed, disappeared or are working under par. This is wrong.

Right through the summer, my office was inundated with parents who, because of the Covid restrictions, had a son or daughter who was not getting the services they needed. They saw significant regression in their children's abilities and engagements with the rest of the world. For any individual, that is a difficult situation in which to be. For a parent watching this happen, it is incredibly heart breaking to have to experience it, as well as the physical demands the extra care they have to give takes as well. What I could never understand in this process is that we could get our hair cut in this country and be in the physical space of a hairdresser, yet a person with a disability who needed to be in the physical space of a therapist, consultant, doctor, nurse or somebody working with Prosper or any of these fine organisations could not be in such a space. It did not make sense that such essential services were being denied while other people could get other simple services such as getting their hair cut.

An issue I have raised over the last six months right through this crisis is that the Government have made decisions to reorientate resources in this country away from the health services towards Covid. It did that on the blind and, at the outset, in response to a crisis that nobody knew how big, difficult and dangerous it was going to be. It was a fire that was rolling across Europe in our direction. It was a natural response back then but during the summer from July, August and September onwards, there is no doubt in my mind that we could have reapplied and reorientated those services back to where they needed to be and that simply did not happen. It still has not happened and there is a radical cost to that. What really drives me nuts is that the Government has made no effort to measure that cost in any way. The British, in fairness to them, have done significant studies with regard to the physical and mental health costs and the costs with regard to disabilities and the health services. In their view, the non-Covid costs could far exceed the Covid costs by the end of this. It is only when you have that level of evidence that you can make evidence-based decisions. Right now, we are not making evidence-based decisions with regard to the orientation of resources.

I welcome the motion that has been tabled and I appeal to the Minister to support the motion with regard to extra funding in the first instance and to make sure that when we take services away, we know the damage and cost it is doing in order that we can bring those services back in time for the families that need them.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I welcome the opportunity to address this important issue

here this evening. One judges any state and any government on how they deal with people with mental, physical or any type of intellectual disability.

In the county I represent, we have a very worrying event happening now, as the Minister of State knows, with St. John of God Community Services notifying the HSE that it will be withdrawing the work it has been doing. I thank St. John of God Community Services for the work it has been doing for many years, taking care of this sector of society and these very important people. It has been running facilities throughout the country such as, for example, St. Mary of the Angels, which I would call a centre of excellence for dealing with people with every different type of disability. I compliment every one of the workers who has been there past, present or future. They have given great service. They are local people drawn from the community and it has been a vocation for them to take care of what I would call special people.

St. John of God Community Services has said it will withdraw services this time next year. Between now and Christmas, the HSE should discuss with that group the financial difficulties that have been ongoing there for a long time, as well as a way forward. I am not here to criticise but the HSE finds it difficult enough to deliver the services it is supposed to and if it is told this group will no longer give this service, who will step into that breach?

The most important thing the Minister of State can do, if she can do it, is take care of what I call special people in their own homes. That can only be done with financial assistance and all the other supports required. I ask the Minister of State to take that into account when dealing with our special people in Ireland.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for facilitating this important debate this evening. If we elected representatives are to be relevant at all, we must ensure we do everything possible for people, whether young or old, with physical and mental disabilities. In County Kerry at present - it is likewise around the country but we know about our own county - many day care centres that were closed because of the coronavirus are now only 30% open and that is not good enough. The parents of these children are under savage pressure. The home carers, whether they are brothers, sisters, fathers or mothers are under pressure. I have met many of them going back many years and they are great people for seeing after their children but they are under pressure when they get over 70 years of age. I know some that are moving towards 80 and their worry is what will happen their child when they pass on or who will look after the child. We are short of respite places for these children and when the parents are getting old, they do not know what will become of their child.

The coronavirus has disrupted so many families. These special children need physiotherapy, language therapy and speech therapy. They have lost all that and on top of that their parents are at home minding them 24-7 and they cannot give any time to their other children. It is very sad.

We are in trouble with primary care certificates. They are not being processed. We also have issues with early intervention for children with disabilities and home carers. Home carers are not being looked after at all and we must recognise them. If these children are not getting to day care centres, their parents must be funded to provide and pay for the services themselves.

Deputy Carol Nolan: At present in Laois-Offaly, a total of 1,118 children have been waiting in excess of 12 months for occupational therapy while 159 children have been waiting in excess of 12 months for speech therapy. As I am not here to raise the problem but to offer possible solutions, is any way in which therapists from other regions where there is not such a

chronic backlog could be brought into Laois-Offaly to clear the backlog, while continuing with recruitment? I would be very supportive of that and grateful if that could be looked at.

As for day care services, it is of concern to many families of adults with intellectual disabilities that day care services are still not fully open. I know the Minister of State is doing her best with that and I commend her on the work she is doing. People have told me that they could not cope if these services were to be shut down again. It had a negative impact on the well-being of adults with disabilities. They asked me to raise with the Minister of State the plea that there would not be a full shutdown of this service in the future because people regressed and those adults and their families need every support they can get.

We ratified the UN convention, and that was the most positive development in this country for a while. I ask that that be matched with actions. For example, Ireland has the lowest employment rate for people with disabilities in the EU. It is almost 20% lower than the EU average of 50.8%. The poverty rates for people with disabilities are 10% higher than the EU average. Ireland ranks among the worst five countries in Europe. We need these things to be resolved, along with the other issues that exist, if we are to be truly inclusive and supportive of people with disabilities.

Deputy Michael Collins: Ireland has the lowest employment rate for people with disabilities in the EU. It is almost 20% lower than the EU average of 50.8%. Some 27% of the homeless population have a disability, which is double the rate in the general population. More than 1,400 people with disabilities under the age of 65 are inappropriately placed in nursing homes. Services are carrying more than €40 million in deficits.

Last week, Mr. Sean Abbott, the chairman of the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, said:

People with intellectual disabilities are experiencing severe mental health challenges as they struggle without the services they relied pre-Covid ... Family carers, many of them elderly, have been providing supports to people with complex needs at home - including providing personal care to their adult sons and daughters - for over six months due to the reduced capacity in services, and are now at breaking point.

He was shocked that the Government allocated just €10 million for the remainder of this year, a fraction of the funding required to provide services for people with disabilities.

This is at crisis point. The Government will spend almost €25 million on ministerial advisers over its lifetime but cannot commit to delivering for people with disabilities. It will give approximately €20 million per year to the European Space Agency but cannot give the same commitment to our disability services. The new National Children's Hospital will cost €2 billion, at least €1 billion over budget. The overrun due to complete mismanagement will likely run into hundreds of millions of euro, yet, at the same time, the Government fails to support those with disabilities. The rural broadband scheme was originally estimated at €500 million but will cost €3 billion over 25 years because of completely dysfunctional management. The overrun will eat into the budget for disability services. Those examples make it clear where the Government's priorities rest. Those priorities are certainly not on the side of Ireland's 643,131 people with disabilities.

I will mention services in west Cork, which are absolutely shocking. I twice approached the Minister of State prior to the summer recess and told her I would like to speak about the

services and see where changes could be made. She did not get back to me. I understand she is busy, but she must not take her eye off the ball when it comes to west Cork. The services there are shocking. Parents throughout the constituency, from Kinsale to Mizen Head and up to Castletownbere, are pleading with me. Their children are losing services or have lost services and Covid-19 is being blamed for everything. It cannot be blamed for everything and certain services could have survived. Hubs were being opened in Drimoleague and efforts were being made to open another hub in Schull and places like that. Those involved in opening those hubs needed the assistance of the Minister of State. I plead with her to work with us, going forward, on this issue.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We move now to the Independent Group. Deputy Harkin is sharing time with Deputy Connolly.

Deputy Marian Harkin: That is right.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Will the Deputies be taking five minutes each?

Deputy Marian Harkin: We will. I am proud to be a signatory to this motion, which unites Opposition Members on the absolute and immediate need to reopen day and other essential disability services. There is also a need to provide additional funding that is required to guarantee sustainable capacity within disability and dementia services. I thank Sinn Féin for facilitating this motion.

I listened to the Minister of State and know she is genuine in the efforts she makes. She reminded us that when she took office, all services were closed. I recognise that everything cannot be done at once. However, we all know these are unprecedented times and unprecedented actions need to be taken. Resources need to be put in place to support the most vulnerable in our society. We all know that Covid-19 has been especially harsh on people with disabilities and their carers. The Minister of State and the Government, therefore, have a responsibility to deliver in the upcoming budget. I know that there are competing demands and that both Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, will fight for this sector but the response of the Government will tell us a great deal about how we value people with disabilities and their carers.

Some €10 million has been allocated to date. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, spoke of the €20 million that was saved because the 1% levy was scrapped. What in God's name does it say about our State that we were looking for 1% efficiency from a voluntary sector that, before the arrival of Covid-19, was stretched beyond its means? The sector relies partly on fundraising and wholly on volunteers and voluntary boards. Its staff, as section 39 workers, are still in 2009 and 2010 pay scales and most of them do not receive increments. I know that the Minister of State is not personally responsible for this, but to look for a 1% cut in the first place was scandalous.

I know that the €10 million was fought for hard but the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers was shocked at that amount. Inclusion Ireland recognised that it was a fraction of what is needed. As the Ministers of State will be aware, Family Carers Ireland today launched The State of Caring 2020 report dealing with pre-Covid times, and another report, Caring Through Covid: Life in Lockdown, was published previously. The two reports should be required reading for every person in this House. More than that, they should inform decisions taken in the upcoming budget.

The reports make harrowing reading in places. One carer described Covid as “a lockdown within a lockdown”. Pre-Covid, 23% of carers had already seen a decrease in the level of services offered to their loved one in the past year and now 43% fear that normal services will not be restored after the pandemic. This does not surprise me because I remember reading the initial HSE guidelines on restoration of services, which referred to a reduced quantum of services. That kind of verbiage strikes fear into the hearts of family carers who have fought long and hard to get these day services up and running in the first place.

My time is limited but before I finish, I want to remember two tireless disability advocates who have died in the past few years and who taught me so much during my 15 years in the European Parliament. They are Donal Toolan, with his easy smile and razor-sharp intellect, and Martin Naughton, who took no prisoners. Those two tireless advocates helped me to recognise that life for people with disabilities is not a dress rehearsal; it is their one and only life. We, in this House, have a duty to support them and their carers to live that life.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion and involving all of us. I have no doubt that the Minister of State’s heart is in the right place and I do not doubt her bona fides because I have attended meetings with her. I look at this motion, which is short and signed by 68 Deputies, if my maths are correct, and it asks for very little. It simply asks the Government to provide the funding required to fully reopen day and other disability centres, subject of course to complying with Covid-19 guidelines and requirements. The Minister of State could not possibly disagree with that. It also seeks to provide the additional funding, resources and capital investment required to guarantee sustainable capacity for people with disabilities and dementia. How could she disagree with that? She does not. I see her nodding. I am not sure what happens to Deputies when they sit on the ministerial side of the House. I am not being smart when I say that. I know the Minister of State’s bona fides. Here we have a three and a half page reply, putting an amendment to a motion that is simply saying we should reopen services and provide adequate funding. I begin to doubt the bona fides of the Government when I see that type of reply. I wonder why is it necessary. I would appeal to women to do it differently, to be honest. I appeal to the Minister of State to stop being captured by Department speak.

This is so simple. It is not simple to implement, but the motion itself is simple. Let us join together as women, while absolutely including the men, and provide services that the Minister of State knows are not there on the ground. Tá Áras Mhic Dara, san Ceathrú Rua, i gcoí-lár na Gaeltachta, dúnta gan aon seirbhís ar fáil. Tá dhá sheirbhís i dTuam, i Claregalway agus i nGaillimh atá dúnta freisin.

I thank the Minister of State for a written copy of her speech. There is a little bit of self-congratulation in it about the funding. I congratulate her on the funding but would congratulate her more if she put it in context. The Oireachtas disability group pre-budget submission puts it in context. It is two pages and very simple to read. It tells us that 13% of those in receipt of carer’s allowance are aged over 70. Can one imagine that? They are doing the hardest work with the least amount of pay. Some 643,000 people in Ireland are involved and the figure will increase by 2026. I will not read out all of the figures, but they are there. The submission outlines the specific things that are required.

The speech from the Minister of State makes me wonder what is going on and who has done an analysis of how many centres have been closed. I have asked these practical questions, as have other Deputies. She has not told us how many centres there are in Galway, how many

have and have not reopened, why they have not reopened and what is necessary instead of me giving anecdotal evidence.

I refer to people who are caring for loved ones at home. I think of somebody near where I live in Galway. The person has no respite. The Minister of State was probably sending emails about respite before she took office. What is she going to do about that? She will have our full support. Let us have an analysis of the problem in the first place. What is the scope of the problem and what do we need to do to deal with that as women who see things differently? I hear my colleague laughing, but there are very good men in the world. I would be delighted if they worked with us and I wish Deputy Moynihan the best as the new Chairman of the committee.

Deputy Alan Kelly referred to what Fergus Finlay wrote about the outsourcing of services. I ask the Minister of State to read it. I would like if she had referred to it in her opening statement because it raises serious questions. Services are in crisis and are being handed back with problems. The amount being paid in salaries in excess of €100,000 and the problems that have been identified mean that services that are not making money are being handed back to the State. Property and services that are making money are not being handed back. The HSE internal review was not referred to by the Minister of State. We are again reliant on newspapers like the *Irish Examiner* and *The Irish Times* to tell us these things.

The HSE is carrying out an internal review and told us that the current model for the provision of services for people with disabilities is not sustainable. I will finish up. I will not go over time because I am always giving out when I am in the Chair. Will that report be published? Can the Minister of State please give us the date of the publication of the capacity review she referred to?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I am delighted to contribute to the debate. I would like to acknowledge, and offer my sympathies to, the family of Dr. Martin O'Donnell in Charleville, whose son, Kieran, is a Member, and his wife Veronica. Dr. O'Donnell set up what is now St. Joseph's Foundation in Charleville, which the Minister of State visited in July. It is his legacy. He gave his time to setting up the section 39 organisation that is St. Joseph's Foundation. We should pay tribute to him and many others around the country who gave valiant service to the community and voluntary sector to provide services for those with disabilities. Services 50 years ago were primitive and it was difficult to get funding and break into a world that was kept behind the curtains. We salute him.

By saluting him, we have to accept that a deadly crisis is facing the disability sector and people with disabilities of every kind. I am honoured that Dáil Éireann has appointed me to chair the committee on disability matters. A raft of issues need to be dealt with. All I can tell the House is that I will give it my all, whether that relates to dementia or disabilities. In each and every aspect, I will give it my all and try to bring as much light as possible into the challenges that are facing the disabilities sector.

Many articles in the *The Irish Times* and the *Irish Examiner* refer to funding. The State has offloaded the need for services to section 39 organisations and has completely under-resourced them over the decades in terms of providing people with disabilities with proper services. Young children are waiting for assessments. People are waiting for occupational therapy or speech and language therapy, which are currently non-existent in the public sector. Parents are waiting years for proper services.

Adult service users attend many fine facilities for which people have fundraised voluntarily around the country, such as the Cope Foundation and St. Joseph's Foundation. Such organisations have been underfunded. We have to accept that what the State is providing at the moment, through all of its funding models, including the HSE and everything else, is not delivering properly. We have to get to the bottom of this and be brutally honest with ourselves and say that there is a monumental challenge.

If we are to be a proper Irish Republic we have to make sure that people with disabilities are looked after from the cradle to the grave, as Dr. Martin O'Donnell often said when he spoke about St. Joseph's in Charleville. We have to ensure that we have the best possible services available. There has been little political argy-bargy in this debate. Everybody who has spoken is genuine about moving this issue forward.

All of us know in our professional work that parents are looking for guidance. One person dropped in a letter to me yesterday. It was being circulated to public representatives to make sure that the voice of the disability sector was raised at the Cabinet table and highlighted prior to the budget. There was no name on the letter, but at the top it stated, "Please help".

I congratulate the Minister of State on what she has done to date. I saw at first hand her compassion and determination when she visited Charleville in July. I ask her to make sure over the next couple of days that, to put it as bluntly as I can, the cage is rattled as hard as possible to get the most money for services so that they can be restored and families can get what we in this Republic should be giving them. I will do whatever I can as Chair of the new committee. I am deeply honoured to have been appointed and I will take it on to the best of my ability. I will do whatever I can.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputies for raising these important matters and giving me the opportunity to speak on them. I would also like to congratulate my colleague, Deputy Moynihan, on his appointment as Chairman of the new committee that has been formed. It is very important that we put a significant emphasis on the disability sector.

There is no doubt that this has been an extremely difficult time for people and their families. We all share a common desire to have the best possible policies and services for all children, adolescents and adults with disabilities. Personally and as Minister of State, I want everyone with additional needs to have access to the necessary supports in every aspect of their lives to enable them to achieve their full potential, maximise their independence and lead fulfilling lives.

There has been an awful lot of talk today about carers. I hosted an online round table with carers three weeks ago. It was supposed to be a much bigger event, but we had to reduce it. I heard from carers, including dual carers who are looking after children with intellectual disabilities, and a parent. I heard from carers about Covid and mental health issues.

In my remit as Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people, I met the Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys, today to discuss carers in terms of the budget. It does not technically come under my remit. The care of carers does, but the finances involved do not. It is very important to put that on the record.

Disability services are provided in many types of settings across many organisations throughout the country, and in the age of Covid-19 these organisations have to adapt and do their best to ensure that services can continue to be provided. I would like to acknowledge the

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commitment of these services over the past seven months to supporting and protecting those with a disability who attend health and social care services. The Government is committed to strengthening the State's relationship with the voluntary sector and to the full implementation of its five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland. The strategy sets out a long-term vision for communities in Ireland and the general direction of travel for Government policy with the community and voluntary sector for the coming years.

On Deputy Connolly's question, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has asked me to say that she also wishes to see the disability capacity review published as soon as possible. We need reform and funding throughout the disability sector. She asked me to acknowledge the Deputy's contribution.

My colleague also spoke earlier about the resumption of day care services, in particular, and I will outline the work under way to support the resumption of other services for people with disabilities. As has been said, respite is a crucial support mechanism for many families. Short stay residential emergency-residential respite began to reopen between July and August as the first stage in a three-phase plan. Activity is now increasing for the next two phases: September to November phase and December to February 2021.

On children's services, all CHOs are putting appropriate arrangements in place to resume assessment of need and intervention therapy services in line with public health guidance. Additional funding of €7.8 million has been provided to the HSE specifically to reduce the current backlog in assessment of need. This funding will help reduce waiting times both for the assessment and for any therapeutic services required. The €10 million announced by my colleagues, the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, last week to support the resumption of disability services included €2.5 million to provide 210 intensive support packages for children and young people with significant support needs. These packages will help these children and young people with complex high support needs to remain living with their families and this investment will go some way to alleviate some of the pressures and stress on people with disabilities and their families.

I appreciate that the reduced capacity in day services caused by Covid-19 is a considerable challenge and is far from the level of service that we would like to provide. However, services must continue to operate under public health guidance and the safety of all service users is paramount. The resumption of day services has been welcomed by service users and their families and this package of €10 million provided to enhance disability services is but a first step on the road to increasing capacity and expanding levels of service for service users.

Turning to the UNCRPD, we cannot allow the current situation to divert us from continuing our work in improving the lives of people with disabilities and significant cross-departmental work is under way in this regard. We are committed to a continued whole-of-government approach to improving access and quality of services for people. The recent programme for Government also commits to the development of an implementation plan to co-ordinate the implementation of the UN convention. Work will commence on the development of this implementation plan shortly.

The situation we now face is one that requires our fullest attention. I assure all that the Government will remain focused on providing the best services we can, while keeping the health and well-being of people with disabilities as our utmost priority. Once again I thank all for their time and valuable contributions regarding these most important matters.

Deputy Mark Ward: Stewarts Care in Palmerstown is in my constituency. I have an aunt who is a long-term resident there. Over the years I got to know many of the service users. In my previous role as the Mayor of South Dublin, I invited the communities service users council to the mayor's reception, which was a fantastic day. It is no surprise to me that several day service users have contacted me with concerns that the services have either stopped or have been really diminished. This does not only apply to Stewarts Care but people with intellectual disabilities also experience mental health challenges as they struggle without the service they once relied upon pre-Covid-19. The structure and supports that they relied upon for their individual personal development have disappeared overnight. Not only were these structures taken away from the service users, they were also taken away from their carers. There was no respite for their carers. Family carers who are often elderly have been providing support to people with complex needs at home, including providing personal care to their adult sons and daughters for over six months due to reduced capacities in services. They are now at breaking point. These carers need a break.

The second point I want to make is on St. John of God community services, which has announced the transfer of its services to the HSE. Currently, they provide services to 8,000 people. It also employs 3,000 staff and has a number of volunteers on more than 300 sites across the State. I raised this issue with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, on Questions on Promised Legislation and asked that the Government formulate a plan so that the people who use St. John of God's do not experience a diminution in services. I also seek clarification that those employed by St. John of God will retain the same terms and conditions in their contracts. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, agreed to send me the Government's response and I am still waiting for that. I subsequently wrote to the Minister, and submitted questions to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, but I still have no response. The Government silence on this issue seems to be deafening. The 8,000 service users, the 3,000 employees and the volunteers of St. John of God need answers and clarifications.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: The Minister of State announced €10 million for disability services. That is shameful, as it falls well short of the money required to properly fund and resource the sector. Since the election I have been contacted by several people who are experiencing serious issues in access to housing, healthcare and disability services. It has been truly appalling.

Just last week, I again raised the issue of transportation for service users with the Minister for Transport. These issues cannot be allowed to continue and Covid-19 must not be used as an excuse for services to be reduced and curtailed beyond recognition. We have many exceptional groups throughout our State that work closely with people with disabilities to further their call for equal rights. One particular group in my home county of Clare is the Clare Leader Forum. I commend it on the great work it has been doing for many years now, battling away without adequate funding for the sector. I also commend the work of family carers, which they continue to put in, day in day out, particularly during Covid-19 without the respite services being available to them. These people are the backbone of our care system.

The UNCRPD is an important, key convention that Ireland ratified in 2018 after 11 long, frustrating years. It is very welcome that we finally now have a committee to oversee the implementation of the convention of which I am a member. It is a step in the right direction but we need to ensure that there are no further delays in fully implementing this convention and in ratifying also the optional protocol. We can all agree that people with disabilities have waited long enough. When will the committee sit?

The cross-party support for this motion shows just how important this issue really is.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There have been many powerful statements in support of people with disabilities in this House tonight from all political parties. I commend my colleague, Deputy Tully, on tabling this motion and for securing support from across the Opposition benches. The truth of it will be judged by our actions rather than by our words. In my home town of Carrickmacross, the action that people want to see is the opening of a group home for people with physical and sensory disabilities. This facility was committed to in 2006, the building was constructed in 2016 and it has been lying idle ever since. Can the Minister of State give us a date when that facility will be opened?

Deputy Pauline Tully: I thank all Members for their contributions to this very important debate but I am disappointed by the response of the Government parties to the motion. The Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, and Deputy Moynihan are just as aware as any of the rest of us are of the circumstances that people with disabilities or dementia and their families are in. They have been informed of the difficulties that they face daily. We all know that tea and sympathy is just not what they need; they need action. It is time to do the right thing. I welcome the fact that a commitment has been given to keep day services open despite what Covid-19 level we are on. That is of great importance. I am aware that safety is also paramount. The reason so many of the services are in difficulty is because they are adhering strictly to the guidelines to keep all of the service users and their staff safe. People with disabilities feel, and not for the first time, that they are the forgotten people in this State.

10 o'clock

It is not for the first time that they are the forgotten people in this State. The €10 million allocated last week was met with dismay, disappointment and disbelief by some people within the sector. Others would have said that they have got used to it and do not expect anything different; they expect to be forgotten. Funding was made available to open the schools, and rightly so, but it has been suggested that a similar amount of funding, €120 million, is needed to cover the cost of Covid-19 and open services fully. If we were to rate our country, and this was raised a few times by other speakers, on the way it treats its most vulnerable citizens I believe we would be fairly low down on that scale, and that is all of us together.

I am sure the Minister of State is familiar with the facts on disability in the country, many of which have been alluded to in the debate, but we have more than 640,000 people with disabilities. That number is expected to rise by 20% in the next five years so we need to ensure that the services provided for people with disabilities are in place to meet their needs.

We also have the lowest employment rate for people with disabilities and it is 20% lower than the European average. I meet parents who tell me that their son or daughter who is on the autism spectrum has qualified in college but when they apply for a job, which they are highly qualified for on paper, people do not want to employ them. We need to do more to secure employment for people with disabilities and ensure that the quotas within the public service are met. There are incentives for employers to hire people with disabilities, of which they may not be aware. We need to make them more aware of those incentives.

It is time to fund properly the services and supports for people with disabilities. Initially, it would be to fund the shortfall in the Covid funding for services but there needs to be a change in focus in the way supports for people with disabilities are provided. The optional protocol was

mentioned several times in the debate. That needs to be adopted and implemented.

Many reports have been commissioned on the way rights for people with disabilities could be guaranteed but they are gathering dust. We know the right way forward but it has not been implemented. It has to be acted upon.

The Minister of State mentioned that the results of the capacity review will be published soon. Is that imminent? It is very important that we know the shortfalls in terms of what is needed.

The Minister of State has tabled an amendment to the motion. I urge her to support this motion instead.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): An amendment has been tabled in the name of the Minister of State. I must deal with the amendment first.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is there a response from the Government?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): Fair enough. We will proceed.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 7 October 2020.

Sitting suspended at 10.03 p.m. and resumed at 10.23 p.m.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Rail Services Provision

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I firmly believe that the process involved in selecting the preferred options and the consultation process are significantly flawed. I will give a couple of examples. First, I welcome the DART+ Maynooth–Dunbooyne line. There is no doubt that the rail transport system for the whole community along that line will be transformed. I did not receive a single email, telephone call or submission in opposition to the project. There is considerable support for it. The benefits of the DART line will certainly be significant but, as with all major infrastructural projects, there will be a major impact on communities. Some impacts will be significant and others less so. With regard to a number of estates along the new DART line, the impact on the associated communities, families and homes will be significant. The most impactful measures will be the closure of the Coolmine level crossing and Irish Rail's preferred option, that is, building a bridge between St. Mochta's estate and Riverwood.

Let me give two examples. During my recent review of the documentation, I noticed that the option of going under the Coolmine crossing was ruled out because of the height of the canal. However, when I asked those concerned to consider a lock system, I was really surprised to hear it was not proposed to the consultants and that if I put in a submission, it would be considered.

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I am not an engineer but I believe the whole community is a wee bit puzzled because the consultants did not consider a drop-lock or similar system used on canals across the world. This really needs to be considered.

Another major issue was the consultation process itself. I acknowledge that Irish Rail has, following strong representations from many in the community, extended its deadline for the consultation process twice. The latest extension is until 21 October. However, we are to be subject to level 3 Covid restrictions for a number of weeks and it looks very likely that these will continue for some time beyond 21 October. This means that only those who are tech savvy can take part in the process. It also means that it will not be possible to engage in the essential type of consultation processes that would normally take place between Irish Rail, Deputies, councillors and communities, with organised public meetings at which large maps, hard copies of relevant documentation and detailed plans would be made available. We cannot overstate the importance of being able to look at hard copies of a map and plans and call a person over to ask him or her what something is, where such a line goes or where a certain road leads to, for example. It is important that we get this wonderful project developed and on-stream as quickly as possible, but not at any cost. Once the preferred options are chosen, there will be no way back for the people, except through the High Court.

On behalf of the hundreds of people, especially those who are not tech savvy - including some older people and others who are unable to use Zoom or have meetings on Teams and who will be very much affected - I ask the Minister to ask Irish Rail to hold off until we can have physical meetings and are able to look across a table at those proposing the project so the community can ask the officials the hard questions.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to address this issue. The short answer to the question is “Yes” in that every option regarding level crossings on the new DART+ line to Maynooth should be given due consideration.

I will start by taking the opportunity to update the House generally on the progress of the DART+ programme. The programme for Government commits to a fundamental change to the nature of transport in the State. If we are serious about delivering the type of change we need, we will need big, transformative projects such as DART+. That is not to minimise people’s concerns about possible impacts or to dismiss their views about particular aspects but it is to make a clear statement of policy support for DART+ and such projects. I have heard the Deputy support DART+, which I very much welcome. I hope and believe that support is given by every Member of this House. People want to see this project built.

For those who are unaware, DART+ will effectively double the capacity of the existing network. It will see the introduction of DART-level services on the Maynooth-Dunboyne, northern and Kildare lines, providing a sustainable, reliable and frequent service across much of the greater Dublin area. If we want to see more people make the switch to more sustainable modes of transport, we must see big projects such as DART+ succeed.

I was delighted to be able to launch the public consultation on DART+ over the summer and I look forward to seeing progress made on the project during the lifetime of this Government. I recognise that major projects such as this can have impacts that not everybody will welcome and I absolutely recognise that the issue of level crossings, as in this instance, has to be considered carefully owing to the potential impact.

Among the documents published as part of the public consultation process is a preliminary option selection report. It sets out in detail the approach taken when considering level crossings. At the very basic level, the general approach is to consider a long list of possible options and then, using multi-criteria analysis, sift through them to create a shortlist of the preferred options for detailed consideration. Therefore, for each level crossing, the report details a range of options to be considered. For some level crossings, up to nine or ten options can be set out, and the pros and cons of each is described.

I understand that, during the public consultation process, some residents suggested there were options ruled out that should have been brought forward for detailed consideration. While I will leave the detailed options analysis to the experts, I believe it is clear that level crossings are a constraint in introducing the type of high-frequency train services we are seeking to introduce with DART+. The reality is that if we were to keep the level crossings, service frequency would be severely restricted, causing traffic difficulties in the area. I would like to think that we can all agree that the issues need to be tackled somehow, even if there may be disagreement on some of the detail of the how.

This initial consultation process is scheduled to close later this month, having been extended, as mentioned by the Deputy. Iarnród Éireann will then consider submissions received and decide upon the preferred route. During the statutory planning process, members of the public will again have an opportunity to make their voices heard. Next year, I expect Government approval of the preliminary business case for what will be the largest ever investment in our railway network and I look forward to the support of the House as we look to improve this important public service.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I thank the Minister. I am a little disappointed in that there is no commitment to ask Irish Rail to hold off until that meeting can be held. I accept that we are not living in normal circumstances, but this is important. This is a major project and we cannot get it wrong.

I would like to mention a couple of things. The Fingal County Development Plan 2017-2023 includes two local objectives. I worked on that plan, and that work commenced in 2014-2015. The objectives are to preserve the existing pedestrian or vehicle right of way at Coolmine level crossing and to prohibit any road bridge across the train line at the canal and Riverwood station court. There are a number of questions being asked by myself and by local people. For example, how do we encourage people to make submissions to county development plans in good faith and tell them that their voices matter and will be heard? How do we encourage councillors - this applies also to strategic housing developments and other legislation that is being brought in that overrides the county development plans - and convince people to spend hours, often days, on county development plans when they can be overridden?

There is another issue I would like to raise. We need to create a level playing field for local communities versus large organisations, be they State or corporate in nature. The webinar was held by Irish Rail engineers and experts. They have the funding, a budget of €2.6 billion, to hire the best minds in the country. What do the people have? They have nothing but their own resources. They have no expertise and they cannot call on expertise unless they can pay for it. In terms of the strategic housing development at the Brady's Castleknock Inn site, people spent thousands of euro to get professional help. Will the Minister give consideration to the provision of funding for communities like Riverwood, St. Mochta's and others along the DART railway line, and in respect of strategic housing developments, to enable them to get the professional

help that the other side always has? The latter have deeper pockets than the people. These are huge projects, costing billions of euro.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is true, as the Deputy says, that in looking at any project, the preference is to be able to sit down with the engineer, to have the maps laid out and to be able to engage, which is the way public consultation is increasingly being done in this city and elsewhere. It is important to allow close contact and detailed debate. Unfortunately, that is not possible in the current environment. To be honest, I would be very wary about a lengthy delay with this project. It is vital that this service is developed. We do not know for how long the Covid restrictions will apply. If we were to put off the planning or consultation processes until the end of the restrictions, that could have an impact on a range of different projects. I am nervous about that, although I understand the intention and from where it is coming.

The Deputy is correct that there may be some people who do not have as easy access to webinars and so on. I wonder what do they have. In the context of this particular project and in the area of Coolmine where the problem arises, it seems to be on one of the level crossings, where the proposal for a road bridge over the crossing has serious potential consequences for local residents. The Deputy is raising this matter tonight. His three constituency colleagues have not been shy in coming to me, each in turn, saying that they have views on the matter. As public representatives, it is at this time we can fulfil that role in a particular way when it is possible for us to have access to the webinars and to the information. If there are proposals, be that a new lough as suggested by the Deputy or other options - as I said in my initial response I do not think we should be ruling out options at this stage, we should be looking at all options - perhaps the public representatives, councillors and Deputies, in this particular instance have a chance to represent their constituents, as the Deputy is doing and as his three colleagues have done already, directly with me, and make that case to Irish Rail as part of the consultation process. I think that would be the most appropriate further help the Deputy could give.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Can we have a conversation about putting in place funding for professional help for local communities?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I think that is a very good idea. I hope Irish Rail might consider it as part of its consultation process, which has to be done in very exceptional times.

National Transport Authority

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: We had an unhappy birthday lately in the south east with the 10th anniversary of the closure of the Rosslare to Waterford train route occurring within the past few weeks. This put an end to a rail link that joined towns across south Wexford to Waterford city, as well as supplying heavy rail infrastructure to two major ports, Belview and Rosslare Europort. Since the closure of the line, advocates for its reopening have kept a close eye on the fate of the Barrow Bridge, which is a 650 m span that links County Kilkenny and County Wexford over the River Barrow. A central part of that bridge can open to allow shipping traffic to access New Ross. Keeping the mechanism of that bridge functioning and in good order has always been seen as essential if this line is ever to be brought back into active use.

I was dismayed recently to receive a copy of a letter sent by the National Transport Authority, NTA, to the South-East On Track group. The letter states that the Barrow Bridge is to be maintained in the open position allowing marine traffic to traverse unencumbered, reflecting

the fact that as there is no railway service on the line, it is entirely appropriate that right-of-way be given to the marine traffic. On further questioning from the South East On Track group, the NTA confirmed that the agreed arrangements in respect of the closed Waterford to Rosslare line do not include weed spraying or vegetation treatment programmes. This was previously done on an annual basis and so it cannot have been a huge draw on CIE's resources. This sounds to me very much like a plan to abandon the line.

In addition, there have been strong indications from the chief executive officer of Wexford County Council that his preferred use of the rail line is for it to be converted to a greenway. Waterford greenway is the best-in-class exemplar for how a greenway should be designed and delivered. It has been a huge boost for the local economy in Waterford city, Dungarvan and Kilmacthomas. However, I am not of the view that greenways should supplant strategic heavy rail infrastructure, particularly that of this level of importance. I have noted with interest the Minister's recent emphasis on the future importance of rail freight. This is particularly pertinent in the case of the Rosslare line. Taken in its entirety, potentially from Foynes to Rosslare Europort, this line links two tier 2 ports, Rosslare and Belview, and a tier 1 port in Foynes with the major population centres of Waterford, Limerick and Clonmel. This strategic link will only become more important in the context of Brexit, with increased shipping traffic likely to emanate directly from Europe, rather than taking the land bridge route across the UK. Belview and Foynes should be considered in the longer term as sites suitable for the development of offshore wind technology. Both are deep water ports with access to development land and heavy rail infrastructure.

It is also worth noting - I stand open to correction on this - that Rosslare is the only point at which, other than through the Phoenix Park tunnel, the Heuston and Connolly lines converge. In terms of the potential for the line to operate as a commuter service, I have previously been vocal on the need for common-sense timetable changes that will cater to population centres in south Tipperary, allowing residents of Carrick, Clonmel, Tipperary and Cahir to commute either to Waterford or to Limerick for work or study. The same logic applies to south Wexford, with towns like Bridgetown and Wellingtonbridge standing to benefit significantly if their local train line terminated at a newly built integrated transport hub in Waterford city.

I note as well the commitment in the programme for Government to examine the development of national tourism trails linking our ferry ports and rail network. A reopened Rosslare-to-Waterford line would allow for the development of a sail, rail and trail offering, which would allow European tourists, to see our greenway the green way, if I may coin a phrase. I ask the Minister to review immediately the NTA's new maintenance agreement with Iarnród Éireann and revert it to pre-September 2020 status so the line remains a viable piece of infrastructure, pending further review.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to address this issue. As most Members are aware, rail services on this line ceased in 2010 under an agreement made between the National Transport Authority and Iarnród Éireann. A number of improvements were made to bus services at the time to ensure continued public transport connectivity. Undoubtedly, some people are fearful that the decision to maintain the Barrow Bridge in the open position means a point of no return as to whether services might ever return again on this closed line. Equally, I do not wish to give false hope regarding the imminent return of services.

The decision to maintain the bridge in an open position is a pragmatic one, based on the fact that the line has now been closed for ten years. While the line has been closed, the port of New

Ross remains open and the position of the bridge reflects the need to ensure easy navigational access to the port. I am informed that up until recently there was a requirement for four full-time Iarnród Éireann staff to be on site to open the bridge to allow ships sail to and from the port, which probably strikes most people as a little odd, to say the least.

Ten years after the decision to close the line, a number of revised arrangements have been agreed between the National Transport Authority and Iarnród Éireann relating to the line. These arrangements include obligations to review level crossing surfaces each year, reviewing the boundary protection along the line each year and conducting bridge inspections every two years in line with Iarnród Éireann's technical standards. In addition, the agreement between the NTA and Iarnród Éireann requires a general review of the line to be undertaken annually. The purpose of the review is to assess the overall condition of the line so as to be able to provide a current status assessment of the infrastructure each year. The revised arrangements also provide that the Barrow Bridge be maintained in an open position. This means that the previous requirement for four full-time staff manning the bridge, with no services, is removed. Furthermore, the design of the mechanism is such that it can easily be reversed if rail services resume at some point in the future.

At a practical and pragmatic level, I hope the Deputy can understand the reason behind the decision to maintain the bridge in an open position. At a broader level, I do not doubt the Deputy's wish to see rail services running again on this line. I hope he can see that this decision does not fundamentally run counter to that at some point in the future, if that were to be decided. There are those who wish to develop the route as a greenway and build upon the work already undertaken or under way in the south east to create a cluster of attractive greenways spanning the region.

I trust this clarifies the position regarding the Barrow Bridge.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I am afraid it feels like a point of no return. It is something that has been closely monitored by people with an interest in this route over the years. It feels a little like a managed decline. I am also worried that we will end up tearing out an excellent and strategic piece of infrastructure with a view to developing a greenway on it. We have a EuroVelo route which has been developed by Wexford County Council and runs from Rosslare Europort to the Ballyhack ferry, which transports people over onto Passage East and into Waterford. It would be a much better use of resources to develop that EuroVelo route to a higher standard and to develop a corridor from Passage East into Waterford city, which would also be an important commuting corridor along the Dunmore road. Significant funding, some €58,000 if I am correct, has been allocated for the design phase of this greenway. I am open to the concept of side by side but the Barrow Bridge would make side-by-side development of a greenway route very difficult.

When we think about rail infrastructure in general, and the Minister is conscious of this as well, we should be mindful that while there is a significant cost to upgrading and maintaining this route, it is certainly a fraction of what it would cost to build this infrastructure from scratch. We should not be aiming towards a managed decline of infrastructure. Heavy rail bridges such as this can discharge freight capacity as well as commuter capacity. It can be moved to low emissions or zero emissions relatively easily compared with haulage traffic. I am anxious that we have a review of this route in the short to medium term to consider how we can make it practically viable for people, not just commuters but also freight and tourist traffic that will be emanating from Rosslare Europort.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I had a meeting with Iarnród Éireann last week and raised the specific issue of the future of Rosslare Port because it is owned by CIE and Irish Rail. I was raising it in the context of a wider review that Iarnród Éireann is commissioning on the future of rail freight in this country. I believe there is an opportunity for the expansion of rail freight. At present, only 2% of freight is carried by rail. That is a small fraction of what the average is across Europe. While some argue that the distances here are not long enough, the rest of Europe is saying it wants to switch to even greater volumes of freight traffic. With new technology coming on stream, the possibility of revived rail freight is a real prospect, and-or the other use of other rail lines for commuting, tourism or other purposes.

The Deputy's instincts are right. We should not write off the possible return of lines which are currently underutilised or, as with this line, effectively closed for the last ten years. There are particular difficulties in Rosslare because it is a roll-on roll-off port. In the discussions I had with Iarnród Éireann, I asked if it was thinking of the possibilities to vary or adapt that in the long term in developing the port. There are difficulties in that regard, but we have to wait and see what is in the report of its review of the future of freight. It is also influenced by the fact that the Port of Waterford has lift-on lift-off facilities at Belview and has rail freight capabilities. That would influence the decision.

The issue of this line is similar in a way to the discussion about the western railway corridor in terms of the question of whether one has a greenway or keeps a rail asset. I do not disagree with the Deputy's suggestion that it is possible, potentially, to have both. We will have to make a decision in that regard in the context of a wider network review. It is not just this section of line, but seeing how we can integrate networks, which is what I hope to do. I commit to doing further work with the Deputy and other Deputies in the Waterford and Wexford region to examine what possibilities there might be.

Swimming Pool Programme

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is í an cheist atá faoi chaibidil agam anocht ná an baol mór atá ann nach mbeidh an linn snámha poiblí i nGaillimh oscailte arís tar éis na Nollag. Ar ndóigh, fógraíodh ag deireadh na míosa seo caite go mbeadh an linn snámha ag dúnadh, ach tar éis feachtas agus tar éis brú, rinneadh athchinneadh agus tá sé oscailte anois go dtí an Nollaig. Dúradh leis na comhairleoirí nach bhfuil dóthain airgid ag an údarás áitiúil chun an linn snámha a choinneáil oscailte. Is léir go mbeidh impleachtaí ón gcinneadh seo ar fud na tíre. De réir mar a thuigim, tá na linnte snámha i dtrioblóid i gach áit - i mBéal Átha na Sluaighe agus i dTuaim freisin.

The subject I am raising tonight is the public swimming pool in Galway, which was opened in 1973. It is a fantastic swimming pool. I must declare a conflict of interest as I use it every weekend. It helps to keep me semi-sane and semi-fit. It was announced at the end of September that the pool was going to close at the end of that week. I reacted by calling it crass stupidity that a local authority would allow a public swimming pool to close because of funding. This public swimming pool broke even in the last number of years. No public swimming pool makes a profit and few of them break even. This pool needed money due to Covid-19 and the difficulties experienced by every public swimming pool in the country. The management in the city council said it was not in a position to give it money and that the swimming pool would have to close. As a result of pressure from councillors, which originated from the people and the users

of the swimming pool, the council relented and gave over €200,000 to enable it to remain open until Christmas. However, it pointed out that the money was coming out of next year's budget, it could not continue and it would not be in a position to fund it.

I do not expect miracles, but I expect a commitment from the Minister and the Government that, regardless of what happens, we are not going to close public swimming pools or public libraries. They are essential services. I note that Ireland Active, which represents leisure, health and fitness associations, welcomed the July stimulus of €2.5 million to enable swimming pools with public access to remain open because of the high energy costs and the difficulties complying with Covid. It seems this is not available to the local authorities. In any event it is a small amount of money given the number of swimming pools. I understand again from Ireland Active that this fund will be administered by Sport Ireland. The Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, made a very positive announcement on this and acknowledged the challenges facing swimming pools. We have got a reprieve until Christmas in Galway because of pressure but the same challenges apply to all the other public swimming pools. Can the Minister of State please do an assessment of what is necessary to keep our public swimming pools open and put a package in place? I understand 300,000 adults at a minimum use swimming pools every year. It is the sport with the second largest number of participants. It does not make sense on any level to allow swimming pools to close, not to mention that in the middle of all our difficulties we have great problems with obesity and lack of exercise. There should be a positive programme to encourage people to use the swimming pools while complying with the Covid restrictions. I ask for confirmation tonight that this closure is not going to be allowed to happen, not just in Galway but anywhere.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to outline today the importance of Government funding of local authorities, with a particular focus on the spend of Galway City Council and Galway County Council, and also to reflect on the serious impact Covid-19 is having on local authorities' expenditure and on their cash flow. The funding system that applies to local authorities is a complex one, as authorities derive their income from a variety of sources including commercial rates, charges for goods and services and funding from central Government. Central Government funding of local authorities similarly presents a complex picture, with transfers coming from a wide range of Departments and offices, not solely from my Department, for a variety of purposes. It is the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport that has responsibility for the funding of swimming pools. Also, local property tax, LPT, can be used by local authorities to support the provision of local services which benefit citizens directly including parks, libraries, leisure amenities etc.

My Department recognised that cash flow support was critical to local authorities in order to ensure the services they deliver, including required subventions to swimming pools, could be maintained. It was decided to bring forward a number of payments due from the Department, where possible, throughout 2020. Specific advances were made to both Galway City Council and Galway County Council in respect of LPT and also each local authority's individual payroll and public service pension reduction allocation. In fact, all of the LPT allocations for 2020, amounting to €516.8 million in total, have been paid to all local authorities at this stage. Local authorities have been advised to capture all related costs in their financial systems to aid future financial analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on the local government sector.

My Department is engaging with representatives of the local government sector and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the financial challenges facing local authori-

ties as a direct consequence of the pandemic, in terms of additional costs incurred as part of the local government response and declines in local authority income streams. These matters are under active consideration. In order to support the sector generally, I will ensure my Department continues to keep local authority income, expenditure and cash flow under review and will continue to work with all local authorities, both collectively and individually, including on issues being raised by Galway City Council and Galway County Council.

In the programme for Government, Our Shared Future, the Government places a strong emphasis on swimming, cycling, walking and running, which are especially suitable for all generations. I am also mindful of recent comments by my colleague, the Minister for Finance, who commented on the importance of swimming pools remaining open during and after this pandemic, though he also advised a huge intervention is required and it may be that we will not be able to meet every need. I hear the significant case the Deputy has put forward in connection with the swimming pool in question and I know that the Department is reviewing the case with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. We have a great need to be met in the local authority sector between a collapse in goods and services income, the commercial rates income being significantly compromised and also in terms of the collection of income streams in the sector.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the positive nature of the last two paragraphs of the reply, which refers to the acknowledgement in the programme for Government of the importance of swimming among other activities and the comments of the Minister for Finance. I do not have the time to go into the finances of both local authorities. I think it is accepted that they are the lowest funded in the whole of the country. That is a separate problem. In addition to that we have Covid. We had a Zoom meeting last Friday. Zoom meetings are never very good for interaction but it was good in the sense of getting a presentation. The manager conveyed to us that the financial situation in Galway city is dire. He said there has been no certainty at all from the Department in respect of the payment of rates and the absence of money.

I am not going to go into that but I am going to use my minute to highlight another irony. We are putting money into opening up pubs, and rightly so, as we need pubs and we need to ensure staff have jobs. However, the irony cannot be lost on the Minister of State that while we are opening up pubs with the help of public funds, we are closing down public swimming pools. There is something seriously wrong with that logic given the programme for Government and the essential nature of swimming pools. On the announcement of the stimulus package, in his last two minutes the Minister of State might clarify if that was specifically for private bodies such as hotels and leisure centres and not for public swimming pools. It is very ironic if we are going to keep private swimming pools open once they have some limited access to the public while we close down the public swimming pools. It was literally closing down. The staff were called in and told it was closing down the following week. It was simply as a result of pressure that we kept it open until Christmas. I still do not hear the Minister of State saying that we are making a commitment to keeping our public swimming pools open because they are an essential service on so many levels. I would like to hear that.

Deputy Peter Burke: I want to put to bed the rumour that the Government is not coming up with and delivering income streams for local authorities. The revised Estimate for the sector was approved today by the committee in connection with a €600 million fund for the rates waiver scheme. The Government is monitoring this closely. We are very clear that the local authority sector has achieved so much over the last number of years and indeed through Covid-19 in the way it rolled out the community call in a few days, for example. Local authorities

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responded to serious emergencies in terms of storms and floods. I can assure the Deputy of that. In terms of the allocation of the LPT fund, which every county and city council has now, I would also make the Deputy aware that the Department gave a special allocation of €1 million to Galway County Council which has been approved and allocated for 2020.

I hear the case the Deputy is making very clearly in terms of the sector. I have absolutely been very clear that this is under review within the Department. I just cannot go making commitments on the broad scale before the budget, which is subject to negotiations currently. The Government is very clear on encouraging people to have the most active lifestyle and also on presenting the infrastructure for them to do that. That is why we have had unprecedented investment in walking, greenways and infrastructure for outdoor recreation. I will do my very best with regard to the Deputy's ask. I would be willing to meet a delegation from the city council in connection with this issue. However, there are going to be significant asks emanating from this crisis. We are doing our very best to make what we have available go as far as it can. It presents a major challenge.

11 o'clock

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Refugee Resettlement Programme

92. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the nature and the full extent of the response by Ireland to the fire at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28469/20]

Deputy John Brady: Will the Minister outline in detail the nature and full extent of Ireland's response to the fire at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos that happened in early September?

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Welcome to the night shift. I hope everyone will stay with us until the early hours. I thank Deputy Brady for asking this question. It is an important issue.

Like many other people, I was deeply saddened by the fire at the Moria camp on Lesbos and the impact this has had on refugees and migrants who were based there. The sudden displacement of thousands of people has caused great suffering to those who were in the camp as well as posing a huge logistical challenge for the Greek authorities in the midst of a pandemic which is already putting much pressure on people.

My colleague, the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, Deputy Byrne,

spoke with his Greek counterpart immediately after the fire to offer Ireland's full solidarity and support. The Greek authorities requested assistance from EU partners in dealing with the immediate humanitarian needs arising from the fire. My Department, through our embassy in Athens, is in contact with the Greek Ministry of Migration Policy and has confirmed Ireland's readiness to provide assistance from emergency stocks which we have in place at the United Nations Logistics Base, UNLB, in Italy. The Greek authorities have thanked us for this offer of assistance and we stand ready to work with them regarding the deployment of the emergency supplies.

We in Ireland are endeavouring to do our part having already received 1,022 asylum seekers, including six unaccompanied minors, from Greece under the first phase of the Irish refugee protection programme, IRPP.

In the context of the difficult situation now arising from the destruction of the Moria refugee camp the Government has decided that Ireland will welcome refugee families from Greece under the Irish refugee protection programme. Up to 50 people in family groups will be resettled following displacement due to the fire. This is in addition to the four unaccompanied minors to be taken as part of our pre-existing commitment to take 36 unaccompanied minors from Greece.

Officials from the Department of Justice and Equality are liaising with the European Commission on the detail of this commitment and, along with An Garda Síochána, will travel to Greece in the coming weeks to make the arrangements.

Like many others, I was moved by the images of young children and babies sitting on the side of the street with few or no possessions. We are responding, as I hope other countries in the EU will as well, to show some solidarity and assistance for the people concerned and also for Greece.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister for his response and share his sentiments with regard to being saddened by what we have seen in Lesbos. I am saddened also by the Irish Government's response, which has been wholly inadequate. We have had ministerial commitments to what can only be described as a piecemeal response in committing to accept four minors.

Back in September 2019, the head of the Children's Rights Alliance said there was a moral duty on this Government to live up to its obligations to accept 36 minors which had been committed to in phase 1 of the refugee resettlement programme. Since that date only six minors have actually been accepted into the State, as alluded to by the Minister. We are 30 short of our own commitments, so agreeing to accept four is less than satisfactory and deeply disappointing. Perhaps the Minister might touch on that point first and foremost.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Ireland has always responded positively to humanitarian crises and we will not be found wanting on this occasion either. As I said in my response, up to 50 people in family groups will be resettled to Ireland from Greece under the Irish refugee protection programme. It would be good if Deputy Brady recognised that, quite frankly. They will be given every support to rebuild their lives here in peace and safety. This is in addition to the commitment we have already made with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, to resettle 2,900 refugees to Ireland over the next four years and they will be welcome and safe here too.

We have already received 1,022 asylum seekers, including six unaccompanied minors, from Greece under the first phase of the Irish refugee protection programme. We have also commit-

ted to accept 36 unaccompanied minors in need of international protection from Greece and I was pleased that the first group of eight such minors arrived in Ireland last June. As I mentioned, the Government has decided to accept another group of four unaccompanied minors as part of this overall commitment. It is, however, an ongoing commitment and we will respond in as generous a way as we can.

Deputy John Brady: I acknowledge the commitment that we will take in 50 people made up of a number of families. I acknowledge also the commitments that we signed up to between 2015 and 2019 that we would take in 36 minors, something we have failed to live up to. We need to learn from this fire. There is deep concern that we will see the rebuilding of the refugee camp in Lesbos. That cannot be allowed to happen, and that will only happen due to the failure of the EU to put in place a humane migration plan. We need to ensure that an investigation is launched into the policies and practices of the EU and its member states which have led to the deplorable conditions in the EU-sponsored hotspots such as those in the Greek islands.

Will the Minister will commit, first and foremost, to living up to our obligations, not by taking in four minors but to take in what we already agreed to going back to 2015? Second, will he repeat the call for an investigation to ensure something like what happened at the Moria camp does not happen again and that we put in place a humane refugee pact?

Deputy Simon Coveney: First, taking in unaccompanied minors is not a straightforward process. It normally involves civil servants from the Department and members of An Garda Síochána interviewing people to ensure they can be brought safely to Ireland and that they are suitable to resettle here and want to come here. Therefore, we are absolutely committed to fulfilling the commitments we have made and I suspect we will probably go beyond. Every time I am contacted by the European Commission to assist in accommodating refugees or asylum seekers, normally people who are trying to cross the Mediterranean, we almost always respond positively and we quietly accommodate different numbers at different times. This country is welcoming, wants to be generous and wants to commit to a sense of solidarity within the European Union where all countries should share the burden and show a willingness to support countries that border the Mediterranean, in particular, which are put under significant pressure.

It is my understanding that an investigation is already under way into how this happened and to learn lessons from it.

Brexit Issues

93. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures he is taking to assist hauliers here to deal with the anticipated delays at ports in the UK particularly at Dover. [28470/20]

Deputy John Brady: Brexit is not good for Ireland, deal or no deal. A big issue coming at us, however, is that of hauliers who rely on the landbridge through Britain. What measures are the Government taking to assist Irish hauliers to deal with the anticipated delays at ports in Britain such as at Dover?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Government has made a range of financial and advisory supports available to all sectors, including the haulage and logistics sector. Details can be found in our Brexit Readiness Action Plan which we published a couple of weeks ago. I urge any

business moving goods to or through Great Britain to take steps to understand and prepare for the changes that are coming on 1 January, trade deal or no trade deal.

It is also important to be aware of the new systems being put in place by UK authorities as set out in the UK's Border Operating Model. An update to the model is expected in the near future and people should certainly keep an eye out for the detail of that. However, even with these preparations, delays at ports are likely immediately after the end of the transition period at the end of this year. We have highlighted this for some time including in our 2019 and 2020 readiness plans, with Dover-Calais identified as a particular likely bottleneck. This is outside of our control.

Ministers and officials are engaging regularly with their key stakeholders. I understand that engagement with the shipping, haulage and logistics representatives takes place on a fortnightly basis.

Goods moving directly between Ireland and elsewhere in the EU will not be subject to any new procedures. The Government has been engaging extensively with the shipping sector to assess the capacity available on direct routes to continental ports and I am working closely with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan. We met on this issue and talked about it in some detail last week.

A number of new direct services have been launched in the past year. The shipping sector has indicated that sufficient capacity is available on direct routes to continental ports. I understand that direct routes are operating at about 40% capacity. After the Deputy asks further questions, I can go through the routes we are talking about. This is also the view of the Department of Transport and the assessment of capacity by the Irish Maritime Development Office.

I encourage engagement between traders, hauliers and ferry companies to align capacity with needs and demand. Where it is feasible to do so, businesses should also consider moving to direct services now. I suggest that they use the month of November as a test period to look at new supply chains as they may need them as a contingency for the period around 1 January.

Deputy John Brady: A report in recent days showed that our tax returns have declined substantially, which is no surprise, but our exports have held up and are keeping us afloat. Some 150,000 Irish lorries use the land bridge through Britain on an annual basis. About 40% of Irish exports and 13% of imports cross the trade thoroughfare every year. The value of trade crossing the land bridge was €18 billion in exports and €3 billion in imports in 2016, according to a report on the route by the Irish Maritime Development Office. It is no surprise. There are serious concerns that some products may double in price along with long delays and chronic shortages of goods due to the choke points such as at Dover. The nature of our goods is such that they cannot afford to be caught up in such serious backlogs. Irish hauliers have suggested a dedicated daily route between Ireland and continental Europe to address some of these major concerns. I know the Minister said the ferry services are under capacity. I ask him to elaborate on that and touch on the call by the Irish hauliers.

Deputy Simon Coveney: This is an important issue and we need to continue to talk to the sector about all elements of the supply chain. The Department of Transport is in close contact with the shipping sector. Operators have indicated that sufficient shipping capacity is available on direct routes to continental ports. The Department of Transport and the Irish Maritime Development Office concur with that. A number of new direct services have been launched

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in the past year with extra sailings planned on existing routes. New direct routes launched in 2020 include those from Cork to Zeebrugge, Dublin to Santander, Waterford to Rotterdam, Rosslare to Bilbao and Rosslare to Roscoff. Extra sailings planned for next year include those from Rosslare to Cherbourg and Cork to Roscoff. Ferry operators have indicated that they are capable of responding to a further increase in demand beyond what is already catered for. At present, spare capacity is available on routes from Ireland to continental Europe, and there is spare freight-carrying capacity in the European shipping industry generally.

However, some hauliers are asking for daily roll-on roll-off services from Rosslare. I read in the media today that the chief executive of Rosslare Europort is talking to a shipping operator about providing such a service. This is an ongoing discussion. Subsidising a route would not necessarily be helpful because it could potentially put some of the existing routes out of business and cause market disruption which might cause more problems than it solves. We will keep talking to the sector to ensure we get this right before the end of the year.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister for the response. It is critical that everyone keeps talking to each other. The year is closing very quickly and there are genuine concerns. A number of reports have alluded to the serious delays and a backlog of up to 7,000 trucks parked up along the M20 in Britain. Unfortunately, many Irish hauliers may be caught up in that situation due to no fault of their own but to unpreparedness at the British end. We know the serious challenges the British are facing in putting IT systems in place. They will not even meet their own deadlines.

I accept what the Minister has said about the capacity on some of the existing routes. However, the impact of that bottleneck needs to be taken into consideration bearing in mind the number of hauliers that may consider using roll-on roll-off. Our current capacity is not where it needs to be. We need to continue to have that conversation. A subsidised service needs to be considered. Commitment needs to be given to that in the event that we need to depend on it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I wish to reassure the House that we have looked at a subsidised service. Having spoken to the shipping operators, for now anyway we have decided that would not be helpful. There is significant spare capacity and also the potential for shipping companies to shift capacity from the Irish Sea routes and on to direct continental routes out of Ireland if they choose to do that, but they will follow the demand. There are issues with scheduling and the timelines involved. Getting product to and from mainland Europe takes longer on direct ferry routes. There are issues with the logistics of this, particularly for fresh and perishable goods that need to get to the market quickly. That needs to be measured against the potential disruption, which we know is likely, on 1 January particularly on the Dover to Calais connection. We will continue to talk to hauliers, exporters and shipping companies to try to get this right. Money is not the issue in supporting routes. It is about ensuring that the capacity shipping companies can provide is matched with the demand.

Human Rights

94. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the violation of human rights in Xinjiang; the steps he and his EU colleagues will take in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28489/20]

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: On 17 September the Chinese Government released a white

paper confirming that more than 1 million Uighurs have been detained in so-called re-education camps in the region of Xinjiang. These camps are designed to stop Uighurs and strip them of their culture, language and religion. What action is the Minister taking to raise these human rights abuses with the Chinese Government?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy for this question. Ireland, along with our EU partners, remains deeply concerned about the credible reports regarding the treatment of ethnic Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang, including restrictions on freedom of religion and belief, arbitrary detention, widespread surveillance, forced labour, and forced sterilisations and birth control.

Ireland has been vocal about raising this issue, along with other partners in the international community. In our national statement at the UN Human Rights Council on 25 September, we reiterated our deep concern regarding the treatment of ethnic Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang, and urged China to allow unrestricted access to the region for the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

At EU level, the deterioration of the human rights situation, including the treatment of minorities in Xinjiang, was raised by EU leaders with China on 14 September, and it was agreed to discuss these issues further at an EU-China human rights dialogue later this year.

Prior to this, Ireland was also one of 27 states to join a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council on 30 June 2020, which also called on the High Commissioner to provide regular information about the situation in the region, in order to safeguard the rights and freedoms that are guaranteed under international law.

Today, Ireland is supporting a joint statement at the UN Third Committee, which reiterates our grave concern regarding the situation in Xinjiang and recalls the exceptional letter of concern issued by 50 UN special procedures mandate holders which called on China to respect human rights and to allow immediate, meaningful and unfettered access to Xinjiang for independent observers.

Ireland previously joined a joint statement at the UN Third Committee last year and a joint letter at the UN Human Rights Council in July 2019, which called for the Chinese Government to urgently implement eight recommendations made by the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination related to Xinjiang, and to uphold its international obligations and respect human rights in Xinjiang.

The protection and promotion of human rights is a core pillar of Ireland's foreign policy, and Ireland will continue to monitor and assess the situation and, along with our EU partners, to engage with Chinese authorities bilaterally and in multilateral fora as appropriate.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Minister for his response. Uighurs have had to shave their beards and uncover their hair as part of the restrictions that have been put on them. They have been made to pledge allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party. Children have been taken from their parents and put in orphanages and there has been family separation. As such, will the Government support the introduction of a European Magnitsky Act in the European Council that would impose visa bans and asset freezes on individuals worldwide who are guilty of crimes such as torture and genocide? Will Ireland, as an EU member state, vote to adopt sanctions against those responsible for the repressive policies in the Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region, which are being imposed on the Uighur ethnic minority?

Deputy Simon Coveney: From my experience, the most effective way to achieve things with China is through dialogue and through building relationships. We will of course be part of the debate and assessment on how the EU should respond to this issue. There is no proposal at the moment for sanctions. There are separate sanctions like arms embargoes and so on that Ireland certainly applies. We are in the middle of this discussion and debate at EU and UN levels. The statement made in the UN today was made by Germany on behalf of quite a number of countries, Ireland included, which signed up to it. We have a very good relationship with China on many levels. It is a huge country and an incredibly complex one. It is important we speak out when we have real concerns, as we have on this particular issue, but it is about the relationship and being able to speak very directly and truthfully about our concerns in order to build pressure to get change. That is how we should approach this. However, the EU collectively needs to make decisions to build further pressure in order to get a more satisfactory response on this issue.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: There are Irish citizens of Uighur ethnicity who are directly impacted by the Chinese Government’s policies in Xinjiang. I am aware of one case where an Irish Uighur citizen lost contact with their Xinjiang-based mother since early 2017. The Irish citizen is worried about their mother’s well-being and whether she is being arbitrarily detained in one of the camps in Xinjiang. Will the Department support this Irish Uighur citizen by inquiring about the current situation and well-being of their mother? This has happened in other jurisdictions and has proven very helpful so I ask that the Minister look at that.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I would be more than happy to do that. If the Deputy can give me the details, I will ensure we pursue it.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I thank the Minister.

International Relations

95. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the response of Ireland to escalating tensions between Turkey and a number of EU member states in the eastern Mediterranean over access to gas fields for exploration purposes. [28471/20]

Deputy John Brady: Will the Minister outline the Government’s response to the escalating tensions between Turkey and a number of EU member states in the eastern Mediterranean which have come to pass since the discovery of a major gas field which is currently being explored by Turkey?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue because it is a developing situation which needs more attention than it is getting, quite frankly, in many capitals across Europe. In relation to the escalating tensions in the eastern Mediterranean, Ireland has consistently called on Turkey to show restraint and respect for the sovereign rights of Cyprus and Greece, and to refrain from actions in the eastern Mediterranean that infringe on international law and risk the stability and security of the region. We continue to stand in full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus on these issues. The only way in which disputes concerning maritime boundaries in the Aegean Sea and the wider eastern Mediterranean will be resolved is through political dialogue. I commend the German Government, in particular, on its efforts to mediate in this dispute. France has been very involved as well. I discussed this issue last week with my German counterpart. I have also been in contact directly with my Turkish counterpart and with

a number of EU partners, in particular, my Cypriot counterpart who is a good friend of mine.

The return of the Turkish research vessel to port from Greek waters and the announcement that exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey will resume are a welcome first step, although we regret that Turkish research vessel remains in Cypriot waters. That is a continued source of concern. I would welcome Turkey taking further steps to de-escalate the situation with Cyprus as a way of demonstrating its commitment to stability and peace in the region. Last week the European Council discussed the EU's relationship with Turkey and the situation in the eastern Mediterranean. The announcement of exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey has opened up the possibility of resolving the current crisis through dialogue and, as such, it was decided to revisit the issue in December in order to allow breathing space for these negotiations. We would like to see a more stable and constructive relationship developed with Turkey, particularly given the importance of the relationship to issues such as migration and economic activity. This would benefit both the EU and Turkey. It is our hope that when this issue is revisited in December we can take steps to build a more constructive relationship than we have seen in recent months and years. However, this will only be possible if the provocations and pressures stop. If not, then we stand ready to use instruments and options that are available to the EU.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister. As he is aware there have been a number of incidents between Greek and Turkish naval vessels and aircraft in the coastal area surrounding the island of Cyprus. The cause of this tension lies in the discovery of a major gas field in the region, estimated to be 3.5 trillion cu. m. That is enough to keep the whole of the United States supplied for up to a decade. Of course the EU's interest in the area lies with the potential of the gas find to ease European energy dependency on Russia. As the Minister said, it is important to stand in solidarity with Greece and Cyprus but it is more important to put substantive actions in place to stand with them. What we are seeing is Turkey, which has illegally occupied the north part of Cyprus since 1974, appearing to want to try to assert itself as a major regional player. As such, we now need substantive actions from the Irish Government and the EU so will the Minister outline some of the actions he alluded to at the end of his initial reply?

Deputy Simon Coveney: As I said in my response, the way this issue will be resolved is through dialogue. The EU of course has tools available to it which it can use to build pressure, including targeted sanctions, economic sanctions and so on. For now it is the view of the EU that introducing sanctions would make it more difficult to make progress with the recent commitment to dialogue between Turkey and Greece. We want to give that process some time and space to produce results that are in the interest of Greece and Turkey and that of the EU as a whole. With regard to Cyprus, we would like to see Turkey de-escalating the tension that is undoubtedly there now. The relationship between Turkey and Cyprus is complicated and difficult and so it is not the same as a dialogue between Greece and Turkey. The European Union is looking for ways to try to resolve this issue but certainly if Turkey were to remove its ships from Cypriot waters it would assist significantly in de-escalating and creating space for dialogue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputies to co-operate a little bit with the time limits.

Deputy John Brady: From Syria to Libya, Armenia, Azerbaijan and now Greece and Cyprus, Turkey is a major protagonist in that region, it has to be said. The one thing that Erdogan has over the EU is the fact that Turkey has 5 million refugees. The EU fears Erdogan and the Turks instead of facing them down. It really is an admission of the failure of the EU to put in

place a humane refugee policy. Until this is done Turkey will get away with what it wants in the region. The EU needs to stand up and take on the Turks and the geopolitics they are playing throughout the entire region, which are causing massive destabilisation. The key to this is addressing the refugee issue and putting in place a policy to deal with it so Turkey does not hold that trump card over the EU.

Deputy Simon Coveney: With respect, I think that is a misreading of the situation. The refugee agreement between the EU and Turkey is something that of course is part of the relationship between them but Turkey's involvement in Libya, Syria and the eastern Mediterranean, tensions with Greece and Cyprus and the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan are issues that go well beyond the refugee issue. Standing up and taking on Turkey, as the Deputy describes it, is not necessarily the way to do this. These issues need to be de-escalated through political dialogue, and if that does not work of course the EU has tools available to it to increase pressure. First and foremost, we want to try to de-escalate the relationship that is there at present and achieve things through political dialogue.

Human Rights

96. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which he, through the EU and UN, continues to engage with NGOs and others involved in seeking an improvement in how refugees are treated internationally; the efforts being made to ensure a reasonable standard of emergency accommodation is available and that renewed efforts are made to address the causes of such mass migration, whether they be war or economic factors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28443/20]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question, like Deputy Brady's question earlier, seeks to focus attention on the deplorable conditions under which refugees and asylum seekers are held in the European Union and on the edges and borders of the European Union to try to get the international community focused in a meaningful way on doing something about it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy. Ireland is a long-standing advocate for refugees. For example, in 2016, Ireland co-facilitated the UN summit on refugees and migrants. This summit agreed the New York Declaration, which led to the global compact for refugees and the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.

The Irish Aid programme, Ireland's official development assistance programme, disburses more than €180 million each year in humanitarian assistance. In 2020, Ireland is providing more than €18.5 million in funding to the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, the highest level in more than a decade. Our contribution includes core funding of €9 million, €3 million to the UNHCR's Covid-19 appeal, and crisis-specific responses, including Jordan, Venezuela and the Rohingya crisis. My Department engages on an ongoing basis with the UNHCR.

Yesterday, I addressed the UNHCR executive committee, underlining that Ireland remains a strong supporter of the UNHCR and the life-saving work it does for displaced persons throughout the world. I acknowledged that several UNHCR staff members lost their lives to Covid-19 in the course of their work, showing extraordinary courage in protecting some of the world's most vulnerable people.

The conflict in Syria has resulted in a major migration crisis, with many grave and wide-

spread consequences. The Government's response to the Syrian crisis, through Irish Aid, is the largest Irish response ever to a humanitarian crisis. This year, Ireland will disburse another €25 million in assistance, which includes support to refugees in neighbouring countries, particularly Jordan. Ireland is also party to the EU response to the Syria migration crisis and the related loss of lives, including the facility for refugees in Turkey, contributing more than €38 million.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC, is also one of Ireland's major humanitarian partners and Ireland has provided the ICRC with €14.5 million in funding this year, including €10 million in core funding, to assist in its protection work. Irish Aid provides predictable and co-ordinated funding to six key NGO partners through our humanitarian programme plan, which is designed for humanitarian interventions in situations of protracted and recurring crises.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for the reply and I agree that Ireland makes a solid contribution to alleviating the harsh conditions of refugees through bilateral and multilateral aid. The issue to which the Minister referred is that the European Union on the one side and the UN on the other side seem to be ineffective in dealing with the magnitude of the problem that arises from Syria. I readily agree but nonetheless it is a problem. Also within the eastern countries in Europe itself, an antipathy has built up towards refugees and that is sad coming from people many of whom themselves were refugees in the last century, something which everybody should remember. History has an unfortunate habit of repeating itself. Can anything further be done to focus attention on the UN and EU in bringing about a convergence of views on it?

Deputy Simon Coveney: When we achieved what I considered to be a huge achievement in getting a global compact for refugees, which effectively was to try to get a global agreement on how countries should respond to refugees, there was a lot of disagreement on it in the UN. Unfortunately, some very vocal EU member states did not support it. Of course, within the European Union itself, where we should be giving leadership by example to the rest of the world, we have had huge difficulty in agreeing a collective approach towards virtually anything to do with migration, quite frankly. In recent weeks, the European Commission has introduced a new proposed pact on migration and asylum, for which it hopes to be able to gain support throughout the European Union. Certainly Ireland will play a very constructive role in helping it to do this so we can ensure there is genuine burden sharing throughout the EU in terms of countries making a contribution, as I believe we should, to the migration challenges. There are numerous ways in which we can do this. No country should be able to opt out.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for the content of his reply. I readily acknowledge and commend the Minister on his contribution to dealing with this particular issue in the UN and the EU. I hope that perhaps as time goes on reason will prevail. I am not 100% certain about this because man's inhumanity to man has recurred many times in the past and will continue in the future. Some of the scenes we have witnessed on television over the past five to ten years have been appalling and a sad reflection on the civilised society in which we claim to live at present. I commend the Minister on the work he has done so far and I hope he will continue that work vigorously to bring about the type of focus we are speaking about.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy. I think I am right in saying that approximately 17 million people now live in refugee camps throughout the world. It is a higher figure than ever before. When we think about the scale of this and the commonality in terms of causes of conflict, tension and people being driven from their homes we begin to realise that most of

the problems that drive mass migration are man made or linked to the actions of men or states. There is a significant amount of work for the UN to do. I am really looking forward to Ireland actually taking responsibility on the UN Security Council from 1 January next year. We will certainly be focusing our efforts on peacekeeping but also on conflict prevention, as well as holding countries and state actors to account for the kind of actions that often lead to driving large numbers of people out of their homes and often out of their countries.

UN Security Council

97. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will outline the immediate priorities of Ireland's membership of the UN Security Council; and the resources that are being invested to maximise membership; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28481/20]

Deputy Dara Calleary: This question refers to our forthcoming membership of the UN Security Council. I commend the Minister on the massive effort he and his team in the Department all over the world and here put in to this. It is a significant achievement for a small country. Now that we have it, what are we going to do with it? Will we make a difference and leave a legacy behind after our two years?

(Deputy Simon Coveney): It has been a while since I have been questioned by the Deputy. Normally, I have been used to looking at him over on the other side on Thursday morning. It is nice to be on the same side for a change.

Ireland will take up its seat on the UN Security Council for the 2021-2022 term on 1 January. We will engage constructively across the Council agenda, which has nearly tripled since Ireland last held a seat 20 years ago. The last time Ireland was on the Security Council, it was dealing with nine files concerning conflicts around the world. Today, it is dealing with 31.

Three principles will underpin our approach, namely building peace, strengthening prevention, and ensuring accountability. The Taoiseach elaborated on these principles in his address to the General Assembly on 26 September. Work is now ongoing to identify specific priorities, taking into consideration where we can have most impact. We will look at how peacekeeping mandates might be improved, as well as how we can strengthen the link between peacekeeping and peacebuilding, while ensuring the involvement of women, young people and civil society.

We will seek to address factors underlying conflict, such as human rights violations and climate change, while strengthening the protection of civilians, including from conflict-related hunger. We will also seek to uphold mechanisms for accountability, supporting the International Criminal Court and ensuring the Security Council can do more in holding states and state actors to account. We will also engage across the range of country specific issues that make up the majority of the Council agenda.

In the period ahead, I will undertake a series of consultations with permanent and elected members of the Council. I will also consult with a range of other states, including those that host UN missions and countries that contribute troops to peacekeeping operations. We are keen to ensure an open dialogue with domestic partners while making use of the extensive expertise available in Irish civil society organisations and academia, including through a stakeholder forum established in partnership with the IIEA, the Institute of International and European Af-

fairs.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Minister mentioned the incredibly complex agenda. That is why, in the context of the two years we have, we do not have a significant opportunity to make an impact. I suggest the issue of climate justice should be at the heart of everything we do. The Minister will see that is at the root of the growing complexity of many of the issues he just mentioned such as peace. I listened to the exchange between the Minister and Deputy Brady around natural resources, Cyprus and Turkey. There is also the impact of the worsening climate situation on crops and food, as well as the protection of civilians. We have an opportunity if we place that at the heart of our mission and skill up our teams in our approaches. Then we might be able to say at the end of the two years that we have made a difference. We have the enormous influence of Mary Robinson, former UN Commissioner, who has done so much work in this area. The Minister referred to the UNHCR earlier. We have an opportunity, as well as waking ourselves up domestically, to put this at the heart of the agenda internationally and domestically.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Climate and its contribution to instability and insecurity will be a big part of what we are doing. We need to be clear, however, that there are powerful states on the Security Council which do not accept that climate change has anything to do with international security and has no place on the UN Security Council agenda. The first thing we have to do is work with other member states to actually ensure that climate change and climate justice is part of the security agenda globally. My understanding is that ten of the 15 members currently on the Security Council accept that. However, others do not and will veto attempts to even bring climate change into the space of Security Council debate.

It is not as simple as saying this is important to us and we are going to bring it to the Security Council. We have to be smart enough to be able to build alliances around issues that we care about and on which we have credibility. This will allow us to be able to bring about policy change and a change of approach on the Security Council with the permanent five who ultimately have a veto to prevent actions and with the other ten members. Climate will be a big part of what we are trying to do and we have already committed to that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Young people internationally would put climate justice on the agenda, even in those five permanent member countries.

In terms of the complexity of the issues involved, what resources is the Minister intending to apply to the membership in terms of extra staff and investment? Will there be an allocation in next week's budget specifically towards serving our membership and maximising our voice at Security Council level?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy is correct on young people. We need to try to involve young people and women on much of the post-conflict management, conflict prevention and the accountability agenda which is important from an Irish perspective. We need to be a country that holds in some cases big powerful friends of ours to account through international mechanisms and the Rome Statute.

There was an agreement between my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform that if we were successful in getting on to the Security Council that resources would be made available to ensure Ireland had an impactful presence. We have already committed resources in terms of a significant increase in staff numbers in New York. We will be opening a number of embassies this year that are quite strategic in terms of Security Council

membership. We will be beefing up our presence in capitals we believe are necessary to make sure that Ireland is both listened to and is relevant. Resources will not be an issue.

UN Security Council

98. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of work undertaken by his Department in the advancement of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation agenda as Ireland approaches the beginning of its UN Security Council term. [28225/20]

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Following on from Deputy Calleary, we will be sitting on the Security Council for the next two years. It is likely to be dominated by the events of the day, as it always is. It is important that we do not lose sight of our traditional responsibility that we have always held in the United Nations to lead on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. I would like to hear from the Minister on that particular point.

(Deputy Simon Coveney): The advancement of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation goals is a signature foreign policy for Ireland. It will continue to be important throughout our membership on the UN Security Council. My Department will engage constructively on efforts to combat nuclear proliferation with a strong focus on situations on the Security Council agenda, namely Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK.

Ireland, like our EU partners, takes the view that the joint comprehensive plan of action, JCPoA, endorsed by Security Council Resolution 2231, is a major achievement of multilateral diplomacy and an important contribution to nuclear non-proliferation. Ireland remains strongly committed to the JCPoA and supports all efforts to safeguard it, as it offers the best mechanism for dialogue with Iran, and to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. It has significant provisions in terms of inspections and transparency.

The continuation of the DPRK's nuclear and missile activities breaches numerous Security Council resolutions, represents a serious threat to international peace and security and undermines the global non-proliferation and disarmament regime. Ireland continues to call on the DPRK to make progress on complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation. Ireland is fully aligned with the EU policy of critical engagement with the DPRK, supporting efforts at dialogue, while fully implementing sanctions until progress on complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation is made.

As a Security Council Member, Ireland will also contribute to the work of the Committee on Security Council Resolution 1540, which addresses proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, as well as their means of delivery, to non-state actors.

Ireland's term on the Council will coincide with the re-scheduled tenth review conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. In furtherance of our nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation priorities, Ireland ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons on 6 August 2020, marking the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Often these issues around disarmament and non-proliferation come to the fore when individual state actors are concerned but it is the bedrock of the treaties that underlie all our efforts in this area which are more important because they establish that consensus in international law by which we can approach any country or any entity that might

be acting against that very strong norm that has been built in the international system for so many years now.

After I tabled this question, Deputy Duncan Smith from the Labour Party suggested that we have speaking time in the Dáil about disarmament and non-proliferation, given our strong history in that area and the fact that we will go onto the Security Council next year. He will submit a request so we can have a fuller conversation about it.

It is 50 years since the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT, came into force. It came into force as a result of the resolution that came from the Irish Government in the early 1960s about the non-dissemination of nuclear weapons and leading to the NPT, which we were the first country to sign in 1968. We have good bona fides in this area. It is important that during the next two years, we return to those treaties, including the NPT, which we ratified, as the Minister said, on the 75th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, but let us not forget the old treaties as well, which have not entered into force, including the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, CTBT, for example, on nuclear weapon testing.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy is dead right on this issue. Many Irish people have no idea of the contribution this little country has made in the UN in this area. We have real credibility in this space. I have seen that in New York when Ireland has been a country that is in many ways like a magnet for others in terms of consulting with on non-proliferation and disarmament issues. I would welcome an opportunity in this House to remind people of the role we have played since the 1960s in this space and the continuing relevance and opportunity for Ireland to give leadership in this area.

The problem is it is quite a technical area when one starts talking about the detail of non-proliferation treaties or about work, which Ireland is very much involved in now, around international law on the use of explosives in built-up areas. These are really interesting and important areas where Ireland is making a contribution and it would be good to have a fuller debate on it in this House.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Minister for welcoming that. As he knows, I used to work in this area before I came into politics and it is full of acronyms and technical terms that can sometimes confuse people as to what the intent is behind what a country is trying to do with a treaty but this work is very important, as are the non-governmental organisations, NGOs, which work in this area. This country has a good history of supporting NGOs and other international state bodies and of doing research, doing work with civil society and bringing countries' populations along when sometimes their governments have not stepped up to the plate yet in issues such as smaller arms and light weapons or cluster munitions or land mines.

There is work that we can do in that area and there is also a great opportunity to educate Irish people on our history here, particularly young people. As we move further and further away from events like Hiroshima, people and generations forget and the risk that these weapons might be used again increases.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I agree with that and let us see if we can facilitate that debate because it would be an interesting discussion for many people. One of the reasons that I referred to both Iran and North Korea in my response is that they are very much active and divisive files. North Korea is less divisive on the Security Council but Iran is divisive because the European Union and the US have taken very different lines on it. That Joint Comprehensive

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Plan of Action, JCPOA, issue is likely to be something that Ireland will be involved in during our membership of the Security Council in terms of potential for allocation of responsibility in certain areas where countries are asked to give leadership on certain files. I hope we will be able to build consensus around some contentious issues and areas and use our ability to do that to good effect.

Consular Services

99. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of emergency repatriations carried out since March 2020 by his Department. [28297/20]

Deputy Pa Daly: I pay tribute to the consular staff and the staff in the embassies who have helped in emergency repatriations carried out this year. While thousands have come home in this manner, many other Irish citizens have made their own way home without consular assistance. We met recently with the Crosscare Migrant Project, which does tremendous work with returning migrants. However, it is what awaits them when they come home that is often the problem.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I advise the Deputy that my Department advised or assisted more than 8,000 people to return safely to Ireland as part of our consular response to the Covid-19 crisis. The priority was to help those normally resident in Ireland to return home safely on commercial flights where possible and, where not possible, on flights chartered by the EU and other partners. The challenges to these efforts, including the closure of borders, airports and airspace, and the suspension of many services were significant and the scale of these repatriation efforts were unprecedented in recent times.

In three exceptional cases where there were significant groups of Irish citizens with no alternative options to get out and in circumstances that made them particularly vulnerable, we chartered planes ourselves. In this way, we repatriated 93 citizens from Peru on 29 March, 68 citizens from India on 4 April and 95 from Nigeria on 11 May. These flights were arranged in close co-operation with partners also facilitating the repatriation of citizens from other EU and European Economic Area, EEA, member states as well as British citizens and were supported through the EU Union Civil Protection Mechanism. This is the first time that Ireland has arranged flights using this mechanism.

I pay tribute to my Department and the consular team, which I do not often get a chance to do, which did heroic work during this period. We ended up setting up our own call centre. At times we were almost like a call centre for airlines. We had people telephoning us night and day from all over the world, trying to get assistance and advice and co-ordinating with airlines to try to do that. A huge number of people were assisted and got home much sooner than they otherwise might have been able to.

Deputy Pa Daly: Does the Minister have a breakdown as to how many people were given financial assistance or flights as opposed to those were given solely advice?

I have dealt with Safe Home Ireland, which works with older Irish emigrants in London and all over Britain. Many migrants who have returned home to Ireland find that once they are here, they experience problems accessing social welfare, dealing with the HSE and dealing with local authorities. There is inconsistency between many county councils and sometimes in the

attitude in the local Department of Social Protection. I appreciate this is not the Minister's area but in speaking with Crosscare, I was told the resuming residence clause and the length of purpose of absence are a problem and that there is an unfair burden of proof in obtaining a whole load of documentation. Given these inconsistencies migrants face when they come home, prior to which the Minister's staff will have done an excellent job in helping them return home, will the Minister consider establishing an Oireachtas subcommittee to deal with this so that we can have an equality between citizens returning to the country?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I think we are mixing two issues here. The repatriation efforts were primarily for people who reside in Ireland and were away. They might have been students, people working away temporarily or people on holidays.

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There were a number of people who had been away for quite some time and felt the need to come home for health reasons. I can give the Deputy all the figures and data about where those people came from and what we spent and so on. We generally did not pay for flights, apart obviously from the ones we chartered. Most of the time, people were happy to pay for their own flights to get home, as long as they could get a seat, and we often negotiated with airlines to make sure that the cost for those people to get home was reasonable. There were, of course, some circumstances where people needed financial support from embassies abroad and we gave the flexibility to ambassadors to be able to use their good sense to do that.

On the issue of migrants who had been away for a long time coming home, that is something I would happily talk to the Deputy about when we have a bit more time. We have done a lot of work on some of the issues the Deputy has raised, particularly for people coming home from the US.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy try to stick to the time so that everyone gets in?

Deputy Pa Daly: I will be brief. Perhaps my question should have been a little more specific but I was not only talking about those who were repatriated due to the situation around Covid-19. Perhaps the Minister and I could have a conversation about these matters. I am aware of some cases of people who have been repatriated very quickly. There are older Irish emigrants, or people who have grown up in Irish families in England, who feel they are discriminated against when they come home, even though they are full Irish citizens, because they do not satisfy the habitual residence condition. They are sometimes waiting five or six months before they are able to access services. Their money is completely depleted and they are not on housing lists. I know of one person whose resources are exhausted and who has had to rely on a GP who gave his time for free and the local Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Perhaps the Minister and I can talk about what can be done to help those emigrants who are returning home.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is a more general issue, not just linked to Covid-19, although it may obviously have been a particular issue during the Covid crisis when people felt they wanted to come home for family reasons and so on. Deputy Cannon, the previous Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora, did some good work relating to people coming home from the US to live in Ireland, including the challenges they had around setting up bank accounts, identity issues, driver's licence issues and other practical things that are needed to reintegrate quickly into society. He looked at solutions to each of those barriers and challenges.

We could probably apply quite a few of those principles that focused on people coming back to Ireland from the US to people coming from other parts of the world. I will follow up with the Deputy on that, if he likes.

US Presidential Election

101. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if there have been discussions with the American Ambassador to Ireland with regard to the very worrying comments from the current President of the United States, stating they will not accept the results of the upcoming Presidential election if they do not win; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28552/20]

117. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has discussed with his colleagues in Europe or if he has concerns regarding the statements made by President Donald Trump that he would not accept the outcome of the forthcoming US elections if he does not win; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28544/20]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Barely a week goes by that President Donald Trump does not do something else that horrifies me and threatens either his own society or the wider world in some way. One of the more disturbing suggestions of recent times is that he would not accept the outcome of an election if he lost it. That is a serious business when one considers the extremely tense situation that exists in the US. Has the Minister any reaction to those sorts of suggestions from President Trump?

Deputy Simon Coveney: To respond more generally, as this House knows, Ireland and the United States share strong ties of kinship and enjoy close diplomatic and political relations, as well as enduring economic, cultural and social connections. These deep connections span right across the political spectrum in the US. With each successive Administration in the White House and with successive Irish Governments, the relationship has been valued and strengthened to the benefit of our people and that continues today.

I was in Washington last week, as the Deputy knows, and got an incredibly warm and supportive response when I outlined Ireland's vulnerabilities in the context of ongoing Brexit negotiations. While I was in the US, I made a real point of not getting involved in, or commenting on, the presidential election. We are in the middle of a campaign at the moment with less than a month to go and while everybody has their views about the candidates and the issues that are being debated, it is probably appropriate not to get into a commentary on the election.

In response to the question the Deputy asked, I am confident that the democratic institutions in the United States are robust and strong enough. It will be a more complex election than we have seen in many years because of the changes in the way in which people will be voting because of Covid-19, the increased use of postal ballots and so on. There may not be a result on election night in the same way that there normally would. Those things notwithstanding, I am still confident, having spoken to a number of people in the United States about it, that the relevant institutions will ensure that there is a result. If that means a transition of power to a new President, that will happen. If it means a continuation of the existing Administration, that will happen.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The problem is that we are dealing with President Trump.

I have definite views and want the President to lose the election. I do not have much faith in Joe Biden but we have to get rid of President Trump. I do not expect the Minister to say that. The President was essentially threatening civil war. That is not an idle threat when one considers what has happened in the United States over the past few months. There has been war on the streets and cities have exploded. The President is leaning on terrifying and, in some cases, openly fascist forces, such as the Ku Klux Klan, which he refuses to condemn. He is essentially threatening a race war and civil war if he does not win the election. Sometimes one has to name the problem. This is not the normal run of politics, this is far more serious. This is a man who does not care about the truth, telling lies or the consequences of his actions and is threatening civil war. That sort of threat to democracy has to be called out in a serious way.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is why the election is getting the kind of profile and media attention it is, even through extraordinary times in the United States. If people are not telling the truth, I expect that to be exposed in a democratic contest such as this. As I said, we need to be careful not to interfere in this election. Having spoken to many people in Washington, regardless of what candidates say, the system of democracy in the United States is robust and strong, and will ensure that, after people have voted in the presidential election in a few weeks' time, the result will be followed through on in a way that upholds democratic standards.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Something that people rarely remark upon is that the country that produced the Nazis was the most developed and advanced society in Europe, almost bar none, at the time. It descended into horror beyond belief. That was a political force that never gained more than 33% support in an open election and which engineered its rise to power through a lie about the burning of the Reichstag. Those events start to have terrifying echoes. I am not saying that Donald Trump is Adolf Hitler but he is playing around with political forces that are heading very dangerously in that direction and threatening this kind of behaviour. Sometimes one just has to say that this stuff is too lethal and dangerous. One can see that President Trump is whipping up and encouraging political forces even in this country and across Europe. We cannot treat that in the normal way. It has to be called out as something that must be politically defeated, challenged and driven out of the political arena.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Divisive language in politics that pits people against each other is never something that should be supported. Supporting or encouraging racist forces is something that should never be supported and I hope will always be stamped out in this country and in other democracies.

I am not somebody who is afraid of mincing my words on some of these issues. As I said, we are a few weeks away from an election in the United States. We need to allow that process to take its course. I have never visited the United States at a time when I have seen it as divided as it is now. The most powerful country in the world is divided in the midst of a pandemic that is affecting it in an incredibly impactful and tragic way. I hope this election will be able to facilitate a new beginning, in some ways, to allow more healing in the United States. It is a terribly divided place right now.

Human Rights

102. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will write to his Polish counterpart to call for an end to the discrimination against Polish LGBT+ people; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28426/20]

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: As the Minister will be aware, one third of Poland has declared so-called LGBT-free zones. The existence of these so-called LGBT-free zones in the European Union is an affront to European Union values and is in no way acceptable. We cannot tolerate this. Will the Minister write to his counterpart in Poland about this? At a European Union level, what action is he taking to address this?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am very concerned at developments relating to LGBTI+ people in Poland. The principles of equality and non-discrimination are enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. It is important that these principles are protected and promoted throughout the Union.

The Government has expressed its concerns regarding this issue publicly. My colleague, the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, has written to his counterpart in the Polish Government in the past month, emphasising the deep commitment of the Irish people to the fundamental values enshrined in EU treaties, including respect for human rights.

Advancing human rights is central to Irish foreign policy. We are committed to promoting the rights of LGBTI+ people, who continue to suffer disproportionate levels of violence and discrimination around the world. Ireland continues to support initiatives in the EU and other international forums which promote and protect the rights of LGBTI+ people and condemn violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Irish Embassy in Poland undertakes a number of initiatives, including with local non-governmental organisations, to raise awareness of and facilitate discussion on the rights of LGBTI people. Our ambassador also signs an annual letter in support of the Warsaw equality parade and other such parades around the country. This year’s letter was published on 27 September and was signed by 50 ambassadors and heads of international representations. The letter expresses support in particular for efforts to raise public awareness of issues affecting LGBTI people.

The ambassador is currently engaged in a series of meetings with NGOs to hear their perspectives on recent developments in Poland and to see how the embassy can best work to support them. These meetings will help the embassy to plan further supports. We will also continue to work bilaterally and at an EU level to promote and protect the rights of LGBTI people across the EU and beyond.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he write to his counterpart in Poland? He might address that question.

There is agreement in the EU in respect of a €750 billion recovery fund. Once that is dispersed to countries like Poland, if the rule of law, democracy and minority and LGBTI rights are not addressed and dealt with it will be very difficult to deal with them afterwards. We are talking about Irish money going from taxpayers here to countries like Poland. I do not think we would accept that if these issues are not addressed and the current policies that exclude and discriminate against LGBTI people in the EU are not stopped. Will the Minister commit to supporting changes to the rule of law to remove the veto and ensure this sort of action is taken by the EU with respect to democracy and human rights?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will commit to writing to my counterpart. There is a new Polish foreign minister who I have not gotten to know yet, but I have spoken to him briefly. It is worth noting that the Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, quite pointedly referred to

this issue when she gave her state of the Union address a number of weeks ago. That was an indication that the European Commission takes it seriously.

The Commission has responsibility to uphold the treaties and, by doing that, the value system of the European Union. I expect that this will continue to be an ongoing discussion and a focus will continue to be on Poland's response to its responsibilities as an EU member state in a way that is consistent with the values that, it is to be hoped, continue to underpin policy across the Union.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Minister for his commitment to write to his counterpart in Poland about this issue. That is welcome. I want to strongly acknowledge the work being done by our embassy in Warsaw and its continued support for the LGBTI+ community in Poland. That is very valuable.

I also want to mention a letter raising these issues written to the Minister by members of the LGBTI+ community who are Polish and live in Ireland. We must have action at a European Union level on this. The Minister is correct that the EU Commission is being very strong in this. It is essential that the Government does everything it can do at a European Council level to support the initiatives the European Commission is taking on this to try to ensure the veto is removed and there can be effective action on this, especially before the funds are disbursed.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy. I wish to acknowledge the work done by the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration, Deputy O'Gorman, who continues to work in this area. He has spoken to me about it and has expressed real concern.

It is important that we try to advocate for and deliver change. We have to figure out the best way of doing that. Sometimes within the European Union that is not necessarily done by penalties and punishment. Sometimes it is more effective to try to do it through political persuasion and dialogue. Ultimately, this is about protecting a community which is being discriminated against in a way that is not acceptable and consistent with the values of the EU. We need to find ways to change that approach by the Polish Government. We need to begin to speak with the Commission about how best to do that effectively.

Middle East

105. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the diplomatic representations that were made to Israel regarding its annexation plan; and if his attention has been drawn to the town of Beit Sahour (details supplied) affected by the annexation in the occupied West Bank. [28298/20]

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister may or may not be aware that my home town, Tralee, twinned with the town of Beit Sahour in the occupied West Bank in May of last year. I wish to ask the Minister what diplomatic representations have been made to Israel regarding its annexation plan and if his attention has been drawn to what is happening in Beit Sahour. We have an email from the mayor dated 26 September 2020.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy. It is unusual that it has taken this long to get to the Middle East peace process in foreign affairs questions. I am glad we have gotten there at nearly 12.30 a.m.

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Israel's announcement on 13 August that it will suspend plans to annex parts of the occupied Palestinian territory is, of course, welcome, although that proposal should never have been on the table in the first place as far as I am concerned. The EU High Representative, Vice President Josep Borrell, also welcomed the announcement on behalf of the EU in a declaration on 15 August. I have noted with concern, however, subsequent Israeli statements that annexation plans remain on the table and I have called for any such plans to be permanently withdrawn.

The unilateral annexation by Israel of any part of the occupied Palestinian territory would be a very clear violation of international law. It would have no legitimacy and would not be recognised or accepted by Ireland or by the international community, more generally, and would be deeply damaging to the potential for a two-state solution in the future. The programme for Government clearly states that the Government would regard any such moves as a breach of international law and would consider an appropriate response to them at both national and international level. I have been forthright in my public statements on the issue of annexation and have raised this matter directly and clearly with Israeli leaders, including during my visit to the region last December and in a telephone conversation with my Israeli counterpart, Gabi Ashkenazi, in recent months. I participated in a discussion with Foreign Minister Ashkenazi along with my EU colleagues during an informal session of the Foreign Affairs Council on 27 August. The EU's firm commitment to a two-state solution was restated together with our readiness to support all sides in efforts to resume meaningful negotiations. I have also outlined my concerns about annexation in discussions with the US interlocutors.

The Deputy raises the case of Beit Sahour. Annexation of this town would be a clear violation of international law, as would unilateral annexation of any part of the occupied Palestinian territory. Irish officials in Ramallah and in Tel Aviv have visited the Bethlehem region in recent months and will continue to monitor developments closely.

Deputy Pa Daly: In the email that I referred to from the mayor in recent weeks, he instructed us that Palestinian-owned land in and around Beit Sahour is to be confiscated, that homes will be demolished, and that displacement will take place as a result of this. In addition to what is already happening, they are being deprived of their basic civil rights. Beit Sahour in this proposed annexation will lose access 7,500 dunams of agricultural land. Currently he said that building and zoning in the entire West Bank requires the permission of the Minister of defence and the Prime Minister in Israel but that that will change and will be dealt with on a local level if this annexation takes place. Their citizens and the freedom of movement of members of the community living in Beit Sahour is restricted. This will lead to more unemployment and poverty and the world needs to hear the truth of his struggle and that of the Palestinian people.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There is a difference between annexation, applying Israeli sovereignty to Palestinian land and expansion of settlements, which is also in my view illegal internationally and should not be happening. The proposals around annexation were about permanently extending Israeli sovereignty to elements of the West Bank. Having said that, the expansion of settlements that we have seen in recent years is almost like creeping annexation and has caused great tensions, understandably so, with Palestinian communities who simply feel that their land is being stolen from under them and are being forcibly removed, with houses being demolished and so on. I am on the record many times as being very critical of both settlements and settlement expansion and plans for annexation and I continue to be.

Deputy Pa Daly: The email, which the Mission of the State of Palestine in Leeson Street sent us today calls:

...on the international community to hold the occupying power accountable, and to encourage real actions towards banning produce from the illegal settlements. The failure to do so to date has fostered a culture of impunity which has greatly emboldened the occupying powers and allows the prolongation of this illegal, colonial, foreign occupation for decades without upholding even the most basic tenets of international law.

Will the Government consider reviewing its position on the boycott, divestment and sanctions, BDS, issue?

Deputy Simon Coveney: My position is well understood on that and the legal position is crystal clear on this issue. Deputies can keep calling on me to do something that they know I cannot do but they want to do this for political reasons. It does not advance the arguments very much.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputies for their co-operation. We have a few minutes left. The next question is in the name of Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Middle East

107. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if, as the 20th anniversary of the second Palestinian Intifada is passed, his attention has been drawn to the escalating policy of silent transfer of Palestinians from occupied east Jerusalem; the measures the EU is discussing to address the behaviour by Israel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28547/20]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The problem is that despite the statements of sympathy with the plight Palestinians are faced with, the silent transfer and annexation prosecuted by Israel against Palestinians to remove them from places like east Jerusalem and other parts of the West Bank just goes on and on. Nothing is done to stop it. The Minister is stating that he is appalled by it but nothing can be done, which is his essential line.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is actually not. We have done a great amount to try to advance the cause of the two-state solution and to focus the world's attention on illegal settlements and their expansion. We have contributed to international pressure that has prevented Israel from moving ahead with plans to annex large parts of the West Bank in the summer. We have been active at UN level and have been involved in multiple resolutions. We have been very active at EU level and we continue to be. Only last week I spoke to my German counterpart on what has been described as the Amman Statement where France and Germany met with Jordan and made a statement following that meeting reinforcing EU support for a two-state solution and a rejection of annexation and breaches of international law. We remain in the middle of this debate and continue to try to shape an EU response towards equality of treatment of both Israelis and Palestinians in a way that can lead to a negotiated solution both sides can live with in security and statehood. That is what we will continue to do. We are far from toothless in this area and I can assure the Deputy that we are doing much more than simply expressing criticism. What we cannot do is breach international law ourselves or try to do something that is outside the remit of the Irish Government in trade sanctions or limiting trade. I have explained that to this House on many occasions and this position comes directly from the Attorney General.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Since January there has been a 55% rise of structures tar-

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geted with demolitions or confiscated in the occupied territories and a fourfold increase in the number of displaced people. While all these statements are being made, the situation continues to get worse. In east Jerusalem, 24 structures were demolished last month. It just goes on and no action is taken. There are no consequences. Is it any wonder that Israel believes it can do what it likes? The Minister and Europe keeps talking to Israel, expressing concern but there are no consequences. In reality, it believes it has the green light to do what it likes because there will be no consequences. The only reason apartheid South Africa was eventually brought down was because there were consequences for running an abhorrent regime but there are no consequences for Israel.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As I have said, if we had this debate last June people would have predicted that in July Prime Minister Netanyahu would have moved ahead with annexation of parts of the West Bank, and possibly even the Jordan Valley. That did not happen because of international pressure. The perception was that Israel had been given the green light to do that and it did not. It was talked out of doing so by powerful allies of Israel but also by very direct messaging from the European Union, in which Ireland was very much involved in the debates on the Middle East peace process at that stage within the Foreign Affairs Council.

I agree with the Deputy that in many instances Israel acts with impunity. It continues to impinge on Palestinian lands and Palestinian rights in a way that is illegal. We have to continue to highlight that and maintain pressure but we also have to talk to Israel and maintain a relationship that can result in a negotiated outcome at some point in the future. It will not be resolved by protest alone.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

The Dáil adjourned at 12.30 a.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 7 October 2020.