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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 10 Samhain 2020*

*Tuesday, 10 November 2020*

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

*Paidir.*  
*Prayer.*

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## **Sittings and Business of Dáil: Motion**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I understand the Government Chief Whip has a business proposal to put to the House.

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

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or in the Order of the Dáil of 22nd October, 2020, that the sitting be now suspended for 90 minutes, and on the resumption, the sitting shall continue in the Convention Centre Dublin on North Wall Quay, Dublin 1, whereupon Leaders' Questions shall be taken in accordance with Standing Order 36.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is that agreed?

**Deputies:** No.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Can I make a point, which I also made here last week? I am not speaking on behalf of politicians but on behalf of every usher and every other member of the staff. I am speaking for those workers who have been informed that the Dáil has to sit until 1 a.m. When the sitting adjourns at 1 a.m. in the convention centre the workers here will have to stay on for at least an hour and a half, bringing us up to 2.30 a.m., and they will be expected to be in here again tomorrow morning. On behalf of the ladies and gentlemen who have served this House with distinction over the years, I advise the Chief Whip that I think that is wrong. I am not fighting about this but I want to put on the record on the workers' behalf that they are not happy. I am airing their views. I am sure everybody would agree it is not right to say to workers at 2.30 a.m. tomorrow that they can go home but they will be expected to be in again tomorrow morning at 8 a.m., 8.30 a.m. or 9 a.m. That is wrong.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank the Chair for his indulgence.

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**An Ceann Comhairle:** That point is well made. Every minute extra we spend here will be added on at the end of the night, so we have to be careful about that. I will call Deputy Mac Lochlainn to be followed by Deputy Mattie McGrath and that will be it, I believe.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The issue of late sittings is one we are working to resolve. I hope that soon we will not be sitting later than 10 p.m. on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. That is a shared concern across the Houses.

Sinn Féin Private Members' time tonight is Opposition speaking time of two hours' duration during which the Government would normally have 20 minutes' speaking time. I have received official notification from the Oireachtas authorities that this cannot now go ahead. Intentionally, the Government's confidence motion is aimed at tripling its speaking time, from 20 minutes to 63 minutes, and halving the Opposition's speaking time, from 100 minutes to 50 minutes. It triples the Government's speaking time and halves the Opposition's speaking time. That is the intent of the Government motion. The House will not sit until 1 a.m. but will wrap up at approximately 11 p.m. I want to make an official protest about that move.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I make the same point. I was at yesterday's meeting of the Business Committee. The time was changed without any consultation. There are people in this House who want the Business Committee destroyed and for it to be defunct. The motion proposing no confidence in the Tánaiste is a Sinn Féin motion, but the Government decided to table a countermotion. That is its right and there is precedent for that. However, the trick of the loop is the speaking time. We are down to five minutes for our group, and all other Opposition parties are restricted in their time. There is also the fact we are here for 20 minutes or so and will then be decamping across the river to the convention centre at enormous cost. That is a waste of time given that we will vote on the Finance Bill in the convention centre tomorrow in any event. It is a display of pure heavy-handedness in an effort to crush the Opposition. I object to it in the strongest manner.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** On the motion that has been put forward, it has been put across that the Opposition is wasting time but that is not the case. The Government could have ordered this business for tomorrow when we will be in the convention centre in any event. Therefore, there would be no need to decamp from this House across the river, for everybody to have to rush to get there and to have the threat of staff having to work late. It is only an excuse for the Government to make it look as if we are causing it problems. It could have put the motion forward and answered it tomorrow. That would have prevented Sinn Féin from raising it today, and that would have been the job done. That is the reason I will be opposing the motion.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Deputy Chief Whip, Deputy Griffin.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I want to put on the record that Sinn Féin misled the Business Committee on Thursday when it indicated it intended to table a Private Members' motion on a matter related to social protection. It was made aware on Friday that its Private Members' motion, it being a motion of no confidence, could not be taken in the House tonight because under Standing Orders, a motion of no confidence or confidence must be voted upon immediately and it cannot be a reduced vote. It was made aware of this on Friday. It waited until Monday to bring forward alternative arrangements, by which time the Government had brought forward its own arrangements because a motion of no confidence in one of its Ministers had been signalled.

In addition, Sinn Féin neglected to use the time it had yesterday following the Business

Committee and before the time for Private Members' submissions closed to revert to its original Private Members' motion, which it could have secured for tonight. It did not do so, however. It is not our fault that it does not know the procedures or rules of the House.

When a motion of no confidence in a Minister is moved, it is customary for the Government to move a motion of confidence. The Opposition is expecting a Minister to come into the House to carry on his or her duties with a motion pending. The same Minister will take oral parliamentary questions this evening. How on earth does the Opposition expect a Minister to come into the House and carry on his or her duties when there is a motion pending? This needs to be dealt with now, which is why the Government is acting in this way now. It is a shame the Opposition is costing the taxpayer €25,000 through its antics when we are dealing with this and getting on with running the country.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Shame on the Deputy.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please Members, with respect.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** This is an exercise of the most cynical game-playing by the Government.

**A Deputy:** That is hypocrisy.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Frankly, Government Deputies are smirking through their words because they know that it is cynical game-playing and politically motivated spite essentially-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----against the fact that an Opposition party put forward a no confidence motion in a Minister. It is important for people to know that Deputy Pringle, at the Business Committee, proposed an alternative that would have saved the €25,000 it will cost to move us at short notice over to the convention centre when we had decided we would be sitting here today.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** When?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I did not interrupt the Deputy. Notwithstanding the political differences he may have with Sinn Féin and the Opposition over the motion, a proposal was put forward by Deputy Pringle at the Business Committee to save us having to incur additional cost and the impact on staff of having to move to the convention centre today. The Government did not accept that, purely for political reasons, precisely because its Deputies wanted to be able to get up and play political games in here and point fingers at people.

**A Deputy:** The Deputy is the one pointing the finger.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It was said that the argument was most vociferously conducted by Deputy Griffin in pretty much the same breath as he said we should effectively do away with the Business Committee.

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

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**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** That is the real agenda. The Government wants to do away with any cross-party co-operation on how we set the schedule of this Dáil-----

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** The Deputy's colleagues told the Dáil last week-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----because it wants to steamroll whatever it wants to go through the House, regardless of the feelings of the rest of the democratically elected Opposition.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** They will oppose everything. That is what they do.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask Deputies to behave with a bit of dignity, please. I call the Chief Whip to conclude on this matter.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** It is important we reiterate the facts around this. At the Business Committee last Thursday, Sinn Féin proposed a motion on social protection and was very clear and explicit about that. It then allowed the Dáil to adjourn - to reconvene at 2 p.m. today, Tuesday - without informing or giving notice to all colleagues and other parties that it was intending to table a motion of no confidence. Those are the facts. Sinn Féin slipped the motion of no confidence in at the last minute, knowing that this would necessitate a change of location and in how the business would be transacted today. Standing Order 80, which we have all supported and voted for, is very clear that divisions on such matters must be taken immediately and cannot be deferred. That is the factual position under Standing Orders, and it is important that we speak about the facts. Because Sinn Féin tabled a motion of no confidence after the Business Committee had gone through its normal course of work on Thursday last, that has necessitated us being here today. We need to stop the game-playing and be clear on the facts.

I also wish to respond to Deputy Mattie McGrath on speaking time. We are putting forward a motion of confidence, which is standard practice for Governments. When a motion of no confidence is tabled, the Government will table a motion of confidence in the particular Member involved. The speaking arrangements that are outlined are underpinned in what the Dáil voted on in July in the context of such arrangements.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please. The Chief Whip should be allowed to speak, without interruption.

**A Deputy:** Democracy is inconvenient.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** If I can be allowed to-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is a battering ram.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Mattie McGrath should please let the Chief Whip answer.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I know Deputy Mattie McGrath respects democracy and the capacity of this House to make decisions on its rules, which is underpinned by the Constitution.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Yes, but the Government nobbled the Opposition.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** We have set out the speaking time today, in line with what was agreed in the context of Dáil reform and with what the House agreed. That is what we are doing. There is no factual basis to what the Deputy.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** There is no-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Shush, please.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** To respond to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, I agree that we need to conduct business in a more family-friendly fashion. We are working across parties to change the current position on late sittings, but that requires the co-operation of the Opposition. When the Opposition comes in here and calls votes, even though the Government has made concessions, that adds 30 minutes to the day of the staff. We have had threats from the Opposition-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We made no threats.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** -----to the effect that regardless of what concessions we make, or what we agree to, it will call a vote on every matter.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** That has been the custom and practice since July. I respect the Business Committee and I have tried to work in a constructive way with everybody. We have made concessions on lots of matters, including in terms of speaking time and in bringing Ministers before the House. Last week, for example, we suggested a change to the proposed business to increase speaking time by up to 50% for the Opposition in the debate on the Tánaiste. However, the Opposition voted against the increase in speaking time just because of game-playing on the part of those in opposition and not wanting to support a Government proposal.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We voted for more time.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** It is very clear. The Opposition argued over one minute last week. We want to be constructive.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Government is playing a game.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The factual position is that the vote on a confidence motion cannot take place in the Dáil Chamber. That is underpinned by the public health guidance. I think everyone supports that. As a result, business must be transacted in the convention centre and that is what we are voting on today. I ask those who oppose that proposal to outline their solution. In the interests of staff and of ensuring-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We could debate it tomorrow.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** -----the expedient progress of business today, Members should accept the situation and move across to the convention centre to allow Leaders' Questions and our normal work to proceed.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Chief Whip. Is the proposal from the Chief Whip agreed?

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**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is not agreed.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 26; Níl, 19; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Michael Collins.

Question declared carried.

*Sitting suspended at 2.30 p.m. and resumed at 4 p.m.*

*4 o'clock*

### **Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before we proceed to Leaders' Questions, I wish to make a brief statement concerning the correspondence between the Chief Justice, Mr. Justice Frank Clarke, and Mr. Justice Séamus Woulfe which has been the subject of commentary in the media and elsewhere since its release yesterday. As Members will be aware, it is a long-established ruling of this House that members of the Judiciary are independent, by virtue of the Constitution, and may not be criticised or have their rulings referred to in the House, except on foot of a substantive motion. Without prejudice to how this matter may proceed, I must point out that Members of this House are in a different position from others in the context of commentary insofar as they may ultimately have to adjudicate on the matter in accordance with the Constitution, legislation and Standing Orders. Any such adjudication must be carried out in a manner that conforms with the principles of basic fairness of procedures and the requirements of natural and constitutional justice. It is crucial, therefore, that Members do not comment on the matter, either on the floor of the House or elsewhere, in such a way as could give rise to a perception of bias because this could act as a serious impediment to their ability to discharge their important constitutional functions, if so required, in the future. Accordingly, I ask Members to exercise the utmost care in any comments they may make on the correspondence and the issues arising and I request their full co-operation in this matter.

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am sure the Taoiseach will join with me in sending our sympathies to the Palestinian people on the loss of Saeb Erekat, secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, who died this morning. He was a great advocate for peace, stability and a homeland for the Palestinian people. The world is a poorer place for the loss of him.

Joe Biden was elected as the next President of the United States on Saturday last. Mr. Biden's election is good for Ireland in many ways. He is, as we know, proud of his Irish roots and he is, without doubt, a long-standing friend of Ireland. During the presidential election campaign and throughout his time in office, he has acted to promote and protect peace, progress and the Good Friday Agreement. He comes to the office of President at a time of threat from the British Government, with both Brexit and the refusal to honour agreements looming large. The President-elect and both parties in Congress have made clear that there will be no trade agreement with Britain unless the Good Friday Agreement is safeguarded in all of its parts.

The election of Joe Biden has, I believe, the potential to reshape the nature of the Brexit negotiation, particularly with regard to the aggressive and arrogant approach taken by the Tory Government and Boris Johnson to Irish interests. Throughout this process, Tories have actively sought to undermine the Good Friday Agreement and, most recently, Mr. Johnson has played a reckless game by using as a bargaining chip the protection secured for Ireland as part of the withdrawal agreement. Central to this game-playing has been Mr. Johnson's dangerous Internal Market Bill. The latter undermines protections that are absolutely vital to ensuring there will

be no reimposition of a hard border on our island, safeguarding the all-island economy and protecting the Good Friday Agreement and our hard-won peace. The recklessness of this Bill is such that even the House of Lords last night voted to strip out powers that would allow Tory Ministers to break international law. Instead of preparing for an end to the transition period, Mr. Johnson used the smoke and mirrors of this Bill to sow confusion and mistrust in negotiations. Perhaps this was an effort to buy time to see where the chips landed in the US election. Now that election is over and in President-elect Biden, Ireland and the EU negotiating team have a very formidable ally, one who has already impressed upon the British Prime Minister that playing fast and loose with the future of this island simply will not be tolerated. It is time for Mr. Johnson to realise that the best way forward for all of us, including Britain, is to engage in what remains of negotiations in good faith, to respect international law and their agreements. A very necessary first step is that the British Government drop its dangerous internal market Bill.

Throughout the Brexit process, it has been critical to defending Ireland's interests that we have spoken as one. I believe this unified approach in the Dáil has yielded much success and I believe this is how we must proceed as we enter the Brexit endgame because the decisions made in the closing stages of negotiations will have ramifications for years, indeed, for generations, to come. I ask the Taoiseach, therefore, how he plans to work on a cross-party all-of-the-Oireachtas basis over these coming crucial weeks.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and for her remarks, and also for the point about unity of purpose across all parties in this House on the crucial issue of Brexit, which I welcome very much indeed. I also take the opportunity to join with the Deputy in expressing our sympathies to the family of the Secretary General of the PLO on his recent passing. I share that sympathy with all in that organisation and those of his loved ones.

We are particularly pleased that President-elect Joe Biden has won the confidence of the American people. It is an outstanding personal mandate - the largest ever in the history of US presidential elections. It is fair to say he is the most Irish of Irish-American presidents since John F. Kennedy. During the campaign, he nailed his colours to the mast in terms of his absolute commitment to the Good Friday Agreement and to the upholding of the Good Friday Agreement, and to his resistance to any measures, mechanisms or developments that would undermine the Good Friday Agreement and peace on the island of Ireland.

In the context of Brexit, fundamentally the negotiations that have been under way for quite some time between the EU and the United Kingdom are ones that, in our view, must yield a sensible outcome, which is a comprehensive free trade agreement without any tariffs or quotas that would limit the damage of Brexit to jobs, the Irish economy, the UK economy and the European economy. Given the enormous negative impact that Covid-19 has had on our economy and on jobs, the last thing that our respective economies need is a second seismic shock via a no-deal Brexit.

I welcome the decision of the House of Lords last evening on the internal market Bill. The talks have intensified over the past week or so and they are at a crucial point. We would like to see an outcome to those talks on the basis of a deal being arrived at and that deal, essentially, then would lead to the neutralisation of the offending clauses of the internal market Bill and strict adherence to the protocol and to the withdrawal agreement because those are international treaties that the UK Government signed up to and that the British Parliament approved of. In our view, the EU was correct in taking infringement action against the UK in respect of those legislative proposals.

The key end objective for Ireland is that the future relationship between the UK and Europe would be a progressive one that has solid foundations that could lead to a fruitful engagement into the future, but, above all, one that would protect jobs and protect our economy. That is our objective. I intend to consult party members. We met last week on related matters. We discussed Brexit and the implications for the operation of the protocol. I believe there were constructive discussions on the protocol in the joint committee over the past while and important progress was made. I am conscious that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have written to us about the issue of Northern Ireland goods' access to the European Union free trade agreements. That is something that has been raised with us by stakeholders as well. A joint letter has been received from the First Minister and deputy First Minister on practical arrangements around the application of certain aspects of the protocol. Those practical solutions are being explored by the United Kingdom and the European Union to address specific concerns regarding some specific supply chains from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. It is important that all outstanding issues are settled in the coming weeks to give the certainty which businesses and citizens need.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Notwithstanding all of the difficulties that have presented in the course of this process, there is no doubt that a deal is still possible. If good sense is to prevail then there will be a deal but of course we cannot be certain of any of that. That is why I have raised this issue with the Taoiseach today. There are many issues on which the Oireachtas will divide, that is in the nature of our system and of our political differences, which are honestly held, but on this issue, and particularly since the edifice of the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process itself cannot be disrupted, undermined or weakened in any way, it is absolutely essential we act as one. I therefore ask the Taoiseach that we have, as a matter of regular occurrence, briefings and contact not just with Sinn Féin or myself as its leader but with all Opposition parties and with the Houses as a whole because as weeks now start to tick down and as pressure intensifies, it becomes all the more important that full briefings and full information is shared.

**The Taoiseach:** I undertake to do that. I am conscious that the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, is introducing the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Consequential Provisions) Bill 2020 tomorrow. I believe he has had consultation with party spokespeople across the House and has secured a good degree of consensus and constructive engagement on that Bill, which is crucial for preparedness on Ireland's behalf. I spoke with the President of the European Commission over the weekend in relation to ongoing contacts between the European Union side and the UK side. We had an interesting meeting of the British-Irish Council on Friday and again the Brexit issue was discussed at length. It was interesting that a number of administrations on the British-Irish Council, from the Scottish Government across to the islands and the Welsh Government had very negative attitudes to the internal market Bill and they made that very clear to the Secretary of State, Michael Gove. The level playing field, fisheries and a governance mechanism are still the outstanding issues and progress still has to be made on those three.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I raise an issue with the Taoiseach that has been raised numerous times in the Chamber in relation to Debenhams workers who have been on strike for over 200 days. It is becoming one of the longest strikes in Irish labour history. My colleague, Deputy Boyd Barrett, raised this issue with the Taoiseach last week and the Taoiseach acknowledged that the talks in the WRC did not deliver a solution. The Taoiseach said something has to be done. Regardless of political affiliation, I think we all agree that something has to be done

because this cannot go on. What the workers are looking for is very just: a fair redundancy. That is the cornerstone of this fight. Many TDs, of all political affiliations, have visited the picket line and the workers want to see a solution. They want to see a meaningful settlement to which they are entitled. Some of the workers worked for the company for decades. They feel as though they have been robbed by their employer and they feel let down by the State. This should never have happened. If we look back at what happened in Clerys, the Government should have implemented the Duffy Cahill report and this should never have happened.

A solution can be found at this late stage. This could go on indefinitely and we want to see a settlement by the Government. The Taoiseach can intervene personally. Sometimes the last people to get paid as creditors are the workers themselves. They are the people who made all of that money in the first place so it is a terrible injustice. The Government can waive the fees that are owed to the State, which could accumulate up to €20 million. To sort out the strike would cost between €12 million and €14 million. The Government has the power to waive these fees with regard to final settlements. The strike has to end, and it will end, but it has to end with workers feeling they have not been robbed. That is very important. They should not be robbed and they feel they have to have a settlement. This could go on forever. It is in the Taoiseach's power to intervene in this personally and end the strike as soon as possible.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of the Debenhams workers. It is very difficult and unsatisfactory from the workers' perspective that it has dragged on for so long and they have not received their redundancy entitlements as per the collective agreement they entered into with their employer. The Government will, of course, honour the statutory redundancy but that is not the issue at stake. The recent exploratory talks at the Workplace Relations Commission ended without agreement. The Ministers of State, Deputies English and Troy, jointly chaired a forum with the social partners on 4 November to discuss the legislative provisions that deal with redundancy and insolvency from a company law and employment law perspective. I am already on the record of the House saying we need to change the legislative situation, particularly in terms of liquidations and the parity and status given to collective agreements. That in itself may not be of much use to the workers here and now in the current situation.

I am not quite clear regarding what the Deputy said about the Government waiving fees but I take it he might be referring to State agencies or arms of the State that stand to get something from the liquidation, such as Revenue or the Department of Social Protection. The challenge facing the Government in situations such as this is the creation of a precedent for other situations. We do not want a situation emerging whereby the Government on an ongoing basis picks up the tab for rogue employers or, indeed, for employers who never honour their commitments irrespective. The legislative framework is fairly clear in this regard. That said, we have not stopped looking at ways of seeing whether we can be of some assistance here, notwithstanding the legal constraints. A liquidation takes place within a legal framework and it is not that simple or easy for the Government to just waive the legal issues to one side and intervene in a manner that could ultimately create a precedent that would allow other employers to get off the hook from their obligations. I do not think anybody in the House wants that either. We are supportive of the best outcome possible for the workers but the issue is trying to get the mechanism to secure that. That has proved very thorny and very difficult to get sorted.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I do not doubt the Taoiseach's bona fides in trying to settle this outstanding strike. The State should step aside as a creditor because otherwise the workers will not get the redundancy they are looking for. It is really important that something concrete hap-

pens. We can talk until the cows come home and have all of the platitudes we want but this is about will. It is like everything in life: if the will is there, things can be settled. Things are not as complicated as they are made out to be. The Taoiseach and the Government have the power to intervene on this occasion, because the previous Government made a mess of the situation where workers were being screwed by their big employer. Of course, there are rogue employers but there are some good employers as well and some very good workers. Those workers have been out for over seven months, rain, shine and everything, including Covid-19, and they still have that amazing solidarity to stay the course. They deserve it. They deserve two extra weeks with their statutory redundancy, and that is the least they deserve.

**The Taoiseach:** What the Deputy is saying, essentially, is that whatever is due to the various Government Departments, to Revenue or in terms of social protection should be waived, if I understand him correctly. That creates a very significant potential incentivisation for others in the future to welch on their obligations to workers, knowing the State will pick up the tab. Essentially, that means creating a new statutory redundancy scheme in an *ad hoc* way and simply saying the State will pick up the tab anyway, which would then incentivise employers to prioritise other issues for themselves and other creditors. I am not sure that is the simple or easy way out of this either.

That said, I am again going to bring all parties from the Government side to meet on this to see if we can develop mechanisms to try to get this resolved. The workers have been out for a long, long time and it has been very difficult for them. They have been treated shabbily. I will see what we can do in this regard.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I want to ask the Taoiseach a quick question with a “Yes” or “No” answer. Does he understand the difference between lo-lo and ro-ro freight?

**The Taoiseach:** I do.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** If he does, he will not, as part of Government, be endorsing the Irish Maritime Development Office, IMDO, report or review that was carried out for the Department of Transport. Given my 30 years in logistics management and my experience, let me explain what logistics management means. It is the part of the supply chain that plans, controls and implements the efficient and effective flow of goods and services from the point of origin to the point of consumption to meet the customer’s requirements. That is not contained within the IMDO document. It is called the Irish Maritime Development Office but there is no development within this review - none. What we are doing is trying to replace an efficient and effective route, the land bridge, which currently takes 13.5 hours for the 150,000 freight movements per year. The IMDO did not feel the need to talk to the people who operate the trucks, the Irish Road Haulage Association, which had no part in this review. Yet, the office of the Minister for Transport can release a press statement, headlined: “Sufficient capacity on existing continental services to accommodate displaced landbridge traffic”. Nothing changes. We seemingly have capacity just sitting there, waiting for Brexit to happen.

I have been in the Dáil for nine months and not one word I have said has been listened to - not one. There is no solution in this report for the land bridge traffic. It is an utter disgrace that the people who are operating logistics management in this country were not even consulted. What it actually says is that, as an alternative to the 13.5 hours movement, we should use container ships that do not take trucks or drivers and that travel for 38 hours. It is not efficient and effective. It is the worst solution I have ever seen. The Taoiseach, in his opening remarks in

reply to Deputy McDonald, said that the Government is in the business of protecting jobs and businesses. That report does not do that for this country. It is beyond belief for me to sit here after nine months and have to read that and, worse still, to have it presented by the Department of Transport to my constituency colleagues who know something but certainly not as much as I do about transport. I am gravely concerned.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this pertinent question. She also raised it the last time she contributed during Leaders' Questions. I went back to my Cabinet colleagues and discussed it with them, particularly the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Robert Troy, who had a discussion with the Deputy in this House another occasion. We cannot divulge confidential discussions of the Cabinet subcommittee but this issue was raised there and has been raised outside of Government and across Government and Ministers.

We have been assured repeatedly, particularly in the context of Brexit preparedness, that sufficient capacity exists. My understanding was that the Irish Maritime Development Office, IMDO, had engaged with all stakeholders but the Deputy is clear that they have not engaged with the Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA. I will raise that to make sure there are direct discussions with the IRHA.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** It is too late.

**The Taoiseach:** It is never too late. The Minister for Transport and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, have been clear on the messaging to businesses to act now and to trial direct services to continental ports. The IMDO analysis is informing Government policy on this. Issues have been raised. I am anxious to make sure no stone is left unturned and all potential eventualities are catered for. For example, there could be significant difficulties with the land bridge, even if there is a normal Brexit as opposed to a no-deal Brexit. There will be issues. There will be a lot more around customs declarations and a lot more administration. There are a lot of issues there.

The IMDO says there is enough capacity on direct routes to continental Europe to take all of the current traffic from Ireland to continental Europe via the GB land bridge. Shipping companies are giving assurances to the IMDO on this matter and to the effect that if there is a demand for increased shipping capacity on direct routes, they will respond. They have indicated a number of options that can be quickly implemented by them if required, including using existing spare capacity, increasing sailings, redeploying ships and chartering vessels. Last week, we saw moves from Irish Ferries and Stena Line to increase direct sailings from Rosslare and Dublin to Cherbourg from January 2021. Departments and agencies have initiated a communications campaign to the sector, "ACT now and Prepare to Switch", to encourage importers and exporters to focus on the direct route option now.

Has the Deputy met the Minister for Transport? If not, we should organise that. I will ask the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, to meet the Deputy on this issue. She is raising issues that, from her perspective, are not satisfactorily responded to. I am anxious to get the issue brought to some resolution.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Everything that the Taoiseach has said is misinformed. The IMDO is not informing the Government; it is misinforming it. The IMDO says there is enough capacity on the direct route but I will inform the Taoiseach what happened on Saturday. Eight

vehicles were left behind on the pier in Rosslare Europort. I happened to be there. It happened because the ship that should be in Rosslare is anchored off Holyhead because the crew have Covid and it is quarantined for two weeks. These are the issues that the IMDO do not inform the Taoiseach about. This is not the real world in here; out there is. The supply chain is going to be damaged irreparably if the Government does not take action and use the connectivity fund that we were told could be used if Brexit had a detrimental effect on certain sectors. It is not even our money. It is being provided by Europe for the atrocity that Brexit will visit upon us. We do not have direct ferries to the closest possible port. We have ro-ro ferries that sail twice a week. All of the other ships that the IMDO are reporting on are in excess of that length of traffic. The sailing from Rosslare to Cherbourg is 18 hours. The sailing from Dublin to Zeebrugge is 38 hours. That is not an efficient, effective alternative.

**The Taoiseach:** I again thank the Deputy for her comments. I will ask the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State with responsibility for international and road transport and logistics, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, to engage with her on the specifics and details as she sees them. I have received consistent reassurances from the Minister and the Minister of State that this issue is adequately prepared for. I am anxious that the points that the Deputy has raised are dealt with and resolved.

There will obviously be problems if Covid-19 arises in a given situation, independent of Brexit and anything else, and crews are knocked out by the virus and forced into isolation and so on. That can happen. Outside of those circumstances, we need to make sure that we are prepared for any eventuality that may emerge.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** The Debenhams workers organised a meeting last Thursday. Representatives from many political parties, including Fianna Fáil, were at that meeting. The workers were filling us in about the outcome of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, negotiations - or non-negotiations, as such. They raised serious issues about what can be done under the legal framework of insolvency. They said that it looks as if the ongoing impasse will mean that the current asset value of the liquidated Debenhams business might be depleted by the end of the year. This will affect not only the workers but also the State, which would potentially forgo many millions of euro due to it as a preferential creditor. It was also explained that the workers had been offered €500,000, down from €1 million.

This dispute is now into its eighth month. The Taoiseach talks about his sympathy for those 1,000 workers but he still does nothing. We are eight months on. The Debenhams workers' union, Mandate, have written to the Taoiseach twice, on 22 October and 2 November, and he has not replied on either occasion. Words and sympathy are all well and good but what the workers want is action. We are now 215 days into this dispute. It is clear that the liquidators, KPMG, are not going to meet the workers' legitimate redundancy claim. The Taoiseach could act. He could move with urgency to establish a public State insolvency fund to deal with the situation faced by the Debenhams workers, a situation that will, most likely, be faced by other workers in the future. It has been faced by workers in the past. The Taoiseach could establish such a fund and make the payment to the Debenhams workers a priority. As I have stated previously, such a fund could be financed by a small increase in employers' PRSI. This could have been included in the recent budget. A figure of €10 million is a modest amount compared with the supports being given to businesses through loans and grants during the Covid crisis. Will the Taoiseach give a commitment to act now? This matter will only be resolved politically, it will not be resolved under the insolvency legislation. The Taoiseach should try to resolve this dispute and protect workers into the future.

It is now 1,715 days - in other words, four years and eight months - since the Duffy Cahill report was issued and still no action has been taken. The Taoiseach promised yet another review but where is it? When the Duffy Cahill report was issued, it was strongly opposed by IBEC. Is that still the position? Is IBEC still opposing it? Is it because of lobbying by employers that no action has been taken on this matter? Perhaps there is a whistleblower out there who might let us know what is really going on.

I had another point to make but I will come back to the Taoiseach on that another time. The Debenhams workers cannot be left out on the picket line for another week, two weeks, three weeks or four weeks. The liquidator is saying it will potentially walk away on 23 December. What will that mean for everybody involved? The Debenhams workers need to be protected and we need political intervention.

**The Taoiseach:** I discussed the matter earlier with Deputy Gino Kenny. The situation has never been simple in terms of resolving the dispute since the liquidation occurred, as I have acknowledged and been honest about from the beginning. People may have been given expectations during this dispute that could never be realised. Simplistic solutions were offered which never had any prospect of being realised. The liquidation process, in itself, was never going to replace the legitimate redundancy entitlements of the workers. The company treated the workers very shabbily. I accept that saying that is not enough for the workers. There has been no lobby by anybody against any resolution of this so let us not create another conspiracy. I have had general discussions with the head of ICTU and I have met workers on this, and there has been ongoing consultations with Ministers. The Mandate trade union has done everything it possibly can and it has not been easy for the union either.

With regard to the fund the Deputy mentioned and the increase in PRSI, that again would have far-reaching consequences as this cost would be on every employer. Whether they are doing well or not in the middle of Covid-19, they would still be charged that.

The more important point on that is that what we are essentially proposing here, if we are to go down that route, is that one would be getting others to bail out the shoddy behaviour of some parties. That is a general point we cannot ignore. Once this is done once, it has been done a second and a third time, and let us be under no illusion that we are creating a precedent then. Whatever mechanism is arrived at, we all better be clear if it has far-reaching consequences and could tip the balance the wrong way. Employers should meet their obligations and the law should be changed to ensure that collective agreements are given higher priority in liquidations. That should certainly happen. I will discuss this with colleagues across Government again with a view to seeing if there is any way we can develop a resolution of this and a way of bringing it to a conclusion.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** A public state insolvency fund is a matter of course in European countries so it is not unusual and this proposal is not being plucked from the sky. We have solidarity funds such as the Social Insurance Fund where people contribute through PRSI for the good of all even though they may not get sick. All sorts of reliefs have been brought in for the very wealthy in this country. There was the special assignee relief programme where €28.1 million was forgone in taxes in respect of only 1,000 top executives. The key employee engagement programme was brought in in 2017, which has cost €10 million in tax incentives for top executives. The Government is, therefore, able to bring in certain measures and to bail out the banks. It can bring in guillotined legislation to seal the records of mother and baby homes. When it comes to workers, creative and exceptional measures have to be put in place to deal

with them. We should also bring in longer-term practices and amendments to company law and so forth. These workers have to be looked after.

**The Taoiseach:** The State provides statutory redundancy and in certain redundancy contexts provides a safety net where employers are either not in a position to pay their redundancies or workers are left with nothing. The State continues to play a strong proactive role in this area. Our systems are as strong as other member states across Europe. We are open to strengthening those. I will engage with the Deputy again and, as I have said, I will talk to other colleagues across Government to see what can be done.

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The House has agreed that for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency only, 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 be put to the House. Is proposal No. 1 for dealing with Tuesday's business agreed to? It is not agreed.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** It is not agreed. Can I propose that sometime before the end of the week the Minister for Justice comes and gives a statement to the House on the advice that she receives from the Attorney General as to the crisis in the Judiciary? It is important that we build maximum consensus among all parties and groupings in this House to try to find a way forward through this. It would be appropriate also if the Taoiseach were to organise a meeting of the party leaders and the group leaders in order to brief everybody and ensure that we are all on the same page and can work together to find a solution to this particular situation.

**The Taoiseach:** I am conscious of what the Ceann Comhairle said at the commencement of these proceedings. I might have been anticipating a question on this issue during Leaders' Questions but it did not materialise for understandable reasons, to be fair. It would be my intention to seek a meeting with party leaders at which we could jointly assess the situation without prejudice. I am mindful of comments that were made by representatives of different parties this morning in a constructive vein. This is a very serious issue. It is fundamental to the separation of powers and is at the very heart of our Constitution so we have to respond in a very serious, sensitive and proper way. I suggest that the first step in this regard would be a meeting with the party leaders to assess what has happened and discuss how to deal with it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** If anybody is indicating, it is one person from each grouping and it is the Order of Business for today. I call Deputy Catherine Murphy.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** It was said earlier but I want to put down a marker in respect of the way the rotation of speaking time happens. Five minutes on a motion of confidence is just not on. The Taoiseach would not have accepted it in the previous Dáil or in the prior one when he was treated very differently from the way we are being treated in this Dáil. That simply has to be looked at. It is not acceptable. We are here to hold the Government to account. The Taoiseach has previously spoken about the importance of having a good Opposition as well as a good Government. This is not the way to conduct business and it reflects really badly on the Government.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I thank the Taoiseach for agreeing to brief the party leaders on a delicate and sensitive issue regarding the Judiciary. We will commit to do our best to resolve it amicably and on a uniform basis across the House if we can. I accept the words of the Ceann Comhairle earlier that we have to be mindful of what we say. I support Deputy Catherine Murphy's claim. It is ridiculous and patently unfair that groups will end up with five minutes speaking time on an important motion such as the one that is coming up. It is not right or acceptable and it should not be happening.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the proposal for dealing with Tuesday's business agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Safe Ireland has published new data on first-time contacts with domestic violence services for the first six months of this pandemic and the study's findings are very alarming. Three and a half thousand women and just under 600 children sought support and safety from abuse and coercive control for the first time. Helpline calls to services also increased by 25% between March and August, with nearly 34,000 calls answered across the State. Between March and June, more than 1,343 requests for refuge went unmet because the services were full. In advance of the current level 5 restrictions, the Taoiseach reassured me that additional supports and resources for domestic abuse services would be provided. He told me clearly that money would not be an issue. I subsequently forwarded to him a briefing provided by Safe Ireland. Will he now commit to providing that additional funding and those resources to ensure that victims and their children are supported and kept safe?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. In advance of moving to level 5, we discussed the issue of domestic violence and the fact that, during the first lockdown, it was reported that there had been a significant increase in reports of domestic violence. Funding is not an issue, and should not be. Significant resources have been made available but I will speak to the Minister again and get an assessment of the report and the need to respond regarding any requirements that have been asked for and are needed.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am quite conscious of what the Ceann Comhairle said earlier regarding the Chief Justice and Mr. Justice Woulfe but this is an issue for all of us, in government and in opposition. It is not an Opposition-versus-Government issue. I welcome the Taoiseach's decision to meet party and group leaders but, having read the letters, I am going to make a request of him in advance of the meeting. It is quite obvious that there is other correspondence between the Chief Justice and Mr. Justice Woulfe and that we have only partial publication of correspondence. In fact, Mr. Justice Woulfe says the publication of all correspondence cannot be good for "either of us or for the Court or the public interest". In fairness, the Chief Justice states, "Unfortunately, further serious issues now arise out of both aspects of the transcripts of your interview with Ms Justice Denham and elements of the correspondence between us." We have, therefore, only partial correspondence. Through the Attorney General, can the Taoiseach request that the other correspondence be published? Second, with regard to the redactions of elements of Ms Justice Denham's report, which some would assume refer to politicians, can the politicians referred to be notified? These are my requests of the Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** First, the matters that the Deputy refers to are matters to be addressed within the judicial arm.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I asked about a request through the Attorney General.

**The Taoiseach:** I know but maybe the wise thing is to meet first and see collectively how we believe we should proceed rather than doing it in a piecemeal way. The facts are that the Attorney General advises the Government and that the Oireachtas has its own legal advice. It would require its own legal advice if it wanted to engage on the issue. I will reflect on what the Deputy has asked, however. I acknowledge what he is saying.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** I want to ask specifically about social housing. The programme for Government commits to ensuring that public procurement of social housing is cost-effective and that there are strong value-for-money protections in that regard. Given the report published last week by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage showing that direct build by local authorities is much more cost-effective than turnkey acquisitions or turnkey purchases from the private sector, will the Taoiseach commit now to ending the costly use of turnkey acquisitions and instead put all our resources into direct build for social housing?

**The Taoiseach:** As the Deputy knows, in the budget we allocated unprecedented resources for housebuilding, in particular public housing. Our target is 10,000 units per annum for the next five years. These will be direct builds.

There will always be an element of acquisition but we want to keep that to a minimum. I take the Deputy’s point; I have no issue with the points that it is far more cost-effective to build directly on the social housing front and that local authorities should become far more proactive on that front. The resources are now being made available at an unprecedented level to get on with the job. Likewise, resources will be provided in terms of affordable housing. There are also specific initiatives around homelessness. I do not disagree with the broad thrust of what the Deputy said.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Sixth-year students in our secondary schools have lost a lot of teaching time. The Minister for Education has made some changes to leaving certificate 2021 to try to take account of this. Coming off the back of the mid-term break, it is fair to say that there is a growing feeling among students that the Minister’s changes do not go far enough. An Instagram poll that I recently organised saw nearly 3,000 students participate, with more than 90% saying that the changes needed to go further and more concessions needed to be made. They said that the changes to be considered should include the cancellation of the leaving certificate. That is the feedback we received. Does the Government intend to listen to these students? If so, what changes to the leaving certificate is the Government considering making?

**The Taoiseach:** What the Government has said is a very clear commitment and intention to hold the leaving certificate next year. We are giving that certainty to the current cohort of students who are now in sixth year, who had a difficult year last year in fifth year - I am sorry, as I meant this year, but it was last year’s academic year - because of Covid-19, the degree of disruption that caused and the fact that schools were closed for quite some time. Account will be taken of that in terms of how the examinations are designed and in terms of the curriculum and the options and the choices. They will be designed in such a way as to take on board the challenges that the students have because they would have missed a significant amount of time last year, particularly in respect of subjects like history and languages. Therefore, the idea would be to give a far greater degree of choice to students who will be sitting the exam next year. I have no doubt that the Minister for Education and, indeed, the examinations board and the Department are giving this ongoing attention. I would surmise-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Go raibh maith agat, but I am trying to be fair to everyone.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I wish to ask about driving tests. There are 92,576 people waiting for driver tests. The current waiting period is 25 to 30 weeks. Prior to Covid, it was 19 weeks. This is not fair on people, be they young or older. I understand from the Minister that 16 retired testers are being rehired. While that is welcome, we need radical and seismic action. I believe it was the former Minister, Mr. Sylvester Barrett, who gave out licences in 1979 because of the delays. People cannot go to work, recreational activities or college. It is a major impediment in rural Ireland in particular. Under the RSA, people must take 12 lessons. If they are competent lessons, then they should give people the authority to say that they are now proficient at driving. Something must be done for this cohort of people.

**The Taoiseach:** I take the Deputy's point and I will pursue the matter with the Minister again to see if we can expedite it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Unfortunately, I believe that the Taoiseach has to leave.

**The Taoiseach:** No, I am okay.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are a number of Deputies offering. With their co-operation, I will get through them as quickly as possible. I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. I beg the House's pardon, but I will actually call Deputy Fitzpatrick. He was the last in this group.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I will just rise to-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy will be next after Deputy Fitzpatrick.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Thank you very much, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I would say that----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Fitzpatrick is first. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae will be next.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** As we speak, the Northern Ireland Assembly is discussing restrictions in Northern Ireland, which are to be reviewed on Friday. I come from a Border county. We in Louth, Meath and Monaghan have busted our backsides getting the coronavirus rate down. Our number of deaths has dropped, as has our number of positive cases. The North's numbers have doubled. Is the Government negotiating with the Northern Ireland Assembly? Everyone is talking about a united Ireland, but we seem to be on two different planets at the moment. We in the Border area are afraid for our lives. Everything is open in the North, including shops on main streets. We seem to be on a completely different island, but we are on the island of Ireland. If the Northern Ireland Assembly does not agree to work with us, it will be time to get the Army out patrolling the Border. The situation there has grown that serious. Is the Northern Assembly speaking to us? I hope that it will show common sense next Friday. Look at the difference made to this country since we went to level 5.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** We do not want another lockdown. We have had two so far.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to co-operate.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** If something is not done with the North, we will have a third lockdown. Please, sort out the North.

**The Taoiseach:** I have kept the channels open on a consistent basis with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, is in constant contact with the Minister for Health in the Northern Ireland Executive, Mr. Robin Swann. The respective Chief Medical Officers are engaging. Our views are well known. I have made the point that harmony in terms of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and the Republic would make sense. England has entered into a significant upping of the levels of restriction, and Scotland likewise. The Welsh are doing something similar. Our plan has been working effectively, from level 3 right through to level 4 in the Border counties and level 5. We are one of the best performers in Europe at the moment in terms of getting the numbers of deaths and hospitalisation down and getting the incidence rate down. It has been a great national effort from young people of all ages in the Republic. I urge people to keep it going so that we can get these numbers down to very low levels.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I raise again the issue of patients who need cataract procedures, hip and knee replacements and several other procedures. They have been advised today by the HSE that, as of 1 January, patients will not be accepted or cannot carry on with the cross-border directive. There are mutterings of a bilateral agreement with Northern Ireland but nothing has been forthcoming on this. Is the Taoiseach going to let people who have problems with their eyes and need cataracts removed go blind? Is he going to let the people who need hip and knee replacements continue suffering in pain? That is more or less what he has been insinuating in recent weeks. This is most unfair. Is the Taoiseach going to allow people to go blind after 1 January? That is the question I am asking him.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I, too, was informed this morning by the chief executive of a hospital in the North. This Saturday I have a bus going up to the North. I went on Radio Kerry this morning to discuss this important issue. I raised this with the Taoiseach in the Dáil before. To be clear, 5,500 patients have used this scheme every year for the past four years. It is not only for cataract operations; it is also for having tonsils removed and orthopaedic procedures, to name a few. If we take it that 5,500 people will be unable to travel to the North after 1 January and if we put those 5,500 on to our already overburdened waiting lists, it will cause chaos in our health service.

I am pleading with the Taoiseach today to ensure there is a bilateral agreement with the North of Ireland. We cannot have a situation whereby the only way people can get cross-border treatment is by going out of this country to some place like Spain. That will not work. The age profile of the people is such that many of them are too elderly to travel like that. I am pleading with the Taoiseach to do something for these people.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is Deputy Griffin indicating to come in on this question?

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I have been indicating for ten minutes to get in.

**The Taoiseach:** I have made it clear in the past that this is because Britain is leaving the European Union. This is not a scheme; it is a European directive. Europe made this facility available to all the citizens of Europe. It is a cross-border arrangement for health services which are then recompensed by their taxpayers. Since Britain is leaving the European Union, its participation in the directive falls. That is what is happening. That said, I have indicated in this House that we are negotiating a bilateral agreement. Whether there is a deal or a no-deal Brexit, we are negotiating a bilateral agreement. The UK health service and the health service in the Republic or the Department here are negotiating. The omnibus Brexit Bill has provisions

for Northern Ireland on a range of issues.

To be fair, under the common travel area, and not only on the common travel issue, historically, the British-Irish relationship on access to health services has been excellent. The UK health service provides specialist treatments and has received many Irish children and people down through the years, and *vice versa*. We now have cardiac care in Ireland in Crumlin for children, for example. That is the spirit in which we intend to proceed.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Yesterday, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, announced €63.5 million for a range of greenway projects throughout the country for 2021. The Minister went on to pat the Government on the back by saying this was the highest single year amount ever allocated to greenways. He went on to say this showed the commitment of this Government to providing a step-change in the way in which we fund walking and cycling.

*5 o'clock*

Can the Taoiseach explain why Cork South-West did not get one brown cent of the €63.5 million fund? Are we now in the same situation with this Government as we were with the previous one, whereby west Cork was overlooked for rural regeneration funds year after year? West Cork has some fabulous opportunities for greenway funding, from old railway lines to old walking routes all the way from Innishannon to the Beara Peninsula, which are starved of funds. Why is the constituency of Cork South-West is being overlooked for greenway funds in 2021?

**The Taoiseach:** I can tell the Deputy one thing: by the time I am finished, there will be no absence of greenways in west Cork. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is here and he agrees with me.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We have had the promise of a vaccine with 90% effectiveness. We need people to be careful and we need to maintain public health guidelines, but the European Commission is to sign a contract with Pfizer and BioNTech tomorrow. I think this is the fourth vaccine contract, and we know that a number of phase 3 vaccine trials are ongoing. Could the Taoiseach explain how the State will have access to these vaccines? Has there been any discussion on an all-Ireland response on vaccination and then ensuring we have the capacity to administer vaccines and that people will get them on the basis of need and not just on the basis of economics?

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** We all awoke in a brighter world this morning with hope that we may have a vaccine with a 90% effectiveness rate coming our way. In Grange Castle, in my constituency, Pfizer has done tremendous work, and the Tánaiste and I have been out there to meet them and see first-hand the work they have been doing. I would appreciate an update from the Taoiseach on how this will impact on us in Ireland, what the plans are for roll-out of the vaccine and any insights he has on this going forward.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government has been part of the European Commission approach in term of the pre-purchase of vaccines from a number of companies. Pfizer-BioNTech is one of the partnerships in respect of which a contract is being explored and it is very close to conclusion. Others are Sanofi, Janssen and Oxford-AstraZeneca. The Government today decided to establish a task force headed by Brian MacCraith, former president of Dublin City University, to lead up the logistics operation that will be required for both the physical procurement of the vaccine, that is, bringing it into the country, creating distribution networks and making sure we can get it administered. A very significant logistical effort is required in respect of the vaccine.

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, for example, has to be stored at -80°C. The task force is representative of people who will have key roles in ensuring we not only purchase the vaccines but are in a position to distribute them to the population.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Is the Taoiseach aware that, in March, the SouthDoc centre in Blackpool, Cork, along with a number of other SouthDoc centres, was closed due to the Covid-19 crisis? All the other SouthDoc centres were reopened except for the one on the north side of the city, in Blackpool. I have contacted the HSE and the operators of SouthDoc seeking a timeline for the reopening of SouthDoc in Blackpool. At the moment people have to travel to the Kinsale Road, and for people who do not have a car, it is €20 to get a taxi over and another €20 back. This is a vital service for the people of the north side of Cork city and for Cork North-Central as a whole. Can I get an answer today? Will Blackpool's SouthDoc centre be open by Christmas because it is desperately needed for the north side?

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I will answer because the Taoiseach, I think, has an important phone call to take. It is no offence to the Deputy or the serious questions he asks about the people in Blackpool on the north side of Cork. I do not have a specific answer as to what happened with the closure but I commit to getting an answer from the HSE and making sure it is provided to the Deputy as quickly as possible. He is right; it is some distance from Blackpool over to the Kinsale Road. We want to make sure facilities are available in every location.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** There seems to be a level of confusion about the Department of Education's interpretation of HSE guidelines with regard to special needs assistants, SNAs, and face coverings insofar as a school does not have to provide medical grade face masks for SNAs outside of intimate care settings. The Minister will agree that our special needs assistants are doing sterling work. They are on the front line and need adequate protection. Will the Minister ensure the Minister for Health engages with the Minister for Education and the Fórsa trade union to ensure the adequate protections are provided in classrooms for special needs assistants as they do their best to keep our schools open?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I join the Deputy in commending the support that is given to children with special needs in our education system, of which I have personal experience. It is critical that special needs assistants get all the protection and supports they need. I will ask the Minister for Health directly, and also the Minister for Education, to follow up and make sure the necessary material is available. There is an ongoing process here. The Government is committed to the school system and we will do everything we can to keep it safe and keep our schools open at this time.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I am seeking an update on the assisted human reproduction Bill. One element in particular, namely, the general scheme which dealt with posthumous reproduction, was introduced and went through pre-legislative scrutiny when the Minister, Deputy Harris, was Minister for Health. That has created an expectation among people who have to go through an unexpected and tragic time and must contend with that. In the absence of any legislation, clinics and people who use clinics must operate without any legislative guide. When will the Bill come forward? In the interim, will the Government engage with the clinics, through the Minister for Health, to ensure that any actions that are deemed to be irreversible to gametes or embryos do not take place? I know it is sensitive subject and I thank the Minister very much for any response he might have.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am informed the Bill has gone through a lengthy process of pre-legislative scrutiny. Further work is progressing on it and I expect it will proceed into the Dáil in due course. It is, however, a complex issue which explains why such extensive pre-legislative scrutiny has been done on it.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I raise the issue of paramedics. Last year, paramedics went on strike and earlier this year, we all sat in the Dáil clapping them. We still refuse to let them be represented by the union of their choice, namely, the Psychiatric Nurses Association, PNA. I ask the Minister and the Government to intervene with the HSE to allow them to be represented in talks by the PNA.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Again, I will have to refer the matter to the line Minister. I do not have details on where those negotiations are taking place. We are engaging on an ongoing basis with the trade union movement. As recently as last week, we attended a meeting of the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, at which the partnership approach involving the Government working with both employers and unions was discussed. That is the correct approach. We must be careful that we do not intervene if particular issues are being solved through our labour dispute resolution processes. I will attempt to get a direct answer for the Deputy on where those talks are at this time.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I welcome the funding for regional airports announced today, which is very important for these airports. Will the Minister update the House on when he expects the Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, national, secondary and primary road funding for 2021 to be announced? It is usually announced around this time of year.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** There will be a series of developments in this area. As the Deputy will be aware, we are seeking to make a significant switch from road spending to public transport funding. We set out the broad outline of the budgets during budget time, which sees a major positioning of new investments for projects such as the greenway investment announced yesterday. Today in County Waterford, we announced the development of a significant sustainable transport infrastructure which will lead to transport-led development. There is a series of other initiatives which will look at investment using the EU recovery fund. Investment will not just be by way of the budget. It is on the EU recovery fund that the first focus will be in terms of what additional funding we can get, particularly for balanced regional development outside Dublin, which will go towards the sorts of announcements we made in Waterford earlier today and in respect of the greenways yesterday. I hope this sort of funding will make a real difference in Kerry and every other county. My focus, first and foremost, is on getting those sustainable transport projects agreed.

### **Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion**

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Transport, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Defence

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Minister for Finance

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 30th July, 2020, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Education.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2020: Referral to Joint Committee**

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2020,

copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 28th October, 2020, be referred to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, in accordance with Standing Order 95(3)(b), which, not later than 25th November, 2020, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 101, and Standing Order 100(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Appointment of Members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority: Motion**

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

That Dáil Éireann, noting that the Government agreed on 28th October, 2020, to propose, for the approval of Dáil Éireann, the appointment or re-appointment, as the case may be, of the persons concerned to be members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, and pursuant to sections 9 and 10 of the Legal Services Regulation Act, 2015, approves the appointment of Simon Murphy, with effect from 1st October, 2020, by the Government to be a member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority in accordance with that Act, and the re-appointment of Don Thornhill, Angela Black, Eileen Barrington and Joan Crawford, with effect from 1st October, 2020, by the Government to be members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority in accordance with that Act, such appointment or re-appointments be-

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ing for a period not exceeding four years from the date of appointment or re-appointment, as the case may be, as the Government may determine.

Question put and agreed to.

## **Ceisteanna - Questions**

### **Census of Population**

23. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the decision to delay the census. [31753/20]

24. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of his Department on census 2021. [33230/20]

25. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach the number of small to medium enterprises that have ceased trading as a result of the pandemic lockdown to date; and the estimated number that will have closed by the end of 2020. [34717/20]

26. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the decision to delay the census until 2022. [35141/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 23, 24 and 26 together.

On the advice of the Central Statistics Office, CSO, the Government decided on 15 September to postpone the 2021 census until 3 April 2022. The census of population is a unique count of everyone present in Ireland on census night and provides essential information for planning and decision-making. It is vital that the census enables everyone in Ireland to participate in order that the information gathered reflects all our needs and can be used to make decisions that benefit us all.

The decision to postpone the census scheduled for 18 April 2021 until 3 April 2022 was not taken lightly and was based on a number of factors. First and foremost for consideration was the need to ensure the safety of the general public and CSO field staff, coupled with the need to deliver a census that achieves the highest possible response rate across all facets of society. Furthermore, the census of population is a major logistical operation and Covid-19 restrictions have prevented or delayed many key planning activities from taking place over recent months. On consideration of these challenges, the Government decided to postpone the 2021 census until April the following year in order to enable the CSO to undertake a comprehensive, inclusive and safe census in 2022 that will provide valuable and accurate data for our country in the years ahead.

Between censuses, the CSO produces annual population estimates rolled forward from the previous census. In this instance, the CSO will roll the 2016 estimates forward for an additional year until they can be recalibrated with the new detailed census data, preliminary results of which will be available in mid-2022, with definitive results coming on a phased basis from

April to December 2023. It is expected that the delay of one year will result in a similar delay in the next report of the Constituency Commission.

Under Regulation No. 763/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council, implementing Regulation No. 2017/712, Ireland is required to transmit census data to EUROSTAT with a reference date in 2021. The transmission must be made by March 2024. The CSO will work closely with EUROSTAT to mitigate the impact of the changed census date and will consider the introduction of additional methodologies and data sources in order to satisfy EUROSTAT's requirements.

Work on planning for census 2022 is under way. This involves revisiting project timelines and investigating the introduction of new approaches, including online interviewing and training, to reduce further potential disruptions.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** We understand the public health concerns of the CSO's director general and agree that it makes sense to postpone the census. However, under the EU framework regulation, Ireland is required to submit census data to EUROSTAT with a reference date next year. What accommodation has been made with EUROSTAT to allow Ireland to push the taking of the census into 2022?

On a related matter, there is a shortfall in the HSE's contact-tracing capacity. A census is a huge undertaking requiring a large number of people to be deployed as field officers. Is the HSE working with the CSO to avail of that resource and train the personnel to take up that role in the contact-tracing area? It strikes me as an obvious opportunity that arises from the current situation.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I was late to the Chamber and missed the Minister of State's reply. I take it that he is saying that the CSO, for public health reasons, feels it cannot go ahead with the census. That is perfectly understandable in the current circumstances. However, the Government could use the interregnum to prepare for a census to take place a year later and ensure we use the information provided by it. The census offers an enormous wealth of information that is underutilised much of the time. It provides us with enormous detail about the changes that are happening in our society and the changing needs of our society. If we use that information properly, we can plan for the future.

Unfortunately, there is often no joined-up thinking in terms of the information that is provided. The census tells us about birth rates, for example, and it should tell us about the infrastructure we need for childcare, education and housing. It should allow us to plan for those things, if we are using that information properly and linking it to our policy objectives and plans. However, that does not happen. Looking back to the 2016 census, one of the things it told us was that there were a lot more people living in households, which should have told us that we had a housing problem we needed to deal with and plan for, if we did not know that already. It told us that we needed to plan for things like childcare provision and infrastructure, of which we are desperately short. We have not used the information the census provides us with to plan properly for the needs of our society, particularly in areas like the provision of housing, decent school infrastructure and childcare infrastructure.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I did not hear any reference to the question that I put in which is, obviously, grouped with these questions. I take it my question is being taken after these.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are only dealing with this group of questions. When this

slot is over, I am afraid that is it.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** As far as I understand it, we are discussing Questions Nos. 23 to 26, inclusive. My question is Question No. 25.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will deal with it now.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

The point of my question is that there are so many victims of the current Covid restrictions in this country that it is hard to separate them but, obviously, small businesses have been massacred because of Covid and because of the restrictions over the past six months. We have seen a large amount of pubs close which have left the isolated even further isolated around the country. We are seeing hundreds of crèches, childcare services, shops, cafés and restaurants all closing for good. Individuals invested vast amounts of money and their own time and sweat into sustaining these businesses up until now and those businesses are being closed completely and all the jobs that exist in those businesses are being lost as well. One of the questions that we in Aontú have been putting to the Government over the past while is that we need to be able to quantify the cost of the restrictions to know adequately whether or not the restrictions are disproportionate. Indeed, Ireland has the sixth strictest restrictions on the planet at present even though we are third from the bottom with regards the level of Covid that exists in the country in European terms.

Fifty-one per cent of retail has migrated online. That is an astounding figure. The majority of retail that exists in these Twenty-six counties is currently happening online. Many of those who have gone online will never go back to physical retail in the future. Amazon is booming while many small Irish businesses are going bust.

We in Aontú have put forward a Bill that looks for a 25% decrease in the wages of TDs and Senators during this period. The sentence, “We are all in this together”, is being thrown around like confetti and it is plainly not true. The wages of TDs are going upwards and everybody else’s wages are going downwards.

What I am asking the Chief Whip to answer is, given that they are making serious decisions on so many people’s lives, if he will quantify the number of businesses that are closed for good as a result of these restrictions.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I thought we were taking Deputy Tóibín’s question separately. I did not know it was grouped. I will try and answer it now.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are four grouped.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** That is fine. I will answer them all.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There was a little extra latitude because Deputy Kelly was not here.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** To answer Deputy Mac Lochlainn’s question around the impact of the census postponement on the EU regulation, under the Framework Regulation of the Council and the Parliament Ireland is required to transmit census data to EUROSTAT with a reference date in 2021 and this transition must be made by March 2024. The CSO is working closely with EUROSTAT to mitigate the impact of the changed census date and will consider

the introduction of additional methodologies and data sources in order to satisfy all EURO-STAT's requirement.

On the Deputy's question around engagement between the CSO and the HSE, I understand there has been extensive engagement in relation to contact tracing and around the utilisation of field officers, as the Deputy has referenced and which is a constructive suggestion. I will ask my officials to send the Deputy a detailed note on that. On the public health response, we need to have all pillars of the State trying to support contact tracing, particularly when there is an escalation of the epidemiological position on how we can respond to it.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, I agree that we should use next year. We should always use every occasion to look at all our data sources to inform public policy objectives and the CSO has not in any way stopped doing that. It is continuing its work and its regular reporting to Government and its public reports and its data sources are a key objective in public policy and in responding to the changing needs of society as the Deputy referenced. Perhaps next year there will be additional time to do that when the census is not happening. I will bring the Deputy's feedback to the CSO in that regard.

In response to Deputy Tóibín, the CSO annual business demography figures indicate that there were 270,300 enterprises in the private business economy in 2018. Of these, some 269,700 were small and medium-sized enterprises, 248,300 of which had less than ten persons engaged and 21,400 of which employed between ten and 249 people.

Between April and August this year, the CSO collected and published six waves of its Business Impact of COVID-19 Survey to provide insights into the impact of the pandemic on businesses. The result of wave six of the survey indicated that an estimated 2.5% of enterprises had ceased trading temporarily while 1.2% had ceased trading permanently at the end of August.

The survey also asked businesses how confident they were in being able to continue trading. It found that 3.4% of enterprises were only confident of having the resources to continue trading for another month and 1.6% were not confident of having the resources to continue trading.

Annual statistics on business demography are compiled with a considerable time lag as they depend on processed tax-return data which enterprises may submit to the Revenue Commissioners up to 11 months after the reference year to submit. To provide early information about the situation in 2020, the CSO is currently developing a business signs-of-life analysis which will link Covid-19 related support payments and other administrative data to the business demography statistics to identify how many businesses are continuing to trade. The first report by the CSO on business signs of life will focus on the effect on business of employee-related supports, such as the pandemic unemployment payment and the wage support schemes. The CSO aims to publish this report in December and to follow it up with reports on the numbers of businesses which are continuing to trade. The CSO is also preparing to collect a larger-scale business impact of Covid-19 survey in January 2021 which will provide structural information on the impacts of the crisis on businesses throughout 2020.

There have been significant supports in the context of budget 2021, for example, the reduced VAT rate for the hospitality and tourism sector from 13.5% to 9%, the commercial rates waiver for Q4 of 2020, the 9,000 upskilling and reskilling opportunities and the extraordinary expenditure response around Covid-19 and the horizontal supports that are there in terms of the wage subsidy schemes. That support will be ongoing to support our SMEs. We are happy to

provide further data to the Deputy from the CSO related to his question.

*Sitting suspended at 5.27 p.m. and resumed at 5.39 p.m.*

## **Confidence in Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment: Motion**

**The Taoiseach:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann has confidence in the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Leo Varadkar T.D.

The decision by Sinn Féin to table a motion of no confidence in the Tánaiste was based on that party's hope that something would turn up that would help it use today for an aggressive political attack on the Government. It was a 100% cynical move and, unfortunately, it reflects the reality of its four months as the largest Opposition party. It has been left scrambling by the reality that nothing significant has changed since last week's two-hour session. Let no one be in any doubt the situation relating to how the nearly-completed contract for general practitioners was given to a doctors' organisation is a legitimate point of public concern. It occurred during the previous Government but it is a matter which this Government and Dáil have a right to ask questions about. As I have said repeatedly, it was inappropriate and it should not have happened. When the Tánaiste informed me of the issue he outlined the details of what happened and these details have remained consistent subsequently. He also accepted without any issue that political accountability required that he come before Dáil Éireann and answer detailed questions at length. In substance, no one has demonstrated any personal gain from how the document was distributed and public policy was not adversely impacted. The Tánaiste has acknowledged his error and all details have been published. Lessons have been learned all round and Ministers realise such situations should not occur during this Government.

In recent days, Sinn Féin representatives were busy telling anyone who would listen that today's debate would be preceded by some blockbuster revelations that would justify the tabling of the no confidence motion. This, of course, has not happened. In fact, there is mounting evidence that we should be very wary of placing weight on claims made in texts between third parties. The Dáil has exercised its political oversight of this case and there has been accountability. A number of Deputies have referred matters to regulatory and legal authorities, clearly more in hope than expectation that their legal assertions are backed up. That is their right and the independent structures involved will carry out their work. It is a tiresome part of debates such as this that attacks are thrown at other parties and Deputies as being somehow complicit or lacking independence. The fact is that Ireland has a multiparty system. Everybody who actually wants to achieve progress for the people has to be willing to work closely and constructively with others. I profoundly reject the idea of putting partisan manoeuvring into every issue. Sinn Féin is entitled to practise the politics of always looking for an angle and both participating in and attacking a government at the same time. I, and my party, simply do not agree. Quite frankly, I have no interest in playing the "politics as usual" to which Sinn Féin is committed. I see no purpose in using my time in this debate to address the ever-rising examples of Sinn Féin ignoring basic ethical standards. True republicanism is about working in the interests of all of

the people and my absolute focus is showing the Irish people that their Government is working for them.

At the moment our country is, with others, going through a dramatic social, economic and public health shock, which is unprecedented in the modern world. I am happy to propose a motion of confidence in the Tánaiste who is part of a coalition Government that is implementing an urgent and progressive programme to help and work with all sections of our society. Tackling the pandemic remains our first priority and the House will note that this morning's report from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, states that Ireland now has the third lowest incidence in the EU. We still have more progress to achieve if we are to limit the impact of the virus in the time before a vaccine is approved, manufactured and distributed but there is no doubt that the measures put in place by the Government are helping Ireland get through the pandemic's second wave.

Every Minister and every part of government have been working tirelessly to respond with action to address new issues as they have emerged. Within weeks of taking up office, we prepared and implemented a job stimulus programme to protect jobs and businesses, support our schools in reopening and respond to the urgent needs of many sectors. The budget we introduced last month goes further and puts in place a comprehensive range of actions to support the hardest hit sectors such as hospitality and culture and is, according to every independent review, highly progressive. People and communities whose needs are the greatest are receiving the biggest benefit of the budget. The left and the far left in this House refuse to acknowledge it but this is a simple fact and is backed up by all independent research. Even with the priority we must give to the pandemic, in only four months we have begun moving forward with a major programme of change and investment. Ministers are participating in a range of Cabinet committees that are delivering an unprecedented period of policy review and development.

In health, on top of resources for responding to Covid, next year will see an entirely new level of activity to deliver fast and sustained progress, including action on cancer, maternity and trauma care, a new public-only contract, 1,200 acute hospital beds, major advances in mental health services, access to diagnostics and access to new medicines. This is not small incremental change; it is substantive progress after only a few months. In education, the Minister and her officials have, together with the partners in education, succeeded in overcoming a series of major policy and logistical challenges and are now moving ahead to implement longer-term action, including a lower pupil-teacher ratio, a significant expansion of special education supports and a new push for inclusive schools. These and many other actions are at the heart of our work on education.

We, of course, continue to give a priority to helping to protect as many jobs as possible and secure a comprehensive and inclusive recovery. The Government has introduced a comprehensive range of measures to support businesses of all sizes and, in particular, the small and medium-sized businesses that are bearing the biggest impact. The Tánaiste has played a central role in delivering these initiatives and continues to proactively consult many stakeholders across business to help create and retain jobs. We have continued intensive work to secure and maintain high-valued inward investment. As part of this, I have held a range of meetings with key employers and potential new investors. The announcement we made last week with Pfizer of 300 new jobs confirmed that this Government is succeeding in showing that Ireland as a place to invest and to grow. The establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was a further example of this and a signal to the inward investment community that Ireland is serious about investment in fourth level and in research.

On housing, a new era of sustained support for social housing has begun. We have also begun action on the existential threat of climate change. Strong new legislation has been published and is going through the House and a wide series of initiatives on energy, biodiversity and sustainability are under way. At European level, we have continued our intense engagement with our partners concerning the critical Brexit negotiations and we played a constructive role in securing agreement on the breakthrough new EU funding mechanisms. On the future of this island, North-South interaction at ministerial level has been restored and is moving forward in a new spirit of cooperation. The new shared Ireland initiative is under way, built on the core principle of fulfilling the vision of the Good Friday Agreement and creating a new era of cooperation, understanding and contact between communities North and South. The €500 million fund created to support the initiative marks the largest sustained investment in this area and will benefit some of our most marginalised communities.

I am very pleased with the work the new Government has undertaken in only four months in office. The three parties that formed the Government have different views on many things but we have agreed to work together in the interests of the Irish people and this is what we are doing. At this critical moment in our country's history we are focused on action, not politics. We are working with the Irish people to get through this pandemic, to build an inclusive recovery and to deliver sustained progress on critical social, economic and environmental issues and that is why I and my party will vote confidence in the Tánaiste and in this Government this evening.

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I want to take this opportunity to speak to express confidence in the Tánaiste. Leo Varadkar has been a colleague of mine for many years and he is a person I have grown to know well and trust. We are here today because of a Sinn Féin attempt to continue to sow division within Government and capitalise on a mistake made by the Tánaiste. As became clear last week, Leo's motivation in bringing the National Association of General Practitioners, NAGP, into the fold on a new GP contract was well-meaning but it did take a shortcut. He should not have mailed the document to the NAGP president. He should instead have had the association briefed officially. The Tánaiste has apologised for this and said that it was wrong and not best practice. However, if one were to read the abuse that faceless online trolls and their backers have drummed up, one would be forgiven for thinking that the Tánaiste had acted for personal gain or to sabotage something instead of landing widespread support for a deal done with GPs that he cared about.

The Tánaiste has already been before this House to explain himself thoroughly and to take questions. It is obvious now that for some what is ongoing is not about establishing facts or truth but about sustaining a political smear campaign masquerading as whistle-blowing to inflict maximum political damage. Let us talk about whistle-blowers. In 2014, as Garda Sergeant Maurice McCabe's reputation stood in tatters and as he was labelled as "disgusting" by his superior, who in this House stood out from the crowd and said no, the actions of Maurice McCabe were not disgusting but distinguished? The Charleton tribunal said that remark came from a brave politician, a member of Cabinet and a senior individual within the political system and it was a break for Maurice McCabe that someone of that stature was brave enough to come out and call it as it was. That is the Leo Varadkar I know.

The timeline of April 2019 shows the truth and context, for those who want to see it, on this issue. The contracts were negotiated and done. The detail was widely briefed to the media by the IMO, the HSE and the Government. The Cabinet was updated. Hundreds of GPs were at organised meetings around the country discussing the detail, with briefing documents from the IMO. Only then did the Tánaiste give the document to the NAGP in an effort to try to bring

GPs together.

Last week was about accountability to the House, and rightly so. What is Sinn Féin's game here this evening? Is it using this issue to try to sow division in a coalition during a global pandemic and as Brexit negotiations reach endgame, or is Sinn Féin's strategy simply to harvest and nurture online hate and bile regardless of the truth and cost, the politics of division and resentment? I will let those listening to the benches opposite judge for themselves but I have no hesitation in voting confidence in Leo Varadkar.

**Minister for Social Protection(Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I have no hesitation in standing before the House this evening to express my full confidence in the Tánaiste, Deputy Leo Varadkar. I do stand here, however, feeling a deep sense of dismay as 2020 has been one of the most difficult years for this country. It is a year that has seen almost 2,000 people lose their lives as a result of Covid and has seen families across the country suffer from unthinkable heartache and grief. Yet, with all the challenges this country faces there is one party in the Chamber that is more interested in cheap political stunts than the very people it claims to represent. Should we be in any way surprised at the actions of Sinn Féin? We are, after all, dealing with the party of multiple mysterious bank accounts, the party that denigrates victims, the party that operates under a toxic culture of secrecy, bullying and intimidation and, most of all, the party of rank hypocrisy. With Sinn Féin it is always a case of do as we say and not as we do. It pontificates about a golden circle while Sinn Féin is the richest party in this country. It even had Donald Trump himself at one of its gold plated dinners in the United States. It had the gall to accuse the Government of burying records when victims of the IRA across the country are still buried and their families are still waiting for the truth from Sinn Féin.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Talk to Breege Quinn, Austin Stack and the families of Columba McVeigh or Tom Oliver. They will tell you what Sinn Féin's truth is about.

Sinn Féin criticises the Government's response to Covid on a daily basis when in Northern Ireland where it is in power people are struggling with one of the highest rates of the virus in Europe. Its talks about honesty and integrity, when it had tens of thousands of pounds of Covid support money that was meant for small businesses lodged into Sinn Féin accounts. And then, when it was found out, it came up with a Father Ted excuse that the money was just resting in your account. It claims to be at 32-county party except, of course, when it comes to political donations.

Sinn Féin comes into the House and throws lots of mud about in the hope that some of it sticks. That is its *modus operandi* as a party. It has introduced a Trump-like nastiness to Irish political discourse and then, when somebody speaks out, its social media army mobilises. Whether it is a politician, a journalist or a member of the public they are all subjected to vile abuse. Thankfully, there is a silent majority who see through Sinn Féin and they will see it tonight for what it is, a stunt which is about political opportunism rather than the national interest.

There is one politician who knows the meaning of the national interest and that is Leo Varadkar. When our country faced some of its darkest hours this year, Leo Varadkar was there. He led from the start and he led from the front. When it came to forming a government, unlike Sinn Féin he did not shirk his responsibility. That is because Leo Varadkar puts the national interest before party interest, something Sinn Féin cannot even comprehend. Its actions tonight

once again prove this to be the case.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Beidh mé ag caint i gcoinne an rúin seo. Níl muinín againn as Leo Varadkar. Bhris sé na rialacha agus is gá dó a bheith freagrach as sin. This Government has been in office for just four months and in that short period we have witnessed displays of incompetence and chaos of record proportions. This Government was born of necessity. The old guard came together to keep change out, to hold back the tides of progress and to hold onto business as usual.

When he was Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar leaked a confidential draft contract to a third party, to his friend. The refusal of the current Taoiseach to hold the Tánaiste and leader of Fine Gael to account left a no confidence motion as the only sanction available to us as an Opposition. Predictably, the Government responds with accusations, name-calling and spin, and that is its choice. That is its business. No amount of insults, innuendo or mud slinging by Fine Gael can alter the facts, and the facts of what happened are not in dispute. Leo Varadkar, while he was Taoiseach, leaked confidential Government information to his friend. He can offer no credible reason for his actions. His claim that he was acting in the interests of the taxpayer, or that the information was already in the public domain, are threadbare. Those defences collapsed on the floor of the Dáil last week.

The truth is there is no acceptable reason for what happened. This was not incompetence. It was not a mistake. This was a conscious decision by Leo Varadkar to leak inside information to his friend, and now the current Taoiseach stands idly by and Micheál Martin's failure to act is a failure of leadership. The Government claims that expressing no confidence in the Tánaiste is disproportionate to the conduct of Leo Varadkar but here is the truth. The truth is that if a junior civil servant or any departmental official leaked a confidential document they would be sacked, end of story. When Leo Varadkar leaked this document he was the Taoiseach. He was the head of government and that position comes with the highest level of responsibility, with the greatest need for ethical and honest conduct and, therefore, it comes with a greater demand for accountability.

What angers ordinary people is that the Fine Gael leader's actions are par for the course, and part of the insider cosy club politics that has done so much damage to our country. This is a broken politics, one that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil want people to believe has been left behind, but the politics of the cosy club really never went away. There are favours for friends, connections to pals in the world of high finance and access to power through a simple text message, while Debenhams workers and survivors of mother and baby homes are frozen out, fighting to have their voices heard. This is a very Fine Gael thing.

The Government argues that Deputy Varadkar's behaviour was a technical or procedural error; "not best practice" they called it. They say it bears no relevance to the bread and butter issues facing ordinary people but how very wrong they are. The Fine Gael cosy club culture is very relevant to the bread and butter reality of people's lives because it is about access to power. It is about what decisions are made and in whose interest, whether in the interests of ordinary people or vested interests, Ministers' friends and personal contacts.

As we debate the motion this evening, workers and families are struggling. Many are coping with the loss of life and the loss of livelihoods as a result of a once in a century pandemic. They also face the uncertainty of Brexit and we are coming to the end of what has been an extraordinarily difficult year for our people. Our people are entitled to much better from the

Government than those in power playing by the rulebook of the old boys' network.

*6 o'clock*

The cosy club insider culture that dominates Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil is why those parties fail workers and families again and again. It is the reason why governments come and governments go, but nothing really changes for ordinary people.

I could stand here and delve into Fine Gael's past episodes with corruption and insider connections. I could list the scandals, the tribunals, the abuses of power and it would take me all night, and it would get us nowhere. This is not about the past. This is very much about how Government is run today. Here is what I know for sure. As long as housing policy in this State is designed for developers and landlords, we will never fix the housing crisis. As long as health policy is driven by profit and privatisation, we will never have a strong public health service. As long as economic decisions are made to favour the golden circle, we will never have a fair economy that delivers for workers and families. The truth is that for so long as this rotten insider culture is tolerated, nothing will ever change. Houses will remain unaffordable, rents will keep going up and up and a generation will have to settle for the box room in their parents' house as a home for themselves and their own families. Our health system will continue to struggle with overcrowded hospitals, citizens on trolleys and children left years waiting, sometimes in agony, for treatment and for care.

That is the price of government for the privileged few at the expense of the many. It is a price that generations have paid and it has cost us dearly. It can no longer be tolerated. It is the politics where Fine Gael's Brian Hayes moves seamlessly from Government to chief lobbyist for the banks and then sits across the table from his Fine Gael friends in government when denying mortgage holders breaks for their mortgage. It is the politics where Fine Gael's Michael D'Arcy, having failed miserably to rein in the insurance industry and its crippling premiums, moves from the Department of Finance to the world of high finance. The people we represent demand change - it is as simple as that. They look for a future of fairness, of kindness, but above all, of equality. They look for the possibility of better politics, where we can finally begin to realise the Ireland of the Proclamation and the vision of our better angels, a real republic that prioritises ordinary citizens and upholds the principle of good, honest government. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael clubbed together to deny that change. People now see these parties, which desperately cling to the past, back doing what they do best: looking after the well-connected and the well-off, while ordinary people are left behind.

It is lamentable that the Green Party, in which so many placed hope for change, have remained so quiet in all of this. Their silence speaks volumes.

After four months in power, this coalition has been riven with scandal. Deputy Leo Varadkar's actions have undermined politics, they have undermined the Government and they have undermined the State. Sinn Féin said the old ways would not be tolerated on our watch in opposition, and we will be held to that commitment. We are now calling time on the politics of the cosy club. Former Taoiseach and serving Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, has asked for a fool's pardon. Deputy Varadkar is no fool. The people will not be fooled by the guff, bluster and bravado of bullish Government Members, whose sole concern is self-preservation.

This scandalous behaviour that we have discovered, by the way, cannot be solved by Ministers simply picking their friends more carefully. Leo Varadkar, when Taoiseach, leaked a

confidential document to a friend. He was caught and now he must be held accountable.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** The Government is asking us to vote confidence in the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The Government is asking us to accept his explanation for his behaviour in leaking a confidential document to a friend and head of a rival representative body, completely outside of normal procedure and appropriate practice, during a multi-million euro negotiation process.

The Labour Party told the Tánaiste to come clean, to tell the truth, to dispense with the incredible yarn he had been peddling and to apologise, and perhaps there may have been a way out for him. However, the Tánaiste chose not to do that. He persisted with the line that he was leaking the document for the good of the document, a statement that takes the entire country for fools. Then, his cheerleaders go on the public airwaves and repeat the same lines. One Minister even suggested that the word “confidential” was printed on the document for the benefit of Dr. Ó Tuathail. The question is not only should the Dáil have confidence in him, but should any trade union have confidence that they can negotiate with this Government in good faith, or should any Minister have confidence that they can share a confidential document with the Tánaiste in good faith. The fact is, in all honesty, they cannot.

We also have no confidence in the Minister because he has shown no interest in protecting the rights of workers throughout this pandemic. When sectoral pay agreements were struck down by the High Court, my colleague, Deputy Ged Nash, introduced emergency legislation to reinstate them, and the Tánaiste dismissed this move as “virtue signalling”. When the Labour Party introduced a statutory sick pay Bill, the Tánaiste and his Government colleagues kicked it down the road for six months. When ICTU walked out of the Low Pay Commission after it advocated a paltry 10 cent increase in the minimum wage, the Tánaiste accepted the increase without question. The same week, he humiliated a public official and NPHET on national television and dismissed their recommendation because they had not thought things through. The Debenhams workers and others have been screaming for the implementation of the Duffy Cahill report, to which he is clearly indifferent. We are quite sure the Bill we launched today on working from home and the right to switch off will be treated with similar disdain by the same Minister. So, we have no confidence in the Tánaiste. He is not a friend of the worker and now appears not to be a friend of transparent politics.

The Labour Party has spent generations championing ethics in public life. From freedom of information legislation and lobbying legislation to tackling corporate donations, Labour has worked tirelessly to clean up politics from the grubby dealings of others. Not one Labour politician has ever faced any accusation of improper behaviour at any tribunal of inquiry. Labour knows what it is like to have to run against Fianna Fáil money, to have to run against Fine Gael money and to have to run against Sinn Féin money. Sinn Féin now wants to present itself as the ethical left. It says it wants to stand against insider politics and the old boys’ club. We in the Labour Party offer it some advice. It is not good enough to describe a convicted tax cheat as a good republican because he is a member of their old boys’ club. It is not good enough to accept £4 million from England to fund political activity in Ireland and then to move it around so they do not have to pay tax on it. It is not good enough to take racist American money from bigoted Trump supporters like Congressman Pete King of New York, who was one of the architects of the Muslim ban, but who supports Sinn Féin - an insider, one of your old boys’ club. It is not good enough to have the Northern Minister for Finance send documents of the renewable heat

initiative to one of its own insiders and member of the old boys' club in Belfast before it got sign-off. Ethics in public life is important, not just when it is somebody else's old boys' club but when it is your own.

This debate suits both Sinn Féin and Fine Gael. They want the public to think politics in Ireland is a choice between the Varadkar conservatives and populist nationalism. It is not. There are enough of us in this Chamber who want to focus on the dignity of the worker and the eradication of homelessness, poverty and Covid-19 and who value the liberation of education and the well-being of all our people. We will continue to work with others to bring honour and ethics to Irish politics. Despite often harsh words between us, we have confidence in many individuals and groupings in this Oireachtas. That confidence does not extend to the Tánaiste.

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications(Deputy Eamon Ryan):**

I am glad to address the House on this serious issue. Like other Members of this House, I first became aware of these revelations when the details were reported in *Village* magazine. I heard from the Tánaiste at the same time as the Taoiseach did, and nothing I have heard subsequently has changed what the Tánaiste said to me, in the first instance, in his response. The Green Party stated that it was important that these issues were addressed in the House, as they were in detail last week. We welcome the opportunity for that to occur again today. We stand for parliamentary accountability in our democracy.

We also welcomed, having listened to the Tánaiste set out his version of events, his admission that what had happened was not right and his apology for such an error of judgment. We accepted that apology. The disclosure of information in this case was not right and he acknowledged that. There is a reason we have the Cabinet rule book and codes for how we must do everything through official channels to protect the public interest and, in the end, to protect the political system from accusations of partisanship or patronage. It is important that we follow those rules, treat documents with the highest confidence and make that work.

I have confidence that this Government can and will engage in that other method, partnership. We need to work collectively and with every section of society and a variety of interests in order that we deliver the Government's goals of tackling the health and housing crises and preparing this country to face the climate challenge ahead of us. That partnership has to work. We referred to that partnership in our statement last week. It was not silence, as Deputy McDonald stated. It was us listening and trying to give our assessment in our response, which we did, that we need to learn lessons from such occasions, as the Tánaiste acknowledged. He wished, as he said, he had done it differently at that time. We in Government commit to doing things differently and in partnership with the people of this country, the various institutions and vested interests, not just for their vested interests but for the public interest. We do that by being open in how we share data but also by making sure we treat data in confidence and with competence and that those we work with do the same in every section of society. That is our responsibility. We are in a coalition; it is not a club.

Confidence in the Government and the Tánaiste extends to the confidence and ability to ask questions and say, as we have said, "That is not right". However, that does not mean we should step aside from the bigger goal of this coalition and any coalition Government of serving the Irish people by changing the health and housing systems and preparing us for the climate future as best we can.

**Minister for Finance(Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I express my full confidence in the

Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar. I have served in government with the Tánaiste since 2014 and knew him for many years before that. The personal and political qualities I have known in him in that time have been apparent again in recent weeks - his openness, honesty and accountability; his genuine commitment to advancing the public interest; and his willingness to acknowledge a mistake. Leo Varadkar's politics are those of decency, progress and doing the right thing by our country. His track record is clear in the leadership he demonstrated in delivering the best outcomes for our country in the many challenges of Brexit; his empathy and decisiveness in leading our country through a demanding and dark phase of Covid-19; and his unstinting support for the management of the economy, public pay and public finances, which has enabled us to meet this moment of challenge from a position of strength.

Contrast those qualities and that record with the record of the Sinn Féin Party. Its attack today is the same as it ever was and ever will be. It is a single transferable critique of our political system, a claim that others act in the interests of elites and insiders. Sinn Féin would have us believe it occupies the high moral ground and is interested only in the public good. I suspect its Members know this is rhetoric. Deputy Ó Broin recently described this as the political tactic of left populism. Position oneself as the real representative of the real people and condemn the rest of the political system as acting in the interests of others. We can see the dark places that this kind of politics can lead to. It is not, I believe, the politics of the majority of this House or the majority of our country.

Sinn Féin does not appeal to the better angels of our nature. Instead, it seeks to arouse the darker spirits to make its case. It is a deeply cynical politics that Sinn Féin has practised for too long. It is for EU membership but against every treaty that has brought our country closer to Europe. It is for jobs and business but against every economic decision pursued by this State in our modern era. That is the politics of division. It is the defining feature of Sinn Féin's politics and it is encapsulated in the motion today.

While Sinn Féin positions itself as the only party on the side of ordinary people, it is more in bed with big money than any party in this Dáil. Sinn Féin is the richest party on the island of Ireland, as its finance director confirmed earlier this year, with many staff and an extensive property network across the island. This network comprises 50 properties, which does not compare with any other party. Equally, no other party funds itself like Sinn Féin. Was the banning of corporate donations by a previous Fine Gael-led Government, which has been maintained by recent Governments, the act of a political party that wants to protect an inner circle and keep an old boys' club going? That type of behaviour better matches the description of Sinn Féin. As its finance director told *The Irish Times* earlier in the year:

Way back, we brought the bulk of it [which is money] into here [which is the Republic]. It helped us build ... the party a lot. It was a lot of money.

Sinn Féin always wants to point the finger rather than point the way. It speaks - and Deputy McDonald spoke - of undermining the State. There is no party less qualified to warn this Government of undermining the State than Sinn Féin. It looks to provide heat, not light. It looks to provide sound and fury, signifying and advancing nothing but its own political interests. This is in contrast with the Tánaiste, which is why I have full confidence in him. He serves and looks to serve our country with distinction. He acts in the public good and looks to advance the public interest. That is his track record and that is why he deserves the support of this House.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Today's debate is about low standards, credibility and trust but,

most of all, it is about how Government business is done by Fine Gael. Last week, Leo Varadkar admitted to leaking a highly confidential document. When his colleague, the then Minister for Health, was asked to leak the same document, he refused, yet the leader of Fine Gael passed the document, marked “Confidential” and “not for circulation”, to a personal friend and political supporter. He gave it to an individual and organisation that stood to gain, organisationally and financially, from securing that privileged information.

Leo Varadkar’s claim that he did this in the public interest is simply not credible. The Government was not talking to the NAGP, and that organisation had a history of seeking to undermine previous GP contracts. The simple fact is that the leader of Fine Gael broke the rules. He breached the confidentiality of Cabinet and sensitive Government contract negotiations, all to give a dig out to a friend. If anyone did this in any other job, they would be sacked. Just because he was the head of Government does not mean that lower standards should be applied. Of course, we know, however, that this is how Fine Gael does business. It looks after those on the inside while leaving the vast majority behind.

How many former Fine Gael Deputies and Ministers are now corporate lobbyists? Enda Kenny works for VentureWave Capital, Brian Hayes for the Banking & Payments Federation Ireland and Michael D’Arcy for the Irish Association of Investment Managers. I could name many more. Indeed, it seems that Fine Gael is fertile recruiting ground for lobbyists who trade in access and influence. All of this has a price. Ordinary people pay the consequence for such insider trading. That is why the private sector has a privileged position in housing policy, why the Government gives more money to big developers and institutional landlords than local authorities and approved housing bodies, why investment funds pay virtually no tax but charge sky-high rents, why banks are bailed out but struggling mortgage holders are left to fend for themselves and why, thanks to the current Minister for Housing and his predecessor, we have the worst social and affordable housing crisis in recent history.

Today, Deputies have a clear choice. They can vote confidence in Leo Varadkar and send out a clear signal that all of this is okay and that Fine Gael is still in charge and calling the shots. Alternatively, Deputies can say that enough is enough and that it is time to end low standards in high places, time to end insider dealing and time for a Government that looks out for everyone and not just its friends.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** The situation we are dealing with here should never really have arisen. The Tánaiste, while Taoiseach, last year engaged in an action which was wrong. He was found out and had to own up. He should have admitted that it was wrong and apologised. That would probably have been the end of it. However, he never admitted it was wrong and instead concocted a false narrative, a cock and bull story which clearly misrepresented the truth on a number of counts. Arguably, that was the greater error because the truth matters.

The Tánaiste first tried to make out that the confidential document which he leaked was somehow not confidential, despite it being clearly marked “Confidential, not for circulation”. This was a negotiation document that was still in process with the IMO. The document was not capable of being finalised at that point as there were a number of outstanding issues to be agreed between the parties to it. There was not sign-off by the IMO until 16 April and it took another month before the final document was published by the Department. The then Minister for Health clarified last week that this was actually the case.

The Tánaiste tried to make out that what he did was some kind of noble action, that he had

a legitimate objective and that he was honouring the Government commitment. There was no basis whatsoever for this claim. Anyone who knew anything about medical politics at the time knew that the row between the NAGP and the IMO was vicious. The Tánaiste had been a member of the IMO and, anyway, he had lots of friends who were GPs from both organisations, as he has told us. We know the intention of the NAGP's inner sanctum was to scupper the IMO's win on the contract negotiations and to upstage the IMO on the eve of its annual general meeting by releasing details of the arrangement. The Minister for Foreign Affairs should check his dates on this because what he said earlier was simply not correct.

If there was any truth in what the Tánaiste claimed, surely he would have urged Dr. Ó Tuathail and the NAGP to support and promote the agreement. There is no evidence that he did this. In addition, if there was any hint of truth in this, he would, of course, have co-operated with the line Minister to that end but, no, he went behind the back of the then Minister for Health.

On 26 January 2017, the then Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Varadkar, was contacted by a former member of the Air Corps on the issue of premature deaths, which is serious and needs urgent examination. There had been 86 premature deaths recorded since the 1980s, including 32 personnel under the age of 50, with many in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Twenty members have died since that contact was made in 2017. The Tánaiste's response at the time was to refer to the Cabinet handbook. He stated that the handbook, "doesn't allow me to go behind the backs of other ministers or enter into confidence with someone else to exclude them." He also indicated that he had signed a contract to observe collective responsibility. It is not that the Tánaiste did not know the rules, it was that he decided not to abide by them in respect of the IMO document.

Not only was the Tánaiste aware that he should not have interfered with the work of the Minister for Health but he also knew that, according to the Cabinet handbook, he was bound by the officeholders' code of conduct which states that officeholders should respect confidences entrusted to them in the course of their official duties. The Tánaiste clearly breached this requirement. His Trumpian defence that he, as Taoiseach at the time, was the arbiter of what he was allowed to do is laughable.

What added insult to injury for the public was that, as leader of Fine Gael, the Tánaiste required his Cabinet colleagues to demean themselves by parroting cynically crafted spin lines and repeating his false narrative across the airwaves. His actions in respect of this sordid affair were unworthy of his office. He damaged the Government and he damaged trust in politics. For that reason, and for all of the reasons and facts I have set out, the Social Democrats cannot vote confidence in him.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming):** This motion raises two important issues from my point of view. The first of these is the issue of confidentiality and accountability on the part of Government. This brings me to what I want to see more of in Irish public life, namely, more openness and transparency at government level. The public want and are entitled to more openness, accountability and transparency on the part of the Government. We inherited a Victorian approach to politics. I want to see a change that includes more open discussion of and debate on how the Government spends public money in advance of decisions we make. We hide behind commercial sensitivity and confidentiality clauses in contracts. As a former Chairman of the Committee of Public Accounts, I have seen many cases where those who spend public money have not been held publicly accountable. I

can give examples of many of the public private partnerships where contracts can run for up to 25 years. Confidentiality clauses in these contracts are preventing openness in discussion and transparency in accounting. In most cases, these conditions are not justified from the taxpayer's point of view. The same can be said of the national broadband plan.

We are all familiar with our annual budget day announcements when the only surprise is when there is something in the Minister's statement that was not published in the morning newspapers. We are having a debate here on openness. We need more openness, not less. I want to see more transparency. The culture of confidentiality in public life is excessive in Ireland.

The second issue I see in this debate is political gamesmanship. We are the middle of a Covid-19 pandemic in which almost 2,000 people have died. Many people are suffering, with hundreds of thousands of people on the pandemic unemployment payment and wage subsidy schemes. Businesses are struggling but the people of Ireland are strong. If the Opposition was sincere about accountability, we would have a debate on that issue. Instead, it chose the nuclear option of bringing down a Minister and, by extension, this Government, which would result in a general election in the middle of this unprecedented Covid-19 crisis. All it wants is disruption. Its attempt to turn Dáil Éireann into a reality television show, such as the "The Jerry Springer Show" or "The Jeremy Kyle Show", will not succeed tonight.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I welcome the opportunity to express confidence in the Tánaiste and the Government. This motion has been manufactured by those in Sinn Féin who pretend to have morals and principles. It is from a party whose actions continue to belie its public statements in this House. Sinn Féin talks about credibility while, on the other hand, it protects and rewards its inner circle. It talks about a cosy boys' club while it cosies up to tax cheats and subversives. Ask the family of Robert McCartney who protects that party's elites and untouchables. Ask former Senator Máiría Cahill or Paudie McGahon about the kangaroo courts, its lies and deceit. It is no wonder Sinn Féin wanted to abolish the Special Criminal Court.

Sinn Féin is the anti-partition party which uses partition to its distinct advantage in circumventing rules and ethics. It is a party that claims Covid-19 payments in the North and sits in the Oireachtas in the South. It has those who had €10,000 resting in their bank accounts for six months while tricking the Irish public into believing that they are on the average industrial wage. This comes from the richest party in our State.

To be a former president of Sinn Féin one must call a tax cheat "a good republican". The current party president uses the words "a very nice man". Three words sum up the corruption and lies of Sinn Féin - Research Services Ireland. This was a bogus company set up to siphon taxpayers' money for the cosy boys in Sinn Féin in the North. Thirty-six MLAs claimed more than £700,000 through this company which was run by the Sinn Féin finance department, with mileage and expenses galore. The only problem was that after 11,500 miles were clocked and £5,000 pocketed, one of the cosy boys did not even drive. A central services company was used because other research facilities could not be used, as the work was deemed too sensitive. After all, in Sinn Féin the untouchables must be protected.

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I am delighted to express confidence in the Tánaiste. I am genuinely worried about the direction of political discourse in our country. I am worried that we now live in

a world and in a country where some strive to see those with political differences as enemies rather than decent people with opposing views. I am worried that there is a real effort under way to have us live in a country where one cannot make a mistake without the off-with-their-heads brigade seeking a political execution. This is not who we are or who we must become. We are better than that.

Sadly, the parties that apply harsh judgment to others often refuse to apply it to themselves. The Tánaiste made a mistake. He accounted to this House for it, apologised and explained his rationale. For some in this House, led by Sinn Féin, that will never be enough. They have decided to measure political effectiveness, not in terms of legislation passed, bipartisan work under way or policy proposals to tackle major societal issues, but rather in decibel levels, units of anger and soundbites of division. A good day at the office for Sinn Féin is one on which it has sown the seeds of mistrust and misinformation about a political opponent and amplified it online, often with the help of faceless trolls. For that party to succeed, it believes others must fail. This week we saw Sinn Féin engage in the grubby politics of “let them deny it”. I have worked with many good, decent and sincere people from across the political spectrum in this House. This is a stunt. It is simply another attempt to divide.

Leo Varadkar is a committed, energetic, smart and sincere leader. I have seen his judgment at first hand during the Covid-19 pandemic and his leadership in trying to keep us all safe as we grappled with a deadly virus. We would not have a new general practice agreement were it not for his leadership. He set it as an absolute priority on becoming Taoiseach. He brought Departments together around the table, banged heads, set objectives, timelines and funding streams and he got it done.

When the Tánaiste made a mistake, he apologised. Have others in this House ever made a mistake? Perhaps they attended a public gathering in Northern Ireland in breach of public health guidelines. Maybe they staged what was effectively a political rally in a graveyard in the midst of severe restrictions when people could not go to the funerals of close relatives, despite the fact that the deceased was not even being buried in the cemetery in question. Perhaps someone was invited to a key briefing on Covid-19 with our top medical experts but was too busy, left early and then claimed not to have been fully briefed on the pandemic. Perhaps they came into this House and used parliamentary privilege to erroneously accuse people of financial wrongdoing and then, on being proven wrong, sadly forgot to apologise. Perhaps they jumped up and down in outrage in this Chamber and smeared the then Minister, Frances Fitzgerald, and when she was completely exonerated by Mr. Justice Charleton, they also forgot to apologise. Everybody makes mistakes and I am sure none of us wishes to be defined by them.

The smears and innuendo that are creeping into political life need to stop. There was an undertone in the last week. We and the Opposition all know it. Not one Member of this House called it out. It is wrong and it cannot go unchecked. It is time to focus on the issues. In the week that the people of the United States, thank God, rejected the politics of Trumpism, do not dare try to introduce it in this country.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. In the course of a conversation with a constituent last week, I learned that it was 100 years ago, last Wednesday, since the Black and Tans had burned her grandfather’s creamery. He had to go on the run, leaving his family, with the price of £1,000 on his head. Afterwards, I received a message from her saying

that her grandparents were committed to a republic, a better world, equality of access to education and employment and their democratic right to vote. She mentioned equality of access. For these just rights, she said, they risked their livelihoods and their lives. Are we, as Teachtaí Dála, staying true to this legacy? Spin will not paper over these cracks. Are we now going to deliver a vote of confidence in this Tánaiste in the light of the leaking of confidential information which has been well discussed? We know the Tánaiste believes that every Member of this House routinely leaks information and that a culture of spin and calculated leaks is completely acceptable.

We remember the promise of the so-called democratic revolution of former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, but our lot was a bank bailout and the continued prosperity of the well-heeled, the golden circle. Who benefits from this type of cronyism? It is banks, the insurance industry and Fine Gael's friends. What fate is in store for those who are not well-connected? Weeks ago, we had the survivors of mother and baby homes being ignored and dismissed by this very Government, whereas those who know the Tánaiste personally get confidential documents posted to them without question. It shows the insidious nature of insider politics. This, as the phrase in Kerry goes, leads to “daoine atá fágtha in áit na leathphingine”, those who are neglected or left behind. That seems to be the fate of rural Ireland with this Tánaiste and his party. Can people in rural Ireland enter the golden circle, the prism of privilege, the fortress of the favoured? School secretaries, who have no pension or job security and are on a two-tier pay scale, certainly cannot enter. I know one school secretary who worked for 28 years under these conditions. These secretaries were promised help but were then told that to help would be to open the floodgates. The Debenhams workers I saw in Tralee at the weekend certainly cannot enter. They are maintaining their vigil through the November nights with their hopes of assistance from Fine Gael or its partners in Government fading fast. The small inshore fishermen of the south west certainly cannot enter as they see the bays of Kerry literally being cleaned out by the larger boats following the recent High Court case. Unlike the vulture funds, there will be no rushed legislation for those who choose to maintain a family fishing tradition; certainly not for seasonal workers, tour guides, bar staff and those in music and the arts excluded from the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP; and, finally, certainly not for those who live off the main roads of rural Ireland who cannot access broadband after the populous areas were carved up by the large companies and the State was again left to pick up the tab. One school in Kerry that contacted the Department of Education to complain about substandard broadband was told to contact their local representatives.

Today is the 100th anniversary of the end of the Siege of Tralee when, among other events, county hall, the seat of local democracy, was burned down by occupying Black and Tans. The Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil-controlled county council does not want to talk about that event or commemorate it in any way. Maybe they are afraid that the motives of those who struggled for equality 100 years ago and remembering men like Frank Hoffman, John Cantillon and Michael Maguire would lay bare the contrast between the promise of then and the reality of now. I oppose the motion.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We move now to Deputy Bríd Smith who is sharing with Deputies Paul Murphy and Barry.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** We have no doubt where this debate is going. The conduct of it is quite shocking. Those on the other side of the House who believe they are debating a Sinn Féin motion, as they repeatedly said, are wrong. We are debating their motion and the outcome of it is clear. After tonight, normal people will look back and say, “He got away with it again”. I refer to normal people like a young care worker in a small local hospital who was suspended for

seven weeks for daring to put a post on Facebook criticising a management decision to spend multiples of her annual wage, which was less than €30,000 a year at the time, on a piece of art when there was a trolley crisis in her hospital. She did not break a confidentiality. She expressed a widely held view of wasted resources during a health crisis. I refer to normal people like 500 paramedics who joined a breakaway union called NASRA. It was a breakaway, rival union about which the Tánaiste, when he was then Taoiseach, said repeatedly to us in the previous Dáil that the Government could not and would not deal with because it was outside the ICTU camp. He clearly had two sets of morals for two different types of people, namely, his friends and the normal 500 paramedics who work day in, day out for this country.

What really amuses me is how Fianna Fáil and the Green Party are circling the wagons of Leo Varadkar and Fine Gael here tonight, not because they like the Tánaiste, or even most of Fine Gael, not because they believe him - I believe they do not believe him - and not because it is inappropriate and unbecoming of his conduct as Taoiseach to do what he did or because it is true that he was right but because it is true that he was wrong. They are doing it out of self-preservation. Deputy Eamon Ryan's statement stooped very low when he used the climate crisis as a reason for backing this confidence motion in Leo Varadkar. Normal people will be struck tonight by the way Leo Varadkar got away with it again. When they think of Leo Varadkar, they will think of the slogan, "Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All", attacks on NPHET, and this disgraceful excuse of a then Taoiseach lying to everybody and getting away with it again.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** If the Tánaiste survives tonight's vote, it will be thanks in large measure to Fianna Fáil and Green Party Deputies whose votes will be noted with disapproval by some-----

**A Deputy:** The bully boys.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** -----and with disgust by many others. He will also survive thanks to the support of the corporate media, which has refused to frame this scandal as a matter that might require resignation. They recognise the Tánaiste as a skilful and capable representative of the capitalist establishment and as a man who can play an important role for the system when he takes the reins again as Taoiseach and is charged with implementing austerity in a post Covid-19 era.

I have no confidence in Leo Varadkar on the leaks issue. He assisted a doctors' organisation, a breakaway within the health service, which opposed free GP care for children aged under six while locking out another breakaway group, more than 500 ambulance paramedics, who campaigned for trade union rights. I have no confidence in him when he wants to limit the increase in the minimum wage next year to less than 1%. Last but not least, I have no confidence in him when he blocked the Duffy Cahill report in the previous Dáil and has taken no action whatsoever to deliver a just settlement for the Debenhams workers in this one.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** A Fianna Fáil Taoiseach proposing a motion of confidence in a Fine Gael Tánaiste is an appropriate end to Civil War politics. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are uniting to defend corrupt behaviour while the Green Party is asleep at the wheel. Tonight, Leo Varadkar will get away with it as a result. He will face no consequence as a result of breaking the code of conduct for Deputies, breaking the code of conduct for officeholders, and committing a crime under the Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Act. However, people have seen how the establishment operates with golfgate, where politicians, lobbyists and judges flouted the rules to rub shoulders with each other, with the revolving door from senior Fine Gael politician

to banking lobbyist, and now with the Tánaiste pulling strings for his friends.

It is the Tánaiste who is guilty of divisive politics. It is the Tánaiste who is guilty in terms of his campaign based on fabricated statistics of “Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All”. We need rid of this Government, which is millionaires serving the interests of billionaires. We need a Government based on left and socialist policies to serve the interests of ordinary people.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has accused the Tánaiste of committing a crime. That is completely out of order. It is not acceptable in this forum in any circumstances and I think he should withdraw that statement. The commission of crimes is something that is adjudicated on by a court of law, not by any of us sitting here in Dáil Éireann.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** If the Ceann Comhairle wishes, I will rephrase it to say that I think there is very clear evidence, but, of course, it is not for me to decide, that the then Taoiseach may well have breached section 7(2) of the Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Act which says that someone cannot give information that they obtain-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We hear what you are saying, Deputy. Thank you.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** -----as a result of their high office to someone else who benefits from it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We move on now to the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegarde Naughton, who is sharing with Deputy Joe McHugh and the Minister of State, Deputy Martin Heydon.

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport(Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** The Tánaiste gave a full and frank account of his actions and motivations last week in this House and took considerable time answering Deputies’ questions. Today is two hours of statements and counter statements, a rehash of last week’s events when we are in the midst of the most serious health crisis to face our nation and staring down the barrel of a no-deal Brexit. We will spend valuable Dáil time today making speeches about a document the detail of which was in the public domain when the then Taoiseach passed it on. Medical journalists were writing detailed articles on the deal before this document was shared. This was not some State secret being passed to the enemy as some on the Opposition benches would spin it.

I remind the House that we are expecting a large budget deficit of €22 billion in 2020. Government debt is high in historical and international terms and is a risk to the public finances and the economy. There are hundreds of thousands of people unemployed and businesses worried if they will ever reopen yet we are here at considerable cost to the taxpayer debating a motion for no good reason other than political opportunism. I am not for one minute saying that any member of Government, or this House for that matter, should be unaccountable; they most certainly should be accountable.

The Tánaiste made himself available and accountable last week for detailed questioning by Deputies. He answered completely and honestly. He has admitted he should have done things differently and he apologised for it. Everyone in politics makes mistakes. It is human nature. Some mistakes are more serious than others. The Tánaiste’s error is certainly not one that warrants resignation. It was a mistake of process rather than substance.

I very much appreciate that the Opposition will make hay while the sun shines and attempt

to make out that every error is some national crisis. That is politics, but it is bad politics. We have steadied the ship during the Covid-19 pandemic and I am particularly conscious of the leading role Leo Varadkar took in that. He has my full confidence.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** The Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, is a politician who gets things done. As Taoiseach he worked hard to get so many things done. As Taoiseach, he worked very closely with his Cabinet colleagues and he was always informed. He was solution focused and was always determined to find a solution, even in the most difficult of circumstances. He took his mandate as Taoiseach very seriously and at all times was conscious of the enormous responsibility placed on his very young shoulders.

The Tánaiste does not wear his heart on his sleeve but that does not diminish his passion to serve all the people or his ambition to get things done. The politics presented to us tonight is of the rawest and most fundamental form — the politics and power. The real priority political issues of the day are sidelined. These include Covid-19, from which people are still dying, and Brexit. The ambition tonight is to inflict maximum political damage. The Tánaiste knows only too well that he would have done things differently; he has acknowledged that. This nonsense tonight — the talk about insiders and cosy clubs — is nothing short of a mockery. Regarding the question of a deal to include all GPs in a contract — GPs who look after the old, young and sick — the Tánaiste wanted to get things done. That was his motivation, and Sinn Féin does not have a monopoly on helping people.

While representatives of the NAGP were outside the gates of Leinster House, Sinn Féin was with them, roaring and shouting at the Government to come up with a solution. Unfortunately, the politics we are witnessing here tonight will be the narrow, divisive and destructive politics that will continue in the period ahead. The roaring and shouting will continue, and it will be fractious. Sinn Féin will be 100% right 100% of the time and will continue to accuse the Government of being 100% wrong 100% of the time. Deputy McDonald, in her tweet just yesterday or the day before, was on about the old boy's network. The reason we are having this debate tonight is because of the members of the old boy's network around a monitor somewhere up in Belfast tonight. It has decided to use our valuable time in the interest of power, and it has sidelined the important issues of tonight. Deputy Doherty, who got elected two years ago this month, will continue with his shouting and roaring with nothing to show for it, but he can do all the shouting and roaring he wants because he will not be making the decisions; it will be the boys in the old boy's network around the monitor in Belfast.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon):** I am very happy to vote to express confidence in our Tánaiste and the Government today. I will spend my limited time expanding on my confidence in Tánaiste, on which I look forward to voting shortly, because we all know the amendment to the motion tabled by Sinn Féin has nothing to do with him. It is all about Sinn Féin's focus on political game playing. In June 2020, the leader of Sinn Féin proclaimed, “[B]e very sure you will see in action the most coherent and effective opposition in the history of the State.” People would have been forgiven for believing Sinn Féin was moving away from the populist politics of the past, such as its trying to convince the public it was entitled to be in government after a general election even though it got less than one quarter of the overall vote. So convinced was Sinn Féin of its entitlement that it organised a series of public meetings all around the country to demand that it get into power. It displayed the same understanding of the electoral system as Donald Trump has done in recent days but, in fairness, at least he nearly did get half the vote in his election.

That Sinn Féin can stand here with a straight face today is interesting in the context of its recent decision to accept from the estate of Mr. William Hampton a donation of more than £4 million sterling, a far cry from the maximum allowable donation under Irish electoral law, which is €2,500. Today is obviously an attempt by Sinn Féin to change the narrative. Will Sinn Féin, given its recent windfall, be offering to reimburse the taxpayer for the €25,000 it has cost to bring us here for a vote today? Would any Sinn Féin Deputy be willing to stand up for more than an hour and answer questions, as Leo Varadkar did, on that donation, on the circumstances surrounding the resignation of Sinn Féin members over the acceptance of Covid-related state grants, or on why it was only when the media got wind of the story that grants had been paid into Sinn Féin accounts that any action was taken? I presume Sinn Féin's same standard of accountability is not required in this instance. Instead of offering effective, constructive opposition, it offers populism once again.

At a time of a Covid pandemic, a Brexit crunch point fast approaching and several key challenges facing our country, Sinn Féin is more concerned with political one-upmanship and point-scoring. That is not the politics I am interested in. It is not a form of politics that serves our country well. That is why I will happily vote to express confidence in our Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, and the Government as a whole today so we can get on with the very important work that lies ahead for our people.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The issues at stake are very clear. Deputy Varadkar, as Taoiseach in 2019, gave a confidential draft document, a contract worth €210 million that was still under discussion with the IMO, to his friend, the president of a rival organisation, on his request. It was done not through official channels but through private text messages before deleting all traces of the correspondence. A friend of the Taoiseach requested a confidential Government document by text message and Leo delivered. End of. If a civil servant did the same, it would constitute gross misconduct, trigger disciplinary action and be grounds for dismissal. What are the consequences for the Tánaiste? Fianna Fáil, the Green Party and Fine Gael believe there should be no consequences, or no sanction. We disagree. The Tánaiste has crossed the line and we are expected to just look away. This is not good enough.

Truth be told, this is how Fine Gael does its business. It involves the politics of the insider, the favour for friends, and access to power for those in high places, but the politics of the insider comes at a price for those on the outside. In this regard, just consider insurance. People are still being ripped off owing to extortionate premium costs. Why? It is because the insurance industry sat down with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and asked him to ensure key sections of my legislation, passed by these Houses, would be blocked. The Minister did as he was asked. Tens of thousands of mortgage holders have seen their mortgages on their homes sold to vulture funds. The vultures asked Fine Gael to block legislation that I introduced that would not allow for the sale of those mortgages without consent. Fine Gael did as it was asked because that is how power works for it. One day it is tasked with holding vested interests to account and the next it becomes the chief lobbyist on the other side. In this regard, just look at the record. A former Fine Gael Minister of State, Mr. Michael D'Arcy, spent three years in the Department of Finance, or three years being lobbied by the fund industry, yet, three months after leaving office, he became the chief lobbyist. The banks are another example. Another former Fine Gael Minister of State, Mr. Brian Hayes, spent three years in the Department of Finance and he is now the chief lobbyist for the banking and vulture fund industry. The revolving door keeps spinning. It is a consistent pattern; it is the politics of Leo Varadkar. Those on the inside will always have his ear.

The Tánaiste's excuse for leaking the confidential documents simply does not hold up. He claims it was some part of a mastermind strategy to get the contract over the line, but strategy requires initiative. This was at his initiative. It was his friend who requested the document from the Minister for Health. That Minister refused to give it to him because it was confidential but Leo delivered for his friend. When he was asked to get it, he obliged. He did so in secret and without telling anyone, covering his tracks and deleting the correspondence. He claims leaking the document was part of a strategy to engage with the NAGP but we know there was no engagement with the NAGP on the part of the Government or the Department of Health. Indeed, the only engagement was when Deputy Varadkar stuck a confidential document in the post to give to his friend, the head of the organisation that was rival to the IMO. The Tánaiste says the agreement was in the public domain but it was not. Every single one of the 130 pages had stamped across it, "Confidential. Not for circulation." We are aware there were at least 35 further changes.

The Tánaiste has been caught red-handed. He leaked confidential, commercially sensitive Government information to a friend. He and his Government colleagues believe he is above accountability but he is not, nor should he be. The question in this House is whether we are going to stand for this. Are we going to allow for this kind of cosy insiders' club to continue, or are we going to vote for accountability? We in Sinn Féin have no confidence in this Tánaiste.

*7 o'clock*

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Canney is next and is sharing time with Deputies Tóibín and Fitzpatrick.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to contribute on this debate. I am struck by the level of debate and what is being discussed. Galway East, which is a rural and urban constituency, faces many issues. It has been stated in this debate that we are wasting our time. Although we must have it, we will have lost a great deal of credibility as politicians if we do not return to the real job we must do. We have to bring the country out of the pandemic. We got the good news yesterday that there may be a vaccine, but we must save jobs and ensure that whatever we do in the House is for the people. We can have debates about issues such as this one from time to time, but it is time now for every politician who has been elected to the House to serve the people to focus on what we need to do.

I was elected and chose to enter into opposition. I said that I would be constructive in opposition. I am here to call the Government to account if I believe it is not doing something right, but I am also here to support the Government when I believe it needs help. I think it needs a bit of help to get it out of this situation this evening, so I will support it. However, we must do things right from now on and ensure that we focus on the issues that are causing suffering and leaving small business people not knowing what to do. We must also ensure that we deal with the school secretaries and community employment scheme supervisors. These are the real issues that we need to deal with, and that I want to deal with, in this Dáil.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** This matter is important because Ireland has been racked by insider circles for decades. Insider circles are not a victimless crime. They have a radical influence on the development of a society and everyone else's ability to live in that society. Either we call insider circles out or give licence to them. If we vote confidence in the Tánaiste, the

Dáil will give licence to that type of behaviour. How will we be able to turn around to anyone else at any level of government or in the Civil Service if he or she does exactly the same thing in the future? The Fine Gael Ministers who are rallying around the Tánaiste know well that, if they did the same thing, they would be out the door without touching the ground. That is a fact.

I listened to Deputy Jim O’Callaghan, who has positioned himself recently as the conscience of Fianna Fáil - if that is not an oxymoron at this stage. The Deputy is basically like the grand old Duke of York, in that he has marched his troops to the top of the hill. Tonight’s vote is his opportunity to put his money where his mouth is.

The Green Party is at a crossroads. Its Members can try to crowbar some level of ethics into this Government or it can get locked into the coalition’s misgovernance for the next three years. Their actions tonight will define the Green Party for about a decade.

There has been much discussion today about the restrictions. Deputy Calleary and Phil Hogan resigned from their political jobs because they were seen to break the Covid restrictions that were in place at the time. Indeed, there is much discussion about the question of Mr. Justice Séamus Woulfe resigning from the Supreme Court. Did the Tánaiste break Covid restrictions in May by having friends over to the house he was staying in on the Farmleigh House estate for drinks?

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** What the Tánaiste did in handing over confidential documents to a GP friend was wrong. That the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, was not aware of that sharing of information was also wrong. It displayed a lack of trust in the then Minister. The bottom line is that the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, displayed a complete lack of judgment and undermined his colleagues in government and in his party. If such a situation involving one of his colleagues in government were to arise, I doubt that the Tánaiste would take the same approach. The record speaks for itself in this regard, with the Tánaiste having thrown colleagues under the bus in the past in similar situations.

I reiterate that Leo Varadkar has done wrong. He needs to face the consequences of his actions. In my opinion, his party needs to reprimand him. It is Fine Gael’s responsibility to deal with this matter. The current Government, led by Deputy Micheál Martin, was not a party to the current Tánaiste’s action and should not be drawn into this mess. Fine Gael needs to stand up and demonstrate transparency in its action to deal with this issue. It should be dealt with internally by Fine Gael.

We are in the convention centre at an additional cost of more than €25,000 of taxpayers’ money to have this debate. It is a waste of taxpayers’ money. We are in the midst of a global pandemic and Brexit will arrive in less than two months, yet here we are debating in the convention centre a motion about the actions the Tánaiste took while he was Taoiseach in the previous Government. Surely we have more important issues to debate.

I will support the motion of confidence in the Tánaiste. This is not because I believe that he did nothing wrong. In fact, what he did was wrong and he should face the consequences for doing it, but action should be taken by his party, Fine Gael. The Government has far more important issues to deal with than this. Covid-19 and Brexit need our full attention and we need a strong Government to deal with them. In my opinion, the Government, led by Deputy Micheál Martin, is a strong one and needs to be given the opportunity to govern. What we do not need is for matters like this to arise and deflect from the real issues of the day.

I will support the motion of confidence in the Tánaiste for the reasons I have outlined, but I expect his party to take some form of disciplinary action so that this kind of behaviour does not happen again. We cannot have one rule for Leo Varadkar and a different rule for everyone else.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We move to Deputy Bruton, who is sharing time with Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I am happy to rise to vote confidence in the Tánaiste. At a time when the nation is holding its breath, many people are striving to demonstrate solidarity with those who are suffering considerably as a result of the Covid crisis, people's mental health is on the line, isolation is affecting people and businesses are struggling just to survive, Sinn Féin comes up with this attempt to blow up an error, one for which the Tánaiste has been fully accountable in the House, into a nuclear incident and create a DEFCON 1 environment, which Sinn Féin believes it can thrive in with its hollow rhetoric pounded out in the Chamber once again and its troops coming in one after another to read scripts and draw parallels to events that occurred long ago to try to muster a sense of division within our community.

What most angers people who follow sport is seeing someone go into the penalty area, dive and, after writhing and screaming on the ground, look for the red card and a penalty. That is deep cynicism; it is not the beautiful game of football that engenders the commitment and courage that we all admire. We face a similar situation here. This motion is motivated by cynicism and is a return to the worst form of tribal politics where we seek to portray our opponents in the blackest colours we can dream up. One after another, people have come into the Chamber with their theatrical descriptions of insiders and hollow terms like "capitalists" and "Black and Tans". These are the sorts of image that people are trying to conjure in a debate like this one.

We are seeing tribal politics across the globe. We need to pull up so that we can understand where this will bring us. We all look with disdain at the fake news and vicious characterisation of opponents in other countries and at the pandering to prejudice that has divided many communities. Ireland is fortunate that we have not had those divisions. We need to find a politics that is more honest with the people and faces up squarely to the sorts of challenge that people are trying to contend with in their daily lives. That is the work of a parliament. Sadly, we seem to think that politics should be about this theatrical approach. We are sent here to try to resolve differences and conflicts, not to create division. Leo Varadkar is a politician who has done that throughout his career. He sought to progress change in a community where he understood that change is disruptive and can hurt people. He has sought to bring people with us.

People are looking to politics now for competence and compassion. That is what Leo Varadkar has shown, especially during this difficult Covid-19 crisis, but his political opponents want to drag him down. That is where this motion has come from. It is trying to prolong the sense of division and damage. It is directly out of the stable of fake news and the echo chamber of social media that they seek to drive those messages through.

Politics can be and will be better than that. We will win this motion of confidence and allow this Government, which has a unique balance, to bring us to a much better Ireland.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I am here to state confidence in the Tánaiste and express confidence in the Government and all of the Ministers working hard to recover our country and society during this dreadful pandemic. It is preposterous that this Parliament is spending its time today on this political stunt by Sinn Féin instead of on the major issues of the day.

The Tánaiste made himself immediately available to this House. He answered every question put to him and was happy to do so, as was appropriate. Having spent time on that, causing this House to repeat the debate in this way is only play-acting. It is not serious or genuine. If it was, Sinn Féin would have put this motion down immediately. As the Taoiseach said, it is only an opportunity to get another run of publicity for the weekend.

People in here are not surprised by that, no matter the jeers and sneers pushed out for everyone around. We all see the failure to respect basic facts and the complete devotion to populist politics, which have been so destructive throughout the world. We have all seen the utter lack of restraint on a serious issue as recently as today. Those in Sinn Féin are not serious liberal democratic parliamentarians. They do not make up the responsible Opposition unlike others who have been before them and others who are here today. Those in Sinn Féin are in politics for the imagery, not the tough decision-making of senior political office and the years and yards of detail that go before it. The image-focused superficial approach to policy is exposed week after week. The Sinn Féin health spokesperson promises an extra 100 intensive care unit beds but when asked cannot tell where they should go. He says only that he will write to the HSE to tell those responsible to hurry on. The justice spokesperson used the charge last week to try to break the link between the Government pandemic plan and the Garda capacity to enforce it for its duration. The Sinn Féin party leader, after crying foul that she was not included in information on the pandemic, could not find her way to stay for the duration of a briefing provided by senior medical officials. All of this is because Sinn Féin is not concerned by detail but only by theatre. We all saw this Sinn Féin theatre in Milltown Cemetery after the funeral of Bobby Storey, which was taking place some 12 km away on the other side of town. It was not so much a funeral at that point as an opportunity for pageantry and for the big men in this House to stand up front with the big men who went before them.

We all saw the lack of concern for detail when it emerged that three Sinn Féin representatives had €10,000 resting in their accounts from the Covid support payments for over six months. They were instantly sacked when the BBC uncovered it, but what happened before that? In all seriousness, how did they not notice it? Is there so much money in Sinn Féin accounts that €10,000 here or there did not register for three separate people? Was it only three? Did others get it? It is shady.

Sinn Féin Deputies have plenty to say about everyone else. They are more than happy to create links and conspiracies that do not exist but when confronted in their own party about serious criminal acts, there is no one with anything to say on anything. Think back to all those people who saw nothing in or near a packed pub in Belfast the night Robert McCartney was brutally murdered. Think about all the smears and lies to discredit Máiría Cahill, who had the temerity and extraordinary bravery to speak out against one of Sinn Féin's elites, one of the party's untouchables. It was claimed she was mentally unstable and implied that she was promiscuous. Hate, bile and untruths were spread, all because she stood up and gave an account of her abusive experience and Sinn Féin's failure to respond to it. Sinn Féin is a party rife with the culture of cover-up but what it is covering up has had much graver consequences for the lives of people on this island.

Let us switch out the names and imagine Leo Varadkar or any other party leader in this House being happy to stand over what Sinn Féin does. It is inconceivable. Do Sinn Féin Deputies actually believe that Leo Varadkar should resign for this matter? It warrants questions in the Dáil and he has been accountable. If so, then why would Michelle O'Neill not resign or, for that matter, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, Deputy Pearse Doherty and the others who travelled,

attended and made no semblance of abiding by the rules? They did so to such an extent that there has been a police investigation into it ever since. Those in Sinn Féin are the masters of throwing stones and rockets around them but they never turn the light on themselves - we know that. The silent, polite, non-abusive, good people of Ireland who remain horrified by the actions of those in Sinn Féin know it too.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I will begin my brief contribution by saying I have no intention of personalising this issue. I have no particular axe to grind with the Tánaiste, even though we have fundamentally disagreed on several important matters. Nevertheless, I am convinced that there are critical issues at stake. It is worth recalling that this fiasco is merely the latest instance in a series of events that have brought the operation of the Dáil and our national Parliament into disrepute. Last year, we had “swing-gate” and “vote-gate”. This year, it is leak-gate and the year is not over.

I acknowledge that the Tánaiste displayed willingness to come before the House last week. However, such actions on his part cannot and should not act as some kind of parliamentary absolution. The Tánaiste was the senior political officeholder in the land when he deliberately leaked the draft contract. He is thereby held to a higher standard, yet in the past week we have seen no meaningful action in terms of parliamentary or party political sanction. The Taoiseach and his Cabinet colleagues have backed him to the hilt but not one of them has been able to identify what sanction he should rightly face. A two-hour session facing questions in the Dáil cannot be the limit of his responsibility or accountability in this serious matter. If there was even the slightest hint of a sanction being applied before this debate, I would have a different view.

I am concerned about the lack of consistency with regard to sanctions. We have seen several Oireachtas Members already sanctioned this year and the year has not yet ended. The general public are asking politicians like me why there is no consistency in sanctions and a lack of consistency in this case. The lack of sanction in this case forced the hand of the Opposition. In that respect, the fault lies with the Tánaiste and the Government alone. On account of this fact and this stark reality, I will be voting no confidence in the Tánaiste.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am to happy stand here this evening but I and the people at home are aghast. In south Tipperary, 976 children are waiting for emergency speech and language treatment. In north Tipperary and east Limerick, the number is 1,079. All the people on the Covid payments will be asked to pay tax on the payments. The hospitals and health services are so bad. We have so many concerns about the failure of the HSE to deal with the pandemic, testing and contact tracing. When the Tánaiste was Minister for Health he chose the site for the national children’s hospital. It is now a black hole in history.

I think of the men of 100 years ago. I think of young Michael Hogan, who lost his life with others on Bloody Sunday in Croke Park. I think of Seán Ó Treasaigh and Liam Ó Loingsigh and people like that and then I see the standards here now and how they have failed and slipped. I saw what happened to Phil Hogan in the early 1980s when, by accident, he leaked a page of the budget with nothing written across the top of it about it being private or confidential, and I see the standards now. I see what happened to the former Ministers, Deputies Calleary and Cowen. They had to be held accountable. I lay the blame with the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, for being so feeble, inept and weak in dealing with this. Standards have dropped so much.

I think of what young people, including the class of last year who are now first-year students, have gone through. I think of all the people out there, including the pensioners who could not get a penny in support during the pandemic. Many of them are in business. I think of the many areas of neglect and abuse, the 300,000 people who are waiting for cancer treatment, CervicalCheck, BreastCheck and everything else that is backed up. I think of the issues of mental health. When I see all that, I believe what is going on here tonight is a shame.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** The people are disappointed and hurt with this duplication this evening. I think of all the things that are wrong. People will be unable to go to the North to get cataracts removed from their eyes. People in pain are not being seen by the HSE and they will be unable to travel to Belfast after 1 January next. What is going on here is very wrong. Sinn Féin knows very well that Fianna Fáil is going to support Fine Gael tonight. They are joined at the hip and they are the one party now. They only have to change the name. When it came down to it, Sinn Féin voted to reduce our speaking time here. That is why I have only a minute this evening. They would all want to cop on because the people of Ireland will not stand for this for much longer.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** By passing on a document marked “confidential” to his friend, Maitiú Ó Tuathail, in the context of negotiations on a GP contract, the Tánaiste undermined that system of negotiation. It is worth noting, however, that the document concerned was partly, if not largely, in the public arena. The IMO had issued a five-page summary document which outlined the important financial and other components several days before the Tánaiste passed it on to Maitiú Ó Tuathail. Nonetheless, this was wrong. The document should at the very least have been passed on through formal channels. The Tánaiste came before the Dáil last week, accepted his errors of judgment and apologised. He made a serious mistake but has apologised publicly more than once. In my opinion, intent matters as much as, if not more than, process. While the process was wrong, I accept the Tánaiste’s explanation that his intent was good in that it was to secure universal acceptance of a GP contract across the GP community.

Yesterday, an article was published purporting to show that the Tánaiste had deliberately attempted to mislead the Dáil as to the extent of his friendship with Maitiú Ó Tuathail. I have looked at that evidence, which consists largely of WhatsApp messages from Maitiú Ó Tuathail. Running through the messages is a pervasive sense of entitlement: “We are the boys who run the show, or who should run the show.” Underpinning these flights of fancy was the claim of easy access to the Tánaiste and senior Ministers. However, Dr. Ó Tuathail has in media reports accepted the Tánaiste’s version of events, namely, that they had three meetings, so I see no evidence of a smoking gun.

I have not deviated from the subject in hand to make political points. There are many to make, but I have not done so. For me, this is not about political point-scoring; it is about the matter in hand. As already stated, intent matters as much as, if not more than, process. In these circumstances, I believe that the former outweighs the latter and I will vote confidence in the Tánaiste.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I would have supported the motion of no confidence if it had been put forward today. This means that I will definitely vote against the Government’s motion of confidence. How can one have confidence in somebody who leaks official documents, thereby undermining best practice in standards in public office? The predictable row at 2 p.m. over the Order of Business and the move to the convention centre should also have been avoided. As I said in the Dáil Chamber, there was no reason the Government could not have put forward its

motion to be taken tomorrow, when we are due to sit here. That would have allowed us to avoid the cost of moving here today.

I read the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's circular entitled "Policy on the Use of Private Email and Other Private Messaging Services", which was sent around by HR in April 2019. The circular related to the use of services other than official Oireachtas-designated modes of communication. It states that it relates to civil servants, but surely the point here is that a Tánaiste and Minister's ability to carry out his official Government work to the highest standard must also mean that he is at the very least held to the same standards as Government and departmental officials. The circular even allows for exemptions to the rule but states that information relating to Government business must be forwarded to official work accounts prior to being deleted. Point 12 states: "Failure to adhere to the requirements set out in this Circular may result in disciplinary action under the Civil Service Disciplinary Code." Why do Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party think that the Tánaiste is above the standards we set for our civil servants? We are public servants and we should be held accountable for our actions. It appears to me that the Tánaiste actively deleted his account rather than forward the messages to the official account. As far as I can see, from looking at WhatsApp, one has to actively delete an account on that messaging service. It cannot be done by accident and does not happen automatically either.

The Tánaiste could simply apologise and step down, as a previous Tánaiste, Frances Fitzgerald, did. There is no excuse for Fianna Fáil and Green Party Deputies to say they have confidence in the Tánaiste. He undermined best practice in the context of standards in public office - this much he has admitted - and should now face the consequences of his actions. If the Tánaiste thinks that "Welfare cheats cheat us all", what does he think about politicians who behave as if they are above the standards set for us and for those in the Civil Service? Who is cheated then? The electorate is definitely cheated, as are those of us elected representatives who try to earn the public's trust in politics.

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I wish to start by expressing my absolute confidence in the Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar. Sinn Féin is here tonight yet again preaching, once more claiming to apply standards to everyone else in this House and to hold others to account, yet when its members are asked to account for their own actions, they fall silent. My colleagues have outlined many instances of hypocrisy but I will focus on one. Sinn Féin Deputies have talked about the challenging year people have faced due to Covid-19. In the midst of this pandemic, however, we saw Sinn Féin pack the streets and a cemetery for a funeral that was not even a funeral but was, in fact, a political rally organised by Sinn Féin in west Belfast. When asked to account for its actions in its undermining of public health, we faced silence. Sinn Féin has needlessly subjected the Dáil to this circus a week after the Tánaiste answered every question put to him and made himself accountable to this House, unlike those on the Opposition benches.

I have worked with the Tánaiste for eight years. I have seen how he works with other people and with organisations, political parties and colleagues. I have seen how he has worked in difficult situations with challenging problems as he tries to ensure that he listens to every single position put forward and that the best outcome is reached for everybody concerned. One does not have to work with him closely to see this; one need only look at the work he has done on Brexit. He is an honourable person. He cares about his work. People say he is ambitious. To be an ambitious public representative is to ensure the best possible outcome in everything one does for the people whom one represents.

As Taoiseach, one of Deputy Varadkar's priorities - and he made no secret of this - was to ensure that a deal was reached for a new GP contract. He is a former Minister for Health and someone who has trained as a GP and who saw the benefits of the contract, not just for patients but also for GPs and the wider public. This was his sole motive in sharing this document with the NAGP. He has apologised for how this was done but has also answered every question put to him in the House. That is why this motion is cynical, uncalled for and a waste of precious time when we could be dealing with issues such as Covid-19, Brexit or the multiple items of legislation and issues that people have elected us to deal with. This is nothing more than a political stunt. I fully support the Government's motion of confidence in An Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment(Deputy Leo Varadkar):**

I thank the Taoiseach, the leader of the Green Party, my party colleagues, colleagues in Fianna Fáil and Independent Deputies for their words of support.

First of all, I wish to restate my apology to the House. I am sorry for my actions that gave rise to tonight's motion and I accept sole responsibility for them. While my motivations were sound, the manner in which I conducted myself was not. I do regret this and I have learned from it. This is the first time I have faced a motion of no confidence or a motion of confidence in my career. It forces me to reflect on the decisions I have made and the things I could have done differently and would do differently in future.

We all know why Sinn Féin put forward a motion of no confidence. Simply, it keeps the story in the public eye for another week. It distracts from other issues Sinn Féin would rather not talk about. Those in Sinn Féin will defend the indefensible when it involves them but they will not forgive an error of judgment when it involves anyone else. The truth is that for Sinn Féin politics is a just game. Every flash of outrage, passionate speech and tear choked back is a tactical move. Their spokespeople are articulate and confident but totally insincere. When we make politics a game we devalue public life and let down the people we are meant to serve. We are all guilty of it on occasion but I believe many of those opposite are guilty of it tonight.

I wish to say a few things for the record. The document was the terms of an agreement between Government and a representative body. It was not a contract or a collective agreement in the normal sense. Perhaps, that does not matter but it is important to state. Multiple changes were made between the time of announcement and publication but these were not significant. They were generally technical in nature and did not require Cabinet approval. My decision to share the document with the then president of the NAGP had no impact on them. Last Thursday, there was mention of a second document in the Dáil. We have established that this was a six-page summary attached to it. I want to clarify there was no other occasion on which I shared a document with Dr. Ó Tuathail.

As I said last week, I spoke to the former president of the NAGP. On the weekend the story broke, we did so on three occasions. The first was a call from me to him on the Friday night when headlines appeared online. The second was a call from me to him to try to ascertain the date on which I posted the document for my statement. The third was contact from him about a statement the former officers of the NAGP were planning to issue. I said I did not want to direct or advise him but made some factual observations. I want to confirm that we have not been in contact in the nine days since.

I also state categorically that the error in providing the document to Dr. Ó Tuathail, notwithstanding my good reasons, was my own. He is blameless in this regard. He is responsible

only of overstating the nature of his relationship with me and the level of his influence, and for sending some messages that were offensive and inappropriate. Having said that, there are few in this House or across the land who would not be embarrassed about the content of messages they have sent to friends or co-workers believing them to be private or confidential.

Dr. Ó Tuathail is a good person, a good doctor and an effective advocate for general practice and for people and patients, especially during the pandemic. I hope that can continue. He is someone who is genuinely committed to providing basic healthcare to those who need it most in his charity work, namely, homeless people, members of the Travelling community, the Roma community and migrants. I know that will continue. Because some people believed he was close to me, they treated him as a pawn and then made him collateral damage. This was raw politics at its most cruel.

As Deputies will know by now, there is more to this story than the sharing of a confidential document. I wish to speak about that for a moment. Our democracy is strong but we are not immune from the corrosive forces being experienced in other established democracies. I refer to fake news, conspiracy theories, the far right, the far left, unregulated fringe publications and unverified social media grievances, score-settling and smears masquerading as journalism, activism or some sort of anti-corruption crusade. I ask Deputies to reflect on their engagement with these forces. By giving them one's name and by repeating their claims, one gives them a legitimacy which diminishes this House.

I wish to put on the record that many of the claims made about me were trumped-up or simply made-up. Yesterday's article was just one example of this. It alleged ten encounters, many of which simply did not and could not have happened, particularly as I was in Brussels on two occasions, Barcelona on one, out of Dublin on another or demonstrably doing Government business. It claimed four meetings with the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Harris, which also never happened. All could have been easily verified and checked if the truth mattered. Truth did not matter, however, and was not the objective.

Last week, I was asked to give a full and detailed account of my actions to the Dáil and to set out the timelines. I have done so. As I said previously, my guiding principle today is the same as it was when I entered political life, that is, to serve my country to the best of my ability, to make a difference while I have an opportunity, to deal with the issues which affect the very future of our nation, like Covid-19 and Brexit, and to build a better society for us all post pandemic.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 92; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	

*Dáil Éireann*

<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	

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<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>		
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Denise Mitchell

and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

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

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss plans to grant extra resources to An Garda Síochána to increase the provision of drug-driving testing; (2) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss issues with the payment of the pandemic employment payment due to errors in departmental records; (3) Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss the impact of public transport reductions under level 5 restrictions on schoolgoing children; (4) Deputies Catherine Connolly and Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss steps to support the inshore fishing sector, which has been severely impacted by Covid-19; (5) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the lack of connectivity from Bus Éireann on bus routes from Youghal to Midleton and Cork city; (6) Deputy Marc MacSharry - to discuss the provision of adequate bursaries for student nurses faced with additional costs during hospital placements due to Covid restrictions; (7) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss the emerging capacity and school accommodation issue in the Greystones district; (8) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss the process to identify elite athletes who are professional but whose federation has no links to Sport Ireland; (9) Deputy Seán Canney - to discuss the resolution of the undocumented Irish in America in the light of President-elect Joe Biden's great knowledge of Irish-American relations; (10) Deputy Michael McNamara - the necessity to extend the defective concrete block scheme to County Clare; (11) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss funding for the retrofitting of houses by Dublin City Council; (12) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss provision of an out-of-hours GP care service on the north side of Cork city; (13) Deputies Jackie Cahill and Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss access to broadband in rural Ireland; (14) Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - to discuss the issue of 17,000 British drivers' licence holders in the context of Brexit; (15) Deputy Verona Murphy - to discuss the current changes to South East Community Healthcare home support packages; (16) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - to discuss the issue of bus capacity in Dublin during level 5 restrictions; (17) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the significant increase in people seeking domestic violence support during the Covid pandemic; (18) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss ongoing issues with access to school bus transport; (19) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the rights of front-line paramedic ambulance personnel to representation by the Psychiatric Nurses Association, PNA; (20) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the need for special needs assistants to be provided with adequate personal protective equipment, PPE, particularly medical-grade masks; (21) Deputy Gino Kenny - to discuss the Government's response to the demolition of a Palestinian Bedouin village by the Israeli military; (22) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss plans to ensure State access to Covid-19 vaccines; and (23) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the loss of healthcare services on the north side of Cork city.

The issues raised by Deputies O'Donnell, Carthy, Cahill and Murnane O'Connor, and Gannon have been selected for discussion.

## Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

### Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

#### Workplace Safety

27. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many content moderators for social media platforms are being subject to serious psychological damage and injury due to being exposed to explicit content during the course of their work; and if his Department will engage with workers and social media platforms to address this situation as the practice is causing post-traumatic stress disorder, among other psychological damage, to many workers exposed to such explicit content. [34902/20]

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** My question is a straightforward one. It relates to people working as content moderators for social media platforms. I want to ask if the Ministers are aware of this new form of work and the fact that the people engaged in it are subject to serious psychological damage and injury due to being exposed to explicit content during the course of their everyday work, and if the Tánaiste will engage with those workers, and, indeed, with their employers, to address this situation because in some instances, as we now know, this is causing post-traumatic stress disorder, among other psychological damage, to many of those workers exposed to this type of content.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important question.

Content moderators working for social media platforms play an important role in preventing the wider distribution of explicit content on these platforms.

Social media content moderators should be treated by an employer in the same way as any other worker exposed to a potential harm. The employer must ensure that the employee has been provided with the appropriate training before taking on the role. The employer must also ensure that procedures are in place to identify workplace risks, with supports in place to avoid employees being affected by a workplace psycho-social hazard or stressor.

In the first instance, every employer is legally obliged to carry out a risk assessment with a particular focus on work that may be hazardous to the worker and prepare a safety statement. A written safety statement should set out how an employer will protect the safety and health of all employees and include an assessment of the risks involved. Proper risk assessment along with mitigation measures, is the foundation for all workplace health and safety.

The Health and Safety Authority, HSA, has an extensive range of advisory and guidance material available to all employers to assist them in putting in place measures to identify and manage specific psycho-social hazards. Promoting positive mental health within the workplace is good for the employees, but it is also a factor in improving overall business performance.

Any content moderator working for a social media platform, with a concern for his or her health and safety arising from the manner in which his or her work is organised, should contact the HSA in confidence. On foot of the Deputy's question, I made inquiries with the authority and I am informed that it has not received any queries relating to content.

In addition, An Garda Síochána investigates the posting and circulation on social media platforms of certain acts and images of an explicit nature, which if found to be unlawful, can lead to prosecution. My colleague, the Minister of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, is responsible for media policy, including online safety legislation, and is currently advancing a regulatory framework that will deal with online safety.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** To expand a little on the kind of work that these people are engaged in, they are responsible for assessing user-generated content submitted to these online platforms. They have to look at videos and other content that users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other platforms upload to see if it complies with the standards. I am not talking about the funny videos with headings such as, "I did not go to work because a cat fell on my head and then a dog with shoes tried to do me justice." I am talking about videos of very serious extreme violence, sexual abuse or child abuse, and videos of people being beheaded. These people are subject to absolute trauma day in, day out and it is having a significant impact on their health.

I ask that this new form of work would be recognised as such. I do not think that the Tánaiste intends to be unfair to them, but it is not fair to say they can go to the HSA or, indeed, to the Garda. This is a workplace issue. It is one that perhaps legislation and legislators need to catch up with because it is very much a new form of work and a new type of occupation.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I am familiar with the work. It must be very difficult work to do to have to sit for hours on end watching explicit, violent or deeply offensive content. Some of it can be done by artificial intelligence but we know that that is not good enough. That is why one needs a human being to do much of that work. Somebody needs to do it. If they do not do that job the content gets online and perhaps is seen by children or others, and perhaps incites violence, terrorism or any of those things to which the Deputy referred. It is very important work, therefore, that people agree to do.

It is absolutely essential that their employer, whether it is their direct employer or indirectly through an agency or third party, looks out for their mental health and well-being. I am certainly open to any suggestions or proposals that anyone may have to make sure that that is the case.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Facebook is the largest of these platforms, and the one where most of the violence, and, indeed, disturbing content, is shared. The content moderators in Dublin have been outsourced. This is despite the fact that their work is essential. It is deemed essential by Facebook. It has to carry on and as the Tánaiste stated, artificial intelligence will only do so much. It will not do the job of these people.

Facebook has outsourced its responsibility in some respects. According to an article in *The Sunday Business Post*, a worker said that he could not even tell his family what he was doing. There is a huge amount of secrecy around this and a huge amount of what I would consider skating up to the very edge of what is acceptable industrial relations practices.

The workers and many of their representatives believe Facebook is aware that the jobs that it is asking these people to do are causing them this level of psychological damage up to and including post-traumatic stress disorder and that is why the company has outsourced it. There

is a job here for us, not only to talk about it but to engage with those workers because this is a new form of work. This is not the type of work that was done when I was younger or, indeed, when the Minister was younger. This is very new. We need to inform ourselves. I ask that the Tánaiste makes time to meet these workers or their representatives to hear at first hand what they are going through.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I certainly would be happy to do that. As I say, it must be extraordinarily difficult work to do but it is work that somebody has to do to protect the rest of us. It is important that those staff who agree to do that job have their well-being protected.

I meet representatives of Facebook and other digital platforms maybe once a year. I will certainly make it part of the agenda or if there is a union representative for those workers, I would be happy to arrange for a meeting for them as well.

### Job Losses

28. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Question No. 61 of 15 October 2020, the steps he is taking to replace the job losses in Ballinasloe, County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35059/20]

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Last August, Aptar announced the closure of its operation in Ballinasloe with the loss of 115 jobs. To put it in perspective, this is the equivalent of 1,380 jobs going overnight in the city of Galway. There has not been the same level of focus on the town of Ballinasloe as there would be with a similar scale of job losses in Galway city and we need a proactive approach to be taken by Government led by the Tánaiste.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I thank the Deputy for his interest in this issue. He raised it with me previously, as have Deputy Fitzmaurice and Senators Dolan and Murphy.

I was disappointed to learn of the decision by Aptar to close its facility in Ballinasloe. My primary concern, as I said previously, is for the workers and families who have been impacted by this decision in losing their jobs at a very difficult time. The Government is doing what it can to help them transition and find new employment opportunities.

Now that the decision has been taken to close the facility, IDA Ireland is working closely with the company to market the plant to potential investors. IDA Ireland has introduced a number of companies that are interested in the Ballinasloe facility to the Aptar management team and has arranged visits to the site. These discussions are ongoing. In the meantime, IDA Ireland continues to market the site to both IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland clients.

IDA Ireland is in regular contact with the company and I understand it spoke with management on Friday last, 6 November, to discuss the wind-down of the facility. I am told that 19 staff remain employed at the site and that at least 60 former staff have found similar employment in the region. The IDA Ireland regional team has connected employees of Aptar with the local Intreo office as well as the local enterprise office, LEO, regional skills forum west, and the Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, ETB.

While the announcement of job losses at Aptar is very disappointing, I assure the Deputy that the Government and its agencies are working to create employment opportunities in the

west and across all of our regions.

*8 o'clock*

Just this week, I was happy to announce the creation of 200 new highly skilled jobs in Galway, which will be created by an IDA Ireland client company, Diligent. However, I note the Deputy is keen to attract new investment to Ballinasloe in particular. While the period ahead may prove challenging, securing new foreign direct investment for our regions is a priority for the Government.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. It is positive that 60 of the staff have found employment but the difficulty is that they are finding it not in Ballinasloe but elsewhere. I would like the Tánaiste to chair a meeting of all of the State agencies, along with the two local authorities in counties Galway and Roscommon, to implement a co-ordinated strategy specifically for the town of Ballinasloe. Previously, when there were significant job losses in various locations, the Tánaiste's predecessors did that on the ground in the affected community. I accept that is not physically possible because of Covid-19 but I ask that he bring all of the players around the table remotely to look at the opportunities available to Ballinasloe. The town has significant resources and infrastructure that are not available in other towns but it always seems to be one decision short of securing critical investment.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** It is important to note that 21,000 people are now employed in IDA Ireland supported firms in the entirety of County Galway. That is a substantial increase on 2010 when there were only just over 11,000 people so employed. The increase in the figure, from just over 11,000 people in 2010 to 21,000 people now, is huge. I appreciate that the vast majority of that employment is probably in Galway city and the area around it, rather than in the east or west of the county. In the past, it was customary to establish task forces when there were major job losses. We have now moved to a different approach, which is having a regional enterprise plan steering committee for the west region. I intend to meet the steering committee in the coming weeks and we will definitely ensure Ballinasloe is on the agenda.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I accept that the steering committees have been set up but there is a steering committee in the mid-west. When Molex Ireland closed in Shannon, the then Minister, Deputy Humphreys, went to Shannon and brought all of the players around the table. I am asking the Tánaiste to do the same because the one thing that Ballinasloe has going for it is the infrastructure. It has industrial land available and in State ownership, through the HSE, at St. Brigid's Hospital. It has water, waste water and fibre capacity. It is 15 minutes away from the new technological university in Athlone. There are major opportunities to secure foreign direct investment into a campus which is 15 minutes from the dead centre of this country. Ballinasloe is close to Athlone, a town with serious infrastructural challenges, yet it seems we cannot secure investment in Ballinasloe. The Tánaiste needs to take a leadership role on this to ensure we secure major investment.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** As the Deputy says, Ballinasloe is very well located and has access to a lot of the key infrastructure that is needed. It is a good site. I had intended to do something like that at the time but we ran into other difficulties around Covid, as the Deputy mentioned. I am happy to commit to pulling together the agencies and having a particular focus on Ballinasloe over the next couple of weeks. That was in the work plan anyway but I appreciate the reminder and I will follow up on it. I do not know if it will produce any results but it is definitely worth a try. We are determined to ensure we find a replacement employer and secure a

significant investment in Ballinasloe as soon as possible, if not in the next couple of years.

## Employment Rights

29. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if legislation will be brought forward to ensure workers have a legal right to remote working following on from the publication of guidance for working remotely by his Department. [34903/20]

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** This is another fairly straightforward question. It follows on from the publication of the guidance for working remotely. Will the Tánaiste consider bringing forward legislation to ensure workers have a legal right to remote working? At the very start of the pandemic, I got a phone call from a constituent who told me that on the day the restrictions were announced, five laptops were brought into her workplace for the senior managers. The managers went home and the workers were left in the workplace. That case was resolved but it should not happen like that. A person should have a legal right to work from home or remotely, where it is appropriate.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** Under the current level 5 of the plan for living with Covid, people are asked to stay at home. If people can work from home, they should do so. They should only enter their workplace if they are providing an essential service for which their physical presence is required. While we all look forward to the day when we are free to return to our workplaces, the Government wants remote working to become part of the new normal. This is reflected in the programme for Government, which contains commitments aimed at facilitating remote work across Ireland. In July, my Department launched a consultation on remote working. We are using the insights garnered from this to refine the current remote working guidance and we will publish a remote working strategy before the end of the year. However, we must seek to strike a balance as the closure of so many workplaces has had a real impact on footfall in our towns and cities. We need to recognise that, depending on the job or role, remote working arrangements may not be ideal for all employers or employees.

A right to request remote working exists in several countries, including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Finland. While the exact mechanics of the schemes vary, the basic concept is that a person who meets the legal definition of "employee" has the right to request remote working arrangements. The employer is not obliged to grant the request but is required to give it fair consideration and provide a reasonable explanation if they choose to reject it. Certain eligibility requirements may also be provided for, such as a minimum length of service or limit on the frequency of such requests.

Currently, there is nothing in legislation that prevents an employee requesting the right to work remotely but I still think legislation is needed. I intend to initiate a discussion on the concept of a right to request remote working with the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, and employer bodies at the next meeting of the LEEF sub-group on employment, which I chair. I will be interested to hear their views on what we can do to further facilitate remote working in a way that works for businesses and staff.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Maybe I misunderstood the Tánaiste. He said he wanted to initiate a conversation on the right to request remote working but we all have that right at the moment, although probably not in this job, admittedly. However, in most other jobs, bar those

where the employee's physical presence is required, people can request it. The boss can just say "No", however. Studies show that productivity has gone up but we also know that some employers are either nervous or unwilling to progress remote working. I have previously said to the Tánaiste that remote working needs to be recognised as a specific form of new work, just like shift work. Shift work is recognised with shift patterns and premiums for working outside of normal hours. Remote work is a separate form of work. I think the Tánaiste said he was worried at the beginning of the pandemic that people would not take to remote working. They have really taken to it. I take the Tánaiste's point about the need for people to be out and about and the impact remote working will have. I believe the vast majority of people will opt for a blended option where they will be in town sometimes. We should also be having a conversation about hubs in our towns and villages to ensure people can work from home but also be in their town and out and about spending money. That would be good all around.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** It is true that anyone can request of his or her employer the option of working at home but it is not a legal right in the sense that I mean it. At the moment, people can request term time or flexible hours, which is kind of what I have in mind in setting out a legal framework whereby people could request remote working of their employer and the employer would have to consider it properly and give reasons. Presumably the employee would then be able to take the matter further if he or she were not happy with the response. That is the kind of right we are talking and thinking about. From the research we have done on people who are in jobs where there is remote working, roughly 10% to 15% are dying to get back to the office. That may be for all sorts of reasons. It could be related to personality or because the person is living in a crowded apartment. About 15% are keen to stay at home and work from home all the time. A good 70% want blended working and that is the way of the future. I would like to create a legal framework around it so that employees have some legal basis and legal backing when they request remote working. That does not mean we can force employers to do it. Nobody is looking for that but we need a framework which gives employees some backing if they make such a request.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I ask the Tánaiste to start by doing a very simple thing. We very rarely hear senior politicians or NPHET requesting employers to allow their employees to work from home. We hear a lot that employees should all work from home where possible but there should also be an onus on employers to provide this facility. We could spend all evening getting into why people's homes or apartments are overcrowded but the Tánaiste is correct that plenty of people cannot work from home. This is where some good work could be done with regard to hubs that would be based in villages and towns. In my area in Balbriggan, a place he knows well, there is a place on the main street and it would be fantastic to have a facility and have people in the town spending money on their lunch break. This can work as an idea for blended working. I welcome the fact that he is committed to doing this and we in Sinn Féin will commit to working with him to ensure this is done speedily. We need to place a little bit more emphasis on the obligations of the employer to provide this. This cannot just be a one-way street in giving people the right to ask. There has to be some sort of persuasive element for an employer.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** On the enterprise hubs, hot desks, digital hubs or whatever people wish to call them, we have a budget for this in the Department and also in the Department of Rural and Community Development. When I was able to get around, I saw a number of them up and running in various parts of the country, including flagship hubs such as Ludgate in Skibbereen. There is also a very good one in Edgeworthstown, County Longford, in an old bank that had closed and become a symbol of the town's decline. It was then transformed into an

enterprise hub where people can work. As the Deputy said, it means people being able to work not necessarily at home but in their local town or village, having lunch on the main street and bringing huge benefits to the town or village. We really want to see more of this. It is very much part of what we are now funding in the budget and it will be a feature of the national economic plan when it is ready.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

**30. Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if grant aid will be provided to livestock marts to update equipment and assist with online costs; and, if so, if the grant scheme will be changed in order that marts with a turnover of €5 million will be eligible to access funding in view of the fact that profit is minimal. [34560/20]

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The start-up grant earlier this year was welcome but businesses with a turnover of more than €5 million could not apply. I realise that when the Tánaiste took over the portfolio he increased it to €25 million. If marts sold 100 cattle a week they would go over the €5 million mark. When they reopened, some of them were not aware that it had increased to €25 million and that they could apply for funding after they reopened. Some of these marts have put in a fair amount of online infrastructure. Will the Minister re-examine this?

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I thank the Deputy for his recent submission to me on this matter. He highlighted some clear challenges that have emerged relating to the imposition of level 5 Covid-19 restrictions, including the prohibition on buyers accessing sales rings at livestock marts.

My colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, and his Department continue to work closely with stakeholders to protect agrifood supply chains, despite the stricter controls in place. Nevertheless, the core responsibility of Government is to protect lives and public health while also supporting the broader requirements of the economy and society. Regretfully, we are in level 5 Covid-19 restrictions and it is not possible to make exemptions for any section of the economy affected by them. This position was reiterated by the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, during Question Time last week and by the Taoiseach.

Regarding the operation of online marts, I understand that Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine officials have been in contact with system providers and have been assured all necessary steps are being taken to avoid a repeat of the recent broadband connectivity issues experienced. They are monitoring the situation closely to ensure the smooth operation of future sales.

I understand the value of adequate broadband throughout the country and it is vital to the future of work and flexible and remote working. Work on the national broadband plan continues as quickly as possible. The Deputy raised the issue of broadband with me last week on Leaders' Questions, and a specific issue regarding stand-offs in relation to poles. I mentioned this to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, but the Deputy may wish to raise it with him directly.

There is no specific programme available to grant aid livestock marts to update equipment but I am happy to discuss any proposal the Deputy may have. I understand that marts have availed of the restart grant plus scheme, for which the turnover cap was €25 million, increased

from €5 million in the previous scheme, as he acknowledged.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the Tánaiste's reply. The reason I am speaking to the Department is that as well as being agricultural marts employ people and they are enterprises. They are very important, particularly in rural areas. Given the outlay many of them had this year, all I ask is that the Tánaiste re-examines providing an incentive or some type of funding that they may be able to access through the Department.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I thank the Deputy. Certainly I am happy to examine any proposal in this regard. It is probably more something for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine than for my Department but I am always open to suggestion. It can be difficult to have a scheme that is for a particular business or enterprise and then not face requests to do the same for other businesses. I am certainly happy to hear more from the Deputy about this.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I acknowledge the Tánaiste has spoken about the submission that has been made and, in fairness to the officials, they spoke to me about this. In the coming weeks there should be an opportunity to show NPHET and the various Departments the flaws or problems in places. We need to concentrate on this to allow a certain number of farmers being able to safely work within a mart. It is our job to prove this to the people to whom we need to prove it but I ask the Tánaiste to be open minded when we look for it again.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I thank the Deputy. I am very sympathetic to the cases being made to allow marts to reopen with restrictions. I recall that during the first phase of the pandemic, we did exactly that at a certain point and it worked reasonably well. I know that buying and selling livestock online is not the same. It is the same as buying anything online, but in particular looking at a live animal online is not just the same. I have heard of situations where farmers have been trying to join the mart online and have suffered from bad broadband or even cases where farmers have got together around a laptop and were probably closer to each other than they would have been had they been at the mart. We also need to be practical about these things. At the same time, one thing the Government is very clear about is that if we start to unravel the restrictions now, they will unravel and we really want to get another few weeks at level 5 to reduce the numbers to a very low level before we consider easing any restrictions. Like all businesses, marts can avail of the employment wage subsidy scheme to help pay staff, low-cost loans and the new Covid restrictions support scheme weekly grant that can be received when they are closed.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Employment Support Services**

31. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to secure alternative employment opportunities for the former workforce at a company (details supplied) which closed in 2020. [34994/20]

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** On 20 May, workers at BD Foods in Glaslough, County Monaghan, got the devastating news that their parent company, Henderson Group, had announced the merger of its recently acquired companies into its operational base in Mallusk with the loss of most of the jobs. Will the Tánaiste indicate whether the Department has been active in trying to save the jobs in the first place or, subsequently, secure alternative employment for the workers involved?

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** Covid-19 is having a severe effect on certain business sectors and the food distribution and supply sectors in particular. In the case of BD Foods, the Deputy will be aware that my colleague, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, was very actively engaged with the company in trying to preserve as many jobs as possible. I understand BD Foods will retain part of the company's sales force and as many as possible of the remaining staff will be redeployed to the logistics end of the business.

The company is currently looking at alternative logistics supply arrangements to facilitate this transition. In terms of the jobs that will ultimately be lost, the company has committed to working closely with State services to help those affected to find alternative employment.

The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is well aware of the situation and her Department is assisting the workers to transition and find new employment opportunities, which will be a challenge in the present circumstances. I also am aware that the local enterprise office has been in discussion with some of the employees to discuss alternative options.

The Department of Social Protection shared a prerecorded webinar in June 2020 with company management, which undertook to circulate to it to each employee. Content included information on the programmes and services that the Department provides. The Department will engage with the former employees to develop individual plans that will include details of alternative employment opportunities.

My Department has undertaken a range of initiatives to develop job opportunities in Monaghan. The new IDA Ireland advance facility in Monaghan is now under construction and we hope to find an occupant for it quite soon. The €5 million BioConnect Innovation Centre is progressing. A new digital hub for Monaghan was funded under the regional development enterprise fund earlier this year and my predecessor, the Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys, launched the Border enterprise development fund in June as part of an economic stimulus for the Border counties to help SMEs deal with Brexit.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** A lot of what the Tánaiste said is factually correct but will be of little comfort to the workers involved. On 18 August, I wrote to the Tánaiste asking him specific questions that the workers in BD Foods had asked but to which they had not received satisfactory responses from the other Minister, who the Tánaiste has managed to mention three times in his response. One question was in regard to the back to education grant. These workers are currently on the Covid payment and if they go back to education, that payment will be reduced. I asked whether the Minister would address that for companies such as this one. Other workers are investigating the possibility of establishing similar businesses to BD Foods and the information they got from the local enterprise office is that because it is a service-type industry, they can be offered no practical support. Furthermore, the workers have asked whether the Department has any evidence of engagement with the company prior to the announced closure. It happened incredibly quickly in the midst of the Covid pandemic and some of the workers believe this was actually a ruse by the company. I got no response to the email of 18 August or to a further email

on 6 October. Perhaps the Tánaiste can answer the questions now.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I do not recall seeing that email or a letter. I usually get sight of any replies that issue to Deputies so I will definitely ask my staff to pull that down and we will send the Deputy a proper reply as soon as we can.

I do not know personally whether there was prior engagement, so I do not want to say to the Deputy now that there was or was not. However, I will check it out and let him know. With regard to the back to education allowance and the back to enterprise allowance, these are really good schemes that allow people to retain their social welfare payment while going back to education or setting up their own business. Obviously, the terms and conditions around that are a matter for the Minister, Deputy Humphreys.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Tánaiste referenced the number of engagements of his Department and the Department of Social Protection. The workers at BD Foods tell me the engagement they have had with the statutory bodies, including the two Departments, has boiled down to the webinar to which the Tánaiste referred, which was essentially informing workers how they could claim social protection payments. My questions to the Tánaiste relate to the fact that, in the beautiful small village of Glaslough in County Monaghan, this is a huge employer which has deep roots and, proportionately, it is as big as a major industry in a larger town or city. I hope the Tánaiste can provide me tonight with an assurance that his Department will work with the former employees of BD Foods to try to establish alternative employment in the place in which they lost it. I believe it is possible but they need the support and assistance of the Tánaiste. I hope he can assure us tonight that he will give it.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I will definitely follow up on that and if we can provide help and provide alternative employment in Glaslough, that is certainly what we will do, and that is part of the role of Government and its agencies. Generally, the kind of advice and support that we provide people who have lost their jobs are not just about letting them know their welfare entitlements, but that is important too. People are entitled to get redundancy and get their welfare payments, and entitled to know what options they have in terms of education and setting up their own business, but we also try to point people in the right direction in terms of alternative employment, training and all of that. That is not just done through the webinar but through the Intreo service too.

## **Brexit Supports**

32. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of Brexit preparations by his Department particularly for businesses in the Border region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35153/20]

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I ask the Minister of State to outline the plans in regard to Brexit preparations. As a Border region Deputy, this is of huge concern to me. Businesses on the ground feel the political agenda has been somewhat taken over by the pandemic, naturally enough, but it is a very worrying time for small and medium businesses, the agrifood sector and local authorities.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. While Covid might have focused

the attention of many minds and businesses in recent months, as a Department and a Government, we have been very much focused on Brexit for the last number of years, certainly as we get closer to it. The Tánaiste and other colleagues have repeatedly tried to drive home the message over the last few months about the importance of focusing on Brexit and keeping an eye to business as well. We want to make sure businesses engage with us, not just those in the Border region that the Deputy represents, but also throughout the country, given Brexit will have an impact on business generally. We know that and we have been working with companies to prepare for that as well.

The Department and its agencies have put in place a wide range of Brexit enterprise measures covering potential Brexit impacts. The Brexit readiness checklist highlights some of the key actions businesses can take to prepare for the changes Brexit will bring from 1 January 2021. The Border enterprise development fund, administered by Enterprise Ireland, provides for collaborative enterprise capability-building projects advancing entrepreneurship, productivity and innovation in the Border region. The fund is part of a €28 million economic stimulus package announced for the six Border counties of Louth, Monaghan, Cavan, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal earlier this year, with some success in both Cavan and Monaghan, which the Deputy represents.

Enterprise Ireland's "ready for customs" scheme helps businesses prepare for the challenges of trading with and through the UK. Its online customs insights course and Brexit readiness checker are also available. These stand alongside grants, mentoring and training to enable businesses to examine their exposure and capability to meet the challenges and opportunities that Brexit presents.

The local enterprise offices offer "prepare your business for customs" workshops. They also provide grants to businesses responding to Brexit challenges, including the technical assistance for micro exporters grant of €2,500, and LEAN for micro grants to assist productivity improvements.

InterTradeIreland's Brexit advisory service offers a focal point for businesses working to navigate changes in cross-Border trading relationships as a result of Brexit. It has run a series of awareness-raising events to help improve knowledge of customs processes and procedures. These events also identify actions that businesses can take in areas like logistics and supply chain management. Its Brexit planning voucher enables eligible businesses to seek professional advice on how best to plan and prepare for Brexit. This helps businesses get advice on specific areas such as tariffs, currency management and regulatory and customs issues.

Also announced was a new €2 billion credit guarantee scheme and further funding to Microfinance Ireland. The future growth loan scheme was expanded at the beginning of the summer to enable long-term investment, including for a post-Brexit, post-Covid-19 environment.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I thank the Minister of State. I accept his point that very strong measures have been put in place in terms of Brexit readiness. There was always hopefulness in the businesses' viewpoint as to where Brexit might leave them. We are on the eve of Brexit and we will certainly be doing business very differently than in the past.

Despite the fact the Border region has received significant EU funding since the 1990s, it continues to lag behind national and regional averages in areas such as productivity and household incomes. There are some 87,000 businesses in the Border region, 40% of which are in the

agri-sector. I always use Lakeland Dairies as a good example of a business that employs a large number of people, does its business on both sides of the Border and is very reliant on a seamless Border. It needs to be able to continue to do business in a way that is sustainable and that allows it to continue to employ in the way it does and to maintain productivity.

I welcome the Minister of State's comments that there will be a positive bias towards the Border region, which is very important. The Border region is at the coalface of Brexit and has a very particular set of certain of circumstances that is not seen nationally.

**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy is correct. I am from the north-east region and I know there will be a greater impact in the Border region. We recognise that, which is why we have the Northern Ireland protocol and the specific committee to oversee the implementation of the agreement in the years ahead. We are very strong in support of that and of working with our colleagues across Europe and in the UK to implement those protocols and arrangements.

Naturally, as a Department supporting jobs, we are very much focused on trying to distribute the jobs to the regions, which includes the Border region. That is why, when we analyse any of the drawdown of the supports, we can see there is a significant drawdown of supports from the regions. The Deputy mentioned there are over 87,000 companies in the region. In the last couple of weeks, the Tánaiste has written to all of those companies that we can account for in order to ask them to engage with our Department and its agencies, whether that is the local employment offices, Enterprise Ireland or the other agencies that are mentioned, including InterTradeIreland. We want to help these businesses to survive and thrive, not just through Covid but also as we deal with Brexit and the fallout from that. We have acknowledged from the start that trading will be more difficult because of Brexit and that is why we want to support those companies but we ask them to engage with us. We can see, as the Deputy knows, that a number of companies have yet to engage.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister of State is over time.

**Deputy Damien English:** It is an important message. We ask those businesses to use the remaining 50 days or so to engage with us so we can have them in a strong position to deal with Brexit.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State and ask for co-operation so we can get as many Deputies in as possible.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I concur with the Minister of State on the local authorities. Both Cavan and Monaghan county councils have done tremendous work in bringing businesses to the table in facing up to the realities of Brexit, along with our LEOs, which have organised round-table conversations, encouraging and enabling them to access the supports the Government is making available.

I ask the Minister of State to continue that work. We are on the cusp of Brexit. It will have a significant impact, with a very particular set of circumstances for the Border region. We want to not only sustain the businesses we have in those areas but to enable them to grow and to strengthen their capacity for further employment. Covid has added an extra layer of negativity on businesses in the Border area. For that reason, I ask that positive bias be shown towards Border counties such as Cavan and Monaghan.

**Deputy Damien English:** We certainly are in a position to do that because the Department

has secured additional resources to work with industry and support it in the area of job creation, as well as sustaining jobs through the period of Brexit and Covid. I stress again, and the Deputy is in a good position to get this message out there, that we need the companies that will be impacted by Brexit to come forward now. Many have but we know from all the research that a number of companies in every category are not fully prepared for Brexit. There is still time to get fully prepared and we urge them to come forward and avail of the supports we and other Departments can give. We are in a strong financial position to work with and help them. The Deputy is correct that it is not just to sustain the jobs that are there today, but to create extra jobs. We need those companies. They are the employers and the ones we want to work with, to reach out to and to help create more employment. They are well capable of that and we look forward to working with them in the months ahead.

### **Brexit Preparations**

33. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of his Department's Brexit preparations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35044/20]

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank the Minister of State for taking this question. On Brexit and the preparedness of small businesses, is he familiar with the research done by the customs clearance service, Declaron, a new partnership between the accountancy firm, BDO, and the fintech company, Fexco. According to their research, 37% of Irish businesses that trade with the UK have yet to start planning for Brexit. Businesses list their primary reason for not preparing as the fact that no trade agreement is in place yet. It is just 50 days until 2021 and such findings seem to me extremely worrying. Is the Minister of State surprised or alarmed by these findings?

**Deputy Damien English:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. On the basis of research such as that and research we have been undertaking through our own agencies and in conjunction with the representative bodies we have worked with on a weekly basis on Brexit over the past number of years, we are concerned that a number of companies have yet to engage with the system to deal with Brexit and with our Department and agencies. That is why we have gone to great lengths in the past couple of months to reinforce the message and encourage that engagement and ask companies to get prepared for Brexit. The State is in a position to assist companies through Brexit and through Covid. We have the additional resources in place to do that but we need companies to engage with us, put up their hand, ask for that help and ask us to see how we can engage with them to put them in a stronger position.

Our Department and agencies under our remit have intensified Brexit-readiness preparations over the past couple of weeks. The Tánaiste has written to more than 200,000 companies to ask them to check their system, supply chain and trading conditions, to engage with our agencies, to draw down some of the grants that are available towards more personnel and supports and to avail of the additional financial products to help companies through the early months of Brexit.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank the Minister of State. I note what he said about the 225,000 businesses that have been corresponded with, which is welcome, but the Declaron research also found that 54% of businesses that trade with the UK do not understand the new custom clearance procedures that are guaranteed to come into effect on 1 January 2021, which is worrying. Does the Minister of State agree with Carol Lynch, one of those who participated

in that research, that many businesses seem to be sleepwalking into the trade agreement trap? Is he confident that businesses know that, even if the trade agreement is reached, there will still be a requirement for import and export declarations? Is there anything that can be done about this?

Last month, a new online Enterprise Ireland Brexit readiness checker was launched to help businesses, which is welcome. What was the response to that? If the Minister of State does not have the answer this evening, perhaps he will furnish me with it because I would like to know how many businesses have logged on.

**Deputy Damien English:** We have been saying clearly for the past couple of months that, regardless of how the talks finish up in the weeks ahead, there will be major changes for business, including in the customs area. That will be new to many businesses that have operated in Ireland over the past 30 or 40 years. It is a new challenge for them. We recognise that and that is why the Tánaiste and the Government made money available for customs support and we announced a specific €20 million fund for the ready for customs support scheme. In that, we encourage businesses to come forward and draw down a fund of up to €9,000 towards an employee or people to enable them to prepare for the customs challenge.

It will be difficult and the Tánaiste, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy and I have been engaging with companies and representative bodies. We have been down at the ports and engaging with Revenue and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on the processes and complications involved. We recognise that life will be complicated. Brexit will put barriers on trade and will make it more difficult. That is why those companies need to use the remaining 50 days plus to prepare themselves to engage the skills they need to trade through this when the customs are in place.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** The €20 million fund the Minister of State referred to is welcome. However, my fear relates to those businesses that may not be aware of the full impact of Brexit or that, because of Covid, have not paid enough attention to it and have had other issues such as keeping the doors open on their minds. It is important that the Department and the Ministers responsible double down on making sure those businesses are aware. Some of these businesses have never dealt with customs issues if they have traded purely within the European Union. We need to get ahead of the issue. The Minister of State spoke about the €9,000 support for employees to be trained, which is welcome, but it is essential, with just 50 days left, that we prioritise this issue in order that businesses are well prepared in advance of a bad deal, which unfortunately seems likely in respect of Brexit.

**Deputy Damien English:** I again thank the Deputy for raising this because it helps us bring the focus onto this. We totally agree with him. From a departmental point of view, we want companies to engage and recognise how serious this is. We acknowledge that, since February, companies have had a great deal thrown at them in regard to Covid and they are trying to manage their way through that. However, Brexit is looming and is coming in approximately 50 days. In fairness to companies, there have been many deadlines in the past couple of years in respect of Brexit and they have kept moving, so they might be a bit relaxed as we get closer. However, we have seen a greater engagement over the past few weeks in preparing for Brexit. The supports are there to help companies with the customs ends of this and the personnel required for that. Quite a number have engaged and drawn down the grant but we want more to do that.

I know from chairing the retail consultation forum that many in the retail sector are well

prepared but there are concerns out there that a number of companies that are either importing or exporting from the UK are not prepared. We are in a position to work with them and, even at this late stage, to help them prepare as best they can but they have to engage. We are trying to locate them but we need them to come forward and if any Members can help, we would be delighted to support that.

### **Beef Industry**

34. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the requests he has received in the past 12 months from his ministerial colleagues to carry out a market study under section 10(4) of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35118/20]

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** In September 2019, Dáil Éireann unanimously supported a motion on the beef sector that called on the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation under section 10(4) of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 to request the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, to carry out a market study and analysis on the nature and scale of consumer and beef farmer issues in the beef market and make recommendations. This has yet to be implemented.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy) (Deputy Robert Troy):** The Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 enables the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to request the CCPC to carry out a study or analysis of any issue relating to consumer protection and welfare, any practice or method of competition affecting the supply and distribution of goods or the provision of services, or any other matter relating to competition and to submit a report to him or her.

No requests have been made by the Minister to the CCPC to carry out a market study or analysis in the past 12 months, nor has any other Minister requested to use those powers to request the CCPC to carry out a study for them.

In August 2019, the then Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, made a request to the CCPC to carry out a study of the public liability insurance market in Ireland. This study was requested as the issue of increases in public liability premiums for businesses was raised with her as a potential systemic threat to the existence of many businesses. Concerns were also expressed about the roles of insurance firms and intermediaries in the increased levels of public liability insurance premiums.

The study will compile a detailed assessment of the functioning of the market and make evidence-based recommendations as to how the Government may address the current issues around the cost and supply of public liability insurance. The CCPC commenced a wide range of activities to complete this study, including meetings with representative groups, public bodies, industry representatives and customers; conducting customer focused market research among a representative sample of businesses, community groups and sports organisations; issuing a public consultation paper to obtain the views of key stakeholders; analysing data that are available on the market; and undertaking desk-based research. We expect the chairperson of the CCPC to provide the report in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Fourteen months ago, the Minister of State and everyone else in

this House supported the proposition that an inquiry into the beef sector take place in this country. At the moment, we are telling beef farmers to come forward with the evidence and present it to the CCPC. I made a submission to the commission but the reality is that unless a whistleblower comes forward to provide documentary evidence, it cannot instigate an investigation into the beef sector. Does the Minister of State believe that there are anti-competitive practices in operation within the beef sector? I believe that there are. The Government has a mechanism by which it can ask the CCPC, at the stroke of a pen, to go in, look at the industry as a whole and carry out a report. Let us see once and for all what is going on.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I am aware that during a debate on the challenges facing the beef sector in the Dáil on 18 September 2019, the Deputy tabled an amendment to a motion, agreed to on 26 September, proposing that the CCPC carry out a market study and analysis on the nature and scale of beef farming issues in the beef market and make recommendations. A request for the CCPC to undertake a market study or analysis under section 10(4) of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 is not a substitute for the commission undertaking its statutory functions by investigating an alleged breach of competition laws that are used by the commission in different situations.

In 2019, the CCPC received a significant number of complaints about the beef sector and, as a result, commenced a detailed, extensive examination. The majority of the complaints related to five core issues: the similarity in the base price per kg offered by processors to beef farmers across all beef processing plants, dissatisfaction with the qualitative criteria for the payment of in-spec bonuses applied by beef processors to the importing of foreign beef, the operation of feedlots, distortion of competition and the impact of a reported monopoly in offal processing.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I will come back to my core point. There are two ways that a thorough investigation can be carried out. One is if documentary evidence comes forward, and that can only happen if we have a whistle-blower within the industry. The other option is for the Government, through the offices of the Minister and the Department, to direct the CCPC to carry out a market study and inquire into the sector. Is the Minister of State honestly telling me that he does not have concerns regarding the operation of the offal sector in this country? Every farmer, man and woman, in this country believes that a monopoly is operating in the offal sector. That has a controlling influence on the kill in this country. It is imperative that we have a separate independent inquiry and it should not be dependent on farmers finding evidence.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I can relay to the Deputy what has been relayed to me by the CCPC. It has reviewed the beef sector and following an extensive review and assessment of all the information it gathered, the CCPC announced in June 2020 that there was insufficient evidence of a breach of competition law to warrant taking any further action at that time. It stated that it would not launch an investigation into the reported practice in the beef sector.

One of the first bodies I met on being appointed Minister of State in this Department was the CCPC. One of the first questions I asked its representatives was about their attitudes to, and concerns about, the beef sector. They forwarded me a report, which I have read and am happy to forward to the Deputy. I am happy to go back to them again, based on the question that the Deputy has asked. If he has specific information that can help the CCPC, I am also happy to relay that to them.

## Departmental Communications

35. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department will actively promote shopping locally to retain money in local economies and sustain them during this very difficult period. [34935/20]

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** My question is about the promotion of shopping locally and the retention of money in local economies. I have put the question forward in a constructive way because we are in a difficult situation at the moment. These matters are important at any time, as I am sure the Tánaiste will agree, but that is particularly true at the moment because of the difficulties of retaining money in local economies, getting money spent and, very importantly, keeping people in jobs and getting people back into jobs.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** My Department is working with the LEOs on a local media campaign to support the “Shop Local” initiatives that are already active across the country. The purpose of this campaign will be to encourage communities to support businesses in their area by shopping locally and safely.

Even while under level 5 Covid-19 restrictions where people cannot physically enter certain stores, they can continue to buy from them through remote ordering. Orders can be placed for products, including non-essential items, either online or by phone, and fulfilled through home delivery or collection. The growth in demand for shopping online is driving the retail sector to also develop its online trading capability to enhance its competitiveness. This is an important route for retail businesses in the current crisis and will be an important element in their recovery over the longer term.

The €2,500 trading online vouchers are available to help small and microenterprises with very limited or no e-commerce presence to get online, boost their sales and reach new markets, particularly during this difficult period when so many businesses are closed to the public. Businesses can also apply for a second voucher where they have successfully utilised their first one, which brings the overall total voucher amount available up to €5,000. As of 6 November, 13,789 applications have been received, of which 10,721 have been approved so far, to a value of just over €25 million. The Covid-19 online retail scheme has been introduced to support Irish-owned retail businesses to rapidly adapt and enhance their online business capability as they work within the Covid-19 public health measures. It helps to position retail businesses for recovery in the future, once the public health emergency and related measures have passed. Grants ranging from €10,000 to €40,000 are payable to successful applicants under the scheme. An additional €5 million has been provided as part of budget 2021. As of 6 November, 373 applications had been received, of which 185 retailers have been approved so far, to a value of €6.58 million.

I thank retailers and their customers for their efforts at this difficult time. By each of us following the spirit of these new rules and working together, we can hopefully return to a lower level of the living with Covid-19 framework.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Tánaiste for his very comprehensive answer. There are many things beyond our control but a number of things are within our control. One of these is controlling the pandemic. Deputies on this side of the House are also active in telling people to obey the rules to try to push back the virus and reopen employment. We also encourage people to spend money locally in towns and villages to keep people in work. This is not about protec-

tionism or isolationism. It is very important.

I welcome the Tánaiste's comment that businesses will have access for a second time to the online voucher scheme. That is very good. The reason I raise the scheme is that more work is needed to promote it. I am aware of it and I tell people about it and encourage them to take it up. Some have done so and some have not done so. There is still reticence among older traders to do this. It is important that we continue to promote the scheme.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** The Deputy is correct. We are trying to ensure that people are aware of these schemes. A local radio campaign will start in the week beginning 19 November for an initial period of two weeks. The campaign will also be activated through the local enterprise offices and local authorities with the support of Enterprise Ireland and local business groups. We particularly want to encourage people to support local businesses, place orders online or over the phone, and to also consider the possibility of home delivery or collection.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** That campaign will be very welcome. We also need to get the message across to people that this is needed not just in the run-in to Christmas but beyond Christmas because we are probably facing a difficult 2021. It will be a difficult year. I hope that, as jobs start opening up and money starts circulating again, the position will improve.

One issue that needs to be addressed is the rates charged by local authorities. Unfortunately, many local authorities are going through their budgets this week and they will have a shortfall. They cannot do anything about that and those with which I am familiar have been very creative in trying to keep the books balanced and local services functioning. Local authorities do not yet have certainty. It is important that they have certainty because this is directly related to local retail trade. Retailers, particularly those that have been closed down for a sustained period such as hairdressers and other services, will not be in a position to get up and running and to start paying rates again next year. Certainty is needed on this issue at this point in time.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I appreciate how difficult it must be for retailers, hairdressers, barbers and any business that has been closed during this period for a second time this year. It is extremely difficult for the people who work in and own these businesses. From the Government's point of view, we would like to be in a position to give people as much certainty as soon as possible. The problem with this virus and the nature of this pandemic is that it is uncertain. We would love to be able to say with certainty to people that they can open their business on a particular date but we are just not at that point yet. We are only into the third week of a six-week period of restrictions. We will need to see more data for the next couple of weeks before we can let people know when and what can be reopened. We will give people as much advance notice as possible so that they can let their staff know to be available, buy in stock and make all the preparations they need to make.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

36. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the position regarding the sale of seasonal goods such as seasonal or religious decorations for Christmas; if it will be ensured such items shall be deemed as essential services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34976/20]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Christmas is approaching and every town in the country has a local pro-

ducer of Christmas trees, advent wreaths and wreaths for graves. It is a time of year which is close to people's hearts and they remember the dead. I ask the Tánaiste to ensure these producers are deemed an essential service and give some clarity to the people involved in the business.

**Deputy Damien English:** I thank Deputy Daly for asking this question. Under level 5 of the plan for living with Covid-19, only essential retail outlets will remain open. The regulations clearly set out the temporary restrictions and it is important to reinforce the point that they are temporary. The regulations list the essential services and retail outlets under level 5 that can open.

Level 5 does not restrict people from purchasing any product, including Christmas trees and wreaths to which the Deputy referred. All products are available and can still be purchased depending on their seasonal nature. It does, however, restrict people from physically entering non-essential stores. We try to discourage people from unnecessary shopping journeys for their own safety and to stop the spread of the virus. We recognise, as the Tánaiste said, the pressure that this has put the retail sector under and that this is a very difficult for retail businesses, whether local producers or otherwise. It is difficult, which is the reason we are working with the sector to support it and help it through this very difficult time. Businesses are also encouraged to follow the regulations and laws in the spirit of protecting customers, staff and the community.

Mixed retailers have been asked to separate their stock and only sell the items that are essential. While seasonal or religious decorations for Christmas should not be purchased physically in stores, customers can continue to purchase them via online or phone ordering for collection and delivery. I emphasise that there is the option to pick up the phone and make an order. Many local suppliers are offering this service and have adapted their business in recent months to prepare for Covid and Christmas. All those products are available either online, through click and collect, click and delivery or phone order. Naturally, we are trying to encourage much more delivery, where possible, but the option to collect is also available. All the goods the Deputy mentioned can be sourced in the weeks and months ahead.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. I ask him to take into consideration that many of the types of seasonal retailers that I am speaking about operate in an outdoor or semi-outdoor environment. Many of these providers who do this work every year but perhaps only for a short window of time have invested throughout the year and this is the only time they can make a living. The evidence is increasing that indoor, poorly-ventilated spaces pose the largest risk. I ask that the Government consider making an exception for businesses selling Christmas trees, taking into account that it is essentially an outdoor activity.

**Deputy Damien English:** I thank the Deputy for his comments. Naturally, all areas for controlling the virus and its spread are being observed and dealt with by the Department of Health and all other Departments, in conjunction with NPHE. All of the evidence is being considered and it all indicates that the best way of stopping the virus is to limit and reduce our contacts, be that in a social, shopping or working context. We are trying, through these restrictions, to reduce the movements of and connections made by people. It goes against the grain for all of us living in Ireland because we like connecting, meeting people, doing our shopping, going to work and all of that. The advice we have received is to limit these activities under these restrictions. That is why we are asking that non-essential retail is conducted in other ways that do not involve encouraging people to leave their homes to make a purchase. We will work with all sectors to ensure that all of those products are available and can be sourced. Many of the companies involved in the growing of Christmas trees or producing wreaths or other items

over the last year have put their plans in place. They will be in a position to trade and reach their customers. This will be facilitated and will happen in the weeks ahead.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I thank the Minister of State for his detailed response but in the next few weeks, it will be important to take a nuanced approach to every single item covered by levels 3, 4 and 5 and to have particular regard to making exceptions.

*9 o'clock*

We should analyse the risk of every activity to make sure that as many people as possible can earn a few quid in the run-up to Christmas.

**Deputy Damien English:** That is our focus as a Department, working with the retail sector, the business community and all those enterprises that are involved in providing products and services, some of which will be in greater demand around the month of December and for the Christmas season. We are working and will work with all those sectors through the various Departments on a range of supports and initiatives. The Tánaiste referred to some earlier around communication plans, marketing plans, how we manage the public realm and make sure that the products can be sourced. That is what we are involved in. In the past seven or eight months, many of the companies the Deputy referred to have availed of the numerous grants available, including the trading online voucher scheme and the online retail voucher scheme being offered through Enterprise Ireland. I believe seven or eight companies from the Deputy's own county of Kerry availed of that scheme and I announced others yesterday.

Companies are adapting. They are finding ways to reach their customers in a safer way as we are living with Covid-19. That is exactly what we are involved in but to be absolutely clear to everybody, it will be possible to purchase all the products people want during the month of December. All the companies involved in the growing and the production of all those products will be able to find a way to trade. That is what we are about and it is what we have been doing with the sector over the past couple of months. Every area, including business organisations, retail and sporting, will be able to trade. That is what we will try to work on also.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

37. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has had discussions with business representative groups since the move to level 5 in the living with Covid-19 framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35037/20]

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** The Tánaiste and the Ministers of State will be aware that the move to level 5 restrictions has had a significant impact on the economy, particularly on the domestic economy. Businesses have closed and unemployment has gone up. I am aware the Tánaiste cannot answer today as to the extent to which those restrictions will be lifted but what has been the extent of his engagement with the business representative organisations as I believe such engagement would be very beneficial?

**(Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I have regular and ongoing engagement with business representative groups and all relevant stakeholders, particularly in the context of the evolving effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives and livelihoods of our people.

10 November 2020

I have met a full range of business representative groups since the Government decision on the move to level 5. Specifically, on the evening of 19 October, following the Government announcement of the move to level 5, I convened a meeting with some 14 business representative bodies including Chambers Ireland, ISME, IBEC, the Small Firms Association, SFA, and the Irish Exporters Association. My Department and I are in ongoing engagement with these groups and their sectors.

In addition, in advance of level 5 coming into effect on 21 October, I convened a meeting of the Department's retail forum, which is chaired by the Minister of State, Deputy English, although I was present. The membership of the forum comprises the key retail representative bodies including RGDATA, CSNA, Retail Ireland, Retail Excellence and pharmacy and hardware associations.

Retail is the largest private sector employer in the country and supports jobs in every city, town and village. I am acutely aware that the sector has suffered a significant shock due to the impact of Covid-19 and the period of closure of non-essential retail. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy English, is continuing to engage with the retail sector, with two further meetings of the forum at the end of October and last week. These meetings are an opportunity to listen to stakeholder concerns and to ensure they understand and continue to abide by the requirements of the restrictions.

On 21 October 2020, I convened a public consultation on the national economic plan with some 200 stakeholders from business representative groups, social partners, environment groups and non-governmental bodies. This was a virtual event to exchange ideas on the national economic plan, which will set out the Government's guiding priorities and policy objectives for a sustainable recovery. The event was opened by the Taoiseach and was structured around three breakout sessions, each with a number of related issues to be considered. Further information, including a summary report of the discussions and footage from the event, can be found on my Department's website.

I also met some of the business representative groups at a meeting of the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, on 28 October. That is a long, convoluted response but I engage with business organisations regularly whether it is through LEEF, the retail forum, the hospitality forum or one to one.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank the Tánaiste for his detailed reply. It is very beneficial that he, as Tánaiste, has met the representative organisations. The move to level 5 has had a very significant impact on the domestic economy. There are now 100,000 more people on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, as a result of the move to level 5 than was the case beforehand. Youth unemployment is a serious issue and we should be careful that we do not allow it to become the expected norm that we can close down businesses and open them again.

I am conscious that the resolution of this depends on how we respond to and deal with the pandemic but I ask the Tánaiste to continue with his engagement with the business representative organisations. We have learned a lot from the lockdowns we have had to date in Ireland. We learned from the first lockdown that we can have schools open. We have learned from all lockdowns that we can have supermarkets open. I ask the Tánaiste to engage with those representative groups as I believe we will learn more about the type of non-essential retail outlets we can open in the future.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I thank the Deputy. We have learned a lot from the different lockdowns. Among the big differences between the first one and the second one is that we kept open the schools and childcare on this occasion and we also kept construction and manufacturing going. While we have seen 100,000 more people end up on the pandemic unemployment payment, which is terrible, as a consequence of level 5, it would have been very much higher had we closed construction and manufacturing as well. That would have had consequences also in terms of trade and housing supply. I am glad we took the decision to keep those sectors open and operating.

I do not know yet what will happen on 1 December, whether we will be able to move to level 3 or level 2 or some sort of combination of levels, but I will continue to keep in touch with the business organisations. In fact, I will make a point of engaging with them before that decision is made and also when it is made because the implications will be significant.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** Obviously, we do not know where we will be at the end of this month but hopefully the trend in the numbers will continue as they are and the incidence of the disease in the country will continue to drop. One aspect the Tánaiste will have to be very careful about is that we are not overly or unnecessarily cautious when it comes to trying to lift the restrictions. People will tell him that if we lift the restrictions too much the numbers will go back up. Unfortunately, it is inevitably the case that numbers will go back up but we have to try to learn from what we have experienced over the previous lockdowns and restrictions.

It is very important to look at the supermarkets. They have been open all the time. They have not been any source of a major spread of the disease. If that type of essential retail outlet can continue to remain open without threat to the general population we need to look to see what other retail outlets, which we now regard as being non-essential, can also remain open. I ask the Tánaiste to look at that in a positive light and without too much caution.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** Deputy O’Callaghan makes some very valid points but there is one thing we need to bear in mind. It is not so much the outlet that causes the virus to spread. It is not that shoe shops are higher risk than a newsagent or whatever outlet one wants to pick. The difficulty is that the more we allow to open, the more interactions there will be. It is not that the person may necessarily pick up the virus in the shoe shop from another customer or the sales assistant. It is that such people go into town, meet somebody at the bus stop, meet other people on the bus, may stop for a coffee, go in, buy shoes and then go home on the bus and do the same thing again. Cutting out certain activities and preventing people from mixing and mingling reduces the number of potential interactions. I am not sure if that makes any sense but in terms of closing that particular set of stores or that particular type of hospitality business, it is not just the interaction that happens in that business; it is the ten in the entire journey. The whole science, to the extent that it is a science although it is not an exact science, is to reduce the number of opportunities people have to mix, meet other people and thereby transmit the virus.

### **Small and Medium Enterprises**

38. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department will promote, through Enterprise Ireland and other State funded bodies, the need to strengthen the connections and interdependence between local businesses.  
[34936/20]

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** My question is to ask the Tánaiste's Department to promote, through Enterprise Ireland and other State bodies, the need to strengthen the connection and interdependence between local businesses. I am not advocating isolationism. There is a good deal of trade in and out of this country, and that is as it should be, but if we strengthen those links we can generate more jobs within the region. It is particularly important for regional development.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I was very pleased that the programme for Government committed to the delivery of a national SME growth plan that will map out an ambitious strategic blueprint for SMEs and entrepreneurs beyond the period of Covid-19. The SME growth task force, which was established last September, is reviewing policy across four sub-groups: entrepreneurship; productivity, digitalisation and competitiveness; internationalisation; and clustering and business networks. The latter sub-group is examining how to strengthen the connections and interdependence between local businesses and multinational companies.

Our regional enterprise plans are focused on region-specific enterprise development and opportunities, and provide a mechanism for joined-up responses at a regional level, including networking and clustering initiatives. In that regard, Enterprise Ireland's Powering the Regions programme provides for nine regional specific plans to grow and sustain jobs and to expand the reach of Enterprise Ireland's client base in every county and region. The programme also supports the scaling of companies into the regions and the attraction of foreign direct investment, FDI, into the food sector.

Enterprise Ireland's regional technology cluster fund provides a platform for engagement between enterprise and the institutes of technology and technological universities to drive productivity and competitiveness in and across the regions. The clustering activity will enable institutes of technology and the technology universities to connect and engage with SMEs and multinational corporations in a strategic way on common areas of interest.

My Department supports joint agency initiatives, such as the global sourcing initiative between Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland, which aims to create business opportunities for Irish-owned companies with multinationals based in Ireland and raises awareness of the innovative capabilities of Irish SMEs across a range of sectors.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

Under the enterprise centres scheme, the regional enterprise development fund and the Border enterprise development fund, my Department has provided over €180 million in funding across every region. Affordable shared remote and co-working spaces for businesses across the country are supported under each of these funds. The SME growth plan, including these initiatives, will be part of our national economic plan, which is currently being developed by the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. He covered many areas. Recently there has been a big move towards globalisation. That is the way the world is now, and we have to accept that. That is how it works but recent times have shown how vulnerable we are in this regard. Many supply lines have been cut off during the pandemic. I am aware of people in business who have had difficulty sourcing overseas goods and services that would normally flow freely into the country. This has shown up that there is a vulnerable side. Many goods and services can be sourced within the country, thus greatly benefiting local and regional development. Rather than shouting about rural Ireland while doing nothing about it, I am pro-

posing a positive measure to keep money in the relevant areas and create more jobs. Many large companies are still very aloof.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** My Department is working collectively to strengthen the connections and interdependence of businesses through engagement with our nine regional enterprise plans. Our focus is on region-specific enterprise development, including sectoral networking and clustering initiatives, such as the regional technical cluster initiative, and opportunities for Irish companies to connect with multinationals based in Ireland to raise awareness of the capabilities of the SMEs across a range of sectors. We must be cognisant of the fact that Ireland is an attractive destination for FDI. This offers our SMEs considerable opportunities to work with and feed into the operations of multinationals. I accept what the Deputy said about supporting SMEs and working with multinationals. There are plans afoot through Enterprise Ireland to do that.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I recognise that there is some good work being done; it is a matter of trying to develop it further. There are many large companies that are still aloof in that they lack a connection with local suppliers and other small local companies. Many of the services and goods needed by various companies can be sourced in the country. If not, there are small firms that can work to provide them.

It is important that we develop a policy of active engagement by IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, whose representatives I have met a number of times, and the local enterprise offices, which are doing a lot of good work.

The commercial semi-State bodies are very important to the economy. We need to determine how to connect them better with local economies because their expenditure is considerable and they have a big impact on local areas and regions, particularly the midlands.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I take on board what the Deputy has said. The SME task force was established in September of this year and is part of a commitment in the programme for Government. I was very supportive of this because I believe that over recent years, there was not a sufficiently significant focus on our SME sector. This task force has put a spotlight on our SMEs. We have brought together, under the stewardship of the Tánaiste, key businesspeople, including people who have created employment over the years and who have built up SMEs, to listen to them regarding what needs to be done from a policy perspective. One of the subgroups that has worked on the SME task force has done so in the area of clustering and business networks. There is a plenary session later this week to work towards publishing our SME plan. I have no doubt that when that plan is published, we will see a very strong commitment regarding how we can ensure indigenous companies benefit from the significant presence of multinationals.

### **Local Authority Funding**

39. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the recoupment schedule for local authorities to receive in full moneys paid out under the restart and restart plus grants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35039/20]

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The restart grant and the restart grant plus have been important for businesses but we need to assure local authorities that they will receive refunds. What are our plans for the grants in the future?

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I will abridge the response so I can fit it all in. There have been two grants, the restart grant and the restart grant plus. The first was worth about €250 million and the second about €300 million but we topped it up because there were top-ups along the way. About €100 million or so was transferred from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to my Department just the other day, and we are going to get that out to local authorities to cover the costs of the restart grant plus and some appeals that came in. There are those who did not get around to applying for the first grant but who were entitled to both. We are honouring that. There are no plans for any new restart grants, really because the scheme has been taken over by the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, which pertains to the weekly grant that is now given to any business that is closed as a result of the Covid restrictions. That is not to say they might not come back again in some form but there is no plan at present.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I welcome the fact that the money has been transferred. This is budget season for local authorities. They need certainty on cash flow.

The Minister mentioned CRSS. There are huge anomalies beginning to appear. For instance, event companies and food service companies will not be able to access the scheme. Are there plans to review the conditions under which CRSS is going to operate given that it excludes many small businesses?

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, is in charge of that scheme. He is working on it. The scheme is for businesses that are closed as a result of Covid restrictions or that have seen a 75% reduction in turnover, but the businesses have to have a premises. If we open it to all businesses that do not have a premises, it would be a very different scheme and a much more expensive one. Having said that, however, we are trying to work around issues associated with businesses that need financial support but that are getting nothing. Many are in the arts and tourism sectors and they are going to be helped out through a different fund and budget under the control of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin. If, however, we find businesses that fall between schemes and get no grant, we will try to come up with a solution for them. I hate the term “under constant review” but the scheme is one of those schemes we accept will need to be amended as we go along so businesses that have been closed can get a grant and survive.

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

### **Drug and Alcohol Testing**

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** Unfortunately, this issue is becoming more prevalent. It was raised at joint policing committee, JPC, briefings by Garda Superintendent Gerard Roche in the Limerick city division. He stated that, aside from what people would traditionally know as drink-driving, there had been an increase in the phenomenon known as drug-driving. He has requested more testing equipment. Currently, the division has only five machines, four of which are mobile and the fifth one being static. The Garda has applied for a further six machines.

The statistics are stark. From January to September, the ratio of detections for drug-driving compared with drink-driving was virtually 50:50. There were 128 drink-driving detections, an increase of 12% on last year's figure, but the 121 drug-driving detections represented a 128% increase year on year. This major surge occurred during the Covid period. More alarming was what happened during June and September. In June, there were 22 drug-driving detections and 19 drink-driving detections. In September, drug-driving detections numbered nearly three times more than drink-driving detections at 22 versus eight.

People need to be aware that, for a first drug-driving offence, drivers lose their licences and are disqualified from driving for four years. They lose their jobs as well. People might believe they will not be caught drug-driving after a certain time, but a drug, be it cannabis or cocaine, can stay in a driver's system for up to three or four weeks. The consequences are significant. People will automatically be disqualified for four years for a first offence. They will lose their jobs in many, if not nearly all, cases.

Will resources be made available to An Garda Síochána in Limerick to increase the number of machines for testing for drug-driving from the current five to 11? This is a growing phenomenon and education is needed. Gardaí in Limerick are looking for extra resources. Nothing I say takes away from the issue of drink-driving, which is equally as bad, but drug-driving is increasing significantly if the Limerick statistics are anything to go by. We are looking for funding for an extra six drug testing machines so that gardaí can do their job and ensure that people are not driving under the influence of drugs.

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I thank the Deputy for raising this serious and important issue. While the Garda has been testing drivers for drugs with the assistance of the Medical Bureau of Road Safety, MBRS, since 1999, the Deputy will be aware that the drug-driving provisions in the Road Traffic Act 2016 were only commenced by the then Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport on 12 April 2017. The Deputy has outlined some of its measures and, indeed, consequences if people are caught. One of the legislation's key measures provides for preliminary drug testing, which enables gardaí to test motorists at the roadside whom they suspect of driving under the influence of drugs. An Garda Síochána can establish roadside checkpoints, known as mandatory intoxicant testing checkpoints or MITs, to test drivers for the presence of alcohol and drugs. The operation of MITs and the enforcement of road traffic legislation are operational matters for the Garda Commissioner. The Deputy will appreciate that I as Minister have no role in these matters. However, I am assured that Garda management keeps the distribution of all resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities to ensure their optimum use. I am also assured that this is the case in Limerick.

An Garda Síochána enforcement figures indicate that 1,216 drug-driving arrests were made in the first six months of 2020, an astonishing figure compared with the 591 in the first half of 2018. This represents an increase of 106% in drug-driving arrests despite a 70% reduction in traffic during the period of the Covid-19 restrictions.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government has committed to ensuring that the Garda has the maximum level of resources available to perform its policing duties. The Garda has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. It is anticipated that each county, including Limerick, will benefit from this additional funding, some of which I will outline now. This level of funding is enabling sustained and ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff first and foremost, given how important it is to ensure that these duties can be carried out. As a result, there are approximately 14,600 Garda members and more than 3,000 Garda staff

nationwide. Budget 2021 will allow for the recruitment of up to 620 new gardaí and an extra 500 Garda staff. This recruitment is supporting the redeployment of gardaí from administrative to operational policing duties where their training and expertise can be used to best effect. An additional €22 million has been provided for Garda ICT, bringing the total allocation to more than €70 million for the second year in a row. There will also be continued investment in the Garda fleet of €8 million. This is in addition to the highest ever investment of approximately €15 million in the Garda transport fleet in 2020, a portion of which relates to the Garda Covid response. I anticipate that all of this additional funding will be spread depending on where the Commissioner and his team know resources are required.

Budget 2021 provides the Garda with a significant resource allocation to support its vital enforcement role on our roads. Drug-driving not only puts drivers at risk but also passengers and other road users. Preliminary drug testing strengthens the Garda's ability to tackle drug-driving and I am committed to supporting this important statutory enforcement provision in my role as Minister for Justice.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I thank the Minister. She stated that the national figures had shown an increase of 106% in the first six months of the year. That correlates with the 128% increase in the Limerick Garda district across the first nine months of the year. It is a serious issue. The Minister also mentioned that there had been a reduction in traffic levels due to Covid. One can only imagine what the detection rates would have been had we normal driving patterns.

This appears to be a growing feature on our roads. The Minister spoke about it not only putting the lives of the drivers themselves at risk but also the lives of their passengers, other car users and, in many cases, pedestrians. Many pedestrians have been knocked down recently.

In the course of her normal engagement with the Garda Commissioner, Mr. Drew Harris, will the Minister ask whether the Garda has adequate resources to ensure that gardaí on the ground in the Limerick district, such as Superintendent Gerard Roche and his fellows, have the extra six drug testing machines for motorists provided to them, thereby ensuring enforcement? I also suggest that the Garda and Department address the education dimension to make people aware of the consequences of their being caught drug-driving – automatic disqualification, no licence for four years and losing their jobs, given that they will not be able to drive.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** Without stepping into an area for which I do not have responsibility, I am assured by the Commissioner and his team that they continue to look at all districts and the resources required therein and that they allocate accordingly. My role is to ensure that the additional funding is allocated and the resources needed are allocated. We have tried our best in this year's budget to ensure that is the case. The fact that we have an unprecedented budget this year of €1.952 billion will allow us to address some of these concerns.

I share the concerns of Deputy O'Donnell. The figures are frightening, especially given the amount of traffic on the road has decreased significantly. I wish to emphasise the fact that the Garda is not only seeing an increase of this type of crime. The force has been able to identify other areas as well. As the Deputy will be aware, An Garda Síochána recommenced Operation Fanacht on 22 October. The Garda has continued its role in the operation and has looked to prevent and detect crime on our roads. In the first seven days of Garda operations, a total of 71 crimes were recorded in the course of the Covid-19 operations that were not related to breaches of regulations. These were mainly road traffic and drug-related. The Garda is focused on this. This is a priority for the Garda even though the force is focused on Covid-19 as well.

The Deputy should note that the Road Safety Authority launched a public consultation to inform the development of the fifth Government road safety strategy that will run from 2021 to 2030. This is something I have no doubt the Garda will address and take on board. I will pass on the Deputy's comments about education. One of the effective tools in recent years has been advertising. Although they can be difficult and upsetting to watch, the advertisements clearly showing the damage that can be done on our roads are effective. When it comes to drugs, it is no different. I look forward to working with the Garda as it implements the strategy and, most important, I will ensure it has the resources to do so.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, for being here to take this Topical Issue. This matter is of crucial importance for many people who have applied for the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, but who have encountered what can only be described as a bureaucratic mess.

Initially, the pandemic unemployment payment was a flat-rate payment of €350 per week. It provided solace and support to tens of thousands of workers and business people who had been forced to close their doors. The Government decided to amend the PUP from a flat rate of €350 for every individual who applied to a tiered system that resulted in different payments depending on people's previous salaries. Difficulties have arisen predominantly, it appears, for small business owners in respect of whom the Department does not have a clear or immediate access to PRSI contributions. This could have and should have been identified as an issue prior to the new system being introduced and prior to the most recent lockdown and restriction measures.

After the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, decided to kick about the National Public Health Emergency Team on live television with regard to its recommendations for level 5, the Government subsequently moved to exactly that position a short time later. The rationale given by the Government at the time was to ensure that the additional time as a result of the delay was to ensure all measures could be put in place to support small business owners and people who might be affected economically. In that regard, it was a downright disaster for many of the people who have been in contact with me. Shortly after the new regime came into place, I received an email from a constituent of the Minister and of mine. It stated that due to phase 4 restrictions, the business was forced to close on Friday 16 October. The person applied online for the PUP and received an email on the Friday evening stating the person was not entitled to the payment but to forward any documents to a different email address. The person checked online at [www.mywelfare.ie](http://www.mywelfare.ie) but there was no notification looking for the person's documents. There was only a notification stating that the application was being processed. There was also a warning notification stating that the MyGovID service does not send details asking for financial or personal documents to be emailed. I could read dozens of similar emails that I have received. I could read dozens of text messages and relay dozens of telephone calls I have had with distressed people. These are predominantly people like hairdressers. Quite a number of them are small business owners. They were forced to close their doors as a result of the Government decision. The Government did not have the work done to provide them with supports.

Many of the cases that have been brought to my attention have been resolved following interaction with the Department. I thank the Minister's staff who are involved in this area in that regard. Yet, people should not have to go to their local politician to get what they are entitled to

in respect of Covid assistance. It should be provided readily. Measures need to be put in place to resolve that.

Will the Minister ensure that the anomalies clearly in place are resolved for all outstanding applicants? Will the Minister ensure that the anomaly whereby many employers have been forced to close their doors and who have been put on a reduced payment is resolved? We have the ludicrous situation in our county where employers have had to close their doors and they are on payments lower than those of their workers as a result of this debacle. Finally, will the Minister give clarification on the PUP recipients from the initial stage in March, April and May? Will the Minister clarify the position on those owed arrears in PUP? Will they all be paid prior to the Christmas period?

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I thank Deputy Carthy, my constituency colleague, for raising this issue. The pandemic unemployment payment has been a vital support for hundreds of thousands of workers and their families throughout Covid-19. Since March, my Department has issued over 12 million payments to over 800,000 people. A total of €4 billion has been paid out under the scheme to date.

I wish to acknowledge the staff in the Department of Social Protection for the extraordinary work they have put in since March to ensure that payments have been issued quickly to those who need them. This demonstrates what public service is all about. I wish to assure the Deputy that the matter he has raised today does not relate to errors in the records of my Department.

The Department uses earnings data supplied by the Revenue Commissioners for 2019 and 2020 in the case of employees and for 2018 and 2019 in the case of self-employed people for the pandemic unemployment payment. Where difficulties in verifying records have arisen in a small number of cases, it is typically due to outstanding or late returns or delays or non-compliance in the recording or reporting of income and earnings to Revenue.

The Deputy will appreciate that if a person is working or self-employed, that person is liable to pay PRSI. It is reasonable, therefore, to expect that a person claiming the pandemic unemployment payment would have a recent and verifiable record of PRSI. Where a person has applied for the PUP and my Department cannot find any record of PRSI contributions or earnings, the Department contacts the person concerned and asks the person to submit evidence of employment, for example, a payslip. Where the person provides evidence, the claim is put into payment as quickly as possible, generally within a week of receiving the information. Dedicated teams are in place in my Department to follow up on all replies as quickly as possible. I am glad that many of the instances Deputy Carthy raised were subsequently resolved.

The staff of my Department are working morning, noon and night to process payments efficiently and quickly. Since the start of October alone, they have processed and paid over 200,000 new PUP claimants. I wish to put that in context. This is the equivalent to a full year claim load in a normal year.

It is always the case when processing such a large volume of claims that there will inevitably be some cases not paid as quickly as others due to incomplete or missing information or simply because a person does not satisfy the eligibility criteria. As I have said, where that happens my Department contacts the individuals concerned. When the necessary information is submitted, the applicant is put into payment as soon as possible.

I am pleased to say my Department has been working very hard on getting the arrears issue

resolved. We hope to have the arrears paid prior to Christmas.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank the Minister for her response. She has outlined how the system is supposed to work and should work, but new cases are coming to my attention daily. We need to get this matter resolved because I cannot go back to these people, whom we both know in many cases, and tell them essentially that the Department says it is their fault they have not received payment. These are hard-working people who want to open their businesses in the first instance. They want to get back to work. That is their primary objective. In the meantime, however, they want a little support. It should be remembered that these people do not have the payment breaks from the banks that they had previously. In many cases they are coming under pressure from landlords and the like. They are therefore asking the Minister to step up on their behalf. I was speaking to some of them today, people who have been affected by this debacle and others, many of whom were less than impressed by the Minister's speech earlier, in which she decided to defend the indefensible by going into the gutter and engaging in what I would describe as a rotten display of deflection. I remind the Minister that when she attacks Sinn Féin, she attacks many very good, decent-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will the Deputy stick to the Topical Issue matter, please?

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** -----and hard-working people within her own constituency. I encourage the Minister to forget about the gutter politics and instead sort out the unresolved issues that relate to her Department. These are business people, employers and the backbone of local communities in our constituency. They deserve support, and I ask the Minister to make sure they do not face an unnecessary wait to receive their payments.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I will stick to the issue at hand. I reassure the Deputy that my Department is doing everything in its power to process payments as quickly as possible. The vast majority of claims have been put into payment without any issue. This week, for example, PUP payments have issued to more than 342,000 people. I am advised that there was an issue with about 1% of the total claims. When that happens the Department contacts the individuals involved, and when they provide the necessary information they are put into payment. It is important as well to point out that some people do not reply at all. That would tell me that they know they are not entitled to a payment. In fairness, we need checks and balances in place because at the end of the day this is taxpayers' money. My priority is to ensure resources go to the people who need them most, and that is what we are doing. For self-employed individuals, my Department has recently received an update from the Revenue Commissioners on the 2019 self-assessment returns. As these returns are filed annually and the deadline for filing is 10 December 2020, some returns will be outstanding.

If the Deputy wants me to check any specific individual cases and if he sends in the details, I will be happy to ask my officials to examine them. For many years the self-employed got nothing. There was no support or assistance available to them. However, thanks to the legislation that was passed in 2019, for the first time ever self-employed people who pay PRSI can get this unemployment support, and it is only right and proper that they should. My Department is here to help people, not to put obstructions in their way. We are here to help people in what is a difficult time for everybody.

## National Broadband Plan

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I wish to highlight the lack of delivery on the part of Eir in rural Ireland. The people I represent are extremely disappointed with the customer service Eir is providing and its approach to the roll-out of the national broadband plan. I receive complaints daily about the way Eir treats its customers and the manner in which it is supposedly connecting rural Ireland to high-speed fibre broadband. Eir regularly shows a complete and utter disregard for the concerns of the ordinary person in rural Ireland, its customers. This cannot continue. We expect people to work, to study from home and to live in rural Ireland with ease and comfort, yet Eir continues to disregard and ignore the needs and requests of its customers without the slightest bit of concern for the best interests of rural Ireland, in spite its being awarded a contract worth €900 million.

I will provide a number of examples in my constituency that prove the way Eir is treating its customers. One woman in the Thurles area contacted me stating she had tried and failed on numerous occasions to cancel her landline contract with Eir. Every time she called customer service she was left on hold for up to an hour. She was not able to cancel her plan for months, despite her best efforts. Then Eir turned around and informed her that she owed a bill of over €100 for that period. Her line had given her problems, she got fed up trying to get it fixed, she tried to cancel her plan and she met roadblock after roadblock with Eir's customer service. This is not acceptable. It would be laughable if it were not so frustrating for people in rural areas. I have a constituent in Portroe who lives just off the main road to Ballina. She is a teacher and during the first lockdown she had to teach a number of her classes from her car as there was so little reception in her house. Eir has run the broadband route along the main road in this area but not down its back roads. This means that this woman's neighbours can access high-speed broadband, work from home, study from home and live comfortably in their homes but she and her family do not enjoy the same connection.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I, too, have been inundated with calls from my constituents about the poor state of broadband in County Carlow. This is especially true in rural parts of the county. Now more than ever, a robust Internet connection is required for all constituents working from home and also to prevent isolation in these challenging times. It is important for us to keep connected, and there is an urgency around this matter. There are parts of Carlow where people are really struggling to get basic-level Internet to carry out normal day-to-day tasks, and this needs to change. I welcomed the announcement in June of €32 million for broadband in Carlow, and I know that National Broadband Ireland has requested a licence from Carlow County Council for road openings and that it is now surveying parts of Bagenalstown, Borris, Tinnahinch, Myshall - that whole area. That is welcome but, again, there is the problem of communication and information. I see a website has been set up with a search tool to enable the public to check whether their premises are within the roll-out area and to show the dates for the areas being surveyed. The website can be updated and there are numbers people can ring. It is so important now that every house has broadband. If we have learnt anything from Covid-19, it is the importance of having good broadband for working from home, whether for students, teachers or anyone else. They need proper broadband. Is there a timescale as to when this work will start for Carlow? How long will it take? I would like an update for the people of Carlow in order that we know it will happen. My concern is that there will be problems; for example, that one house down a road will have broadband while half a mile down the road someone else might not have it. What can we do to make sure that every house gets broadband as soon as possible, that there are no mistakes, that there is no confusion and that anyone ringing up about

his or her account gets the necessary service? It is all about service.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, for being here.

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I thank Deputies Cahill and Murnane O'Connor. They have raised two slightly connected but separate issues. I will respond first to Deputy Cahill on Eir's shockingly poor customer response performance and the lady who he said was waiting for hours to try to get on to Eir to cancel a service, but was not able to do so and ended up landed with the bill. That is totally unsatisfactory and something the company will have to address. ComReg maintains a regular assessment of the delivery of service and how companies are meeting their objectives. Given the difficulty experienced and the fact that Deputy Cahill is hearing this from a number of constituents, it is something the company and the regulator, ComReg, will have to address.

In response to Deputy Murnane O'Connor, I will focus on the national broadband plan because it is a critical way of helping to overcome the problem and to deliver high broadband speeds to the entire country. The plan sets out an intervention area which covers 1.1 million people, 544,000 premises and 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The objective is to pass premises in all counties, including County Carlow, within the first two years and more than 90% of premises in the State having access to high-speed broadband within the next four years.

The map of areas that will be covered is available on the [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie) website. This shows which areas will be included as well as those targeted by commercial operations, such as Eir and SIRO, which is a joint venture between the ESB and Vodafone.

There are 28,291 premises in County Carlow of which 29%, or 8,158, will be provided with high-speed broadband through State-led intervention. The remaining 20,000 or so premises are in areas where commercial providers are either currently delivering or have plans to deliver high-speed broadband services.

As Deputy Murnane O'Connor said, the national broadband plan intends to spend €32 million in County Carlow. As of 4 November, 122,000 premises across the country have been surveyed. In County Carlow, 4,889 have been surveyed so far where we are looking to see exactly how to get the fibre into the house. We map out the various poles or alignment to make it happen.

Surveys are complete in the areas the Deputy mentioned and in Downings, Ballymurphy, Coppengagh, Killerrig, Friarstown, Slaney Quarter and Kilmagarvoge. Surveys are currently under way in Muine Bheag, Borris, Ballinkillen, Garryhill, Knockdramagh, Drumpheea, Coshill, Ballyfeanan, Kilcarraig, Gowlin, Ballon, Glynn, St. Mullin's, Hollybrook, Myshall, which the Deputy mentioned, Liselican and Cappawater. I hope I got my Carlow pronunciation right; it is a test.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I mentioned Myshall but I did not go through all of the names.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The next step is for National Broadband Ireland, NBI, to develop the network designs to deliver to the house. One does the survey first and then connects into the house. Work has already started in counties Cork, Galway, Limerick and Cavan and the fibre connection will be in the first houses in Carrigaline before the end of the year. From the end of

January, retailers will be able to resell the service in those areas, so we will be up and running.

Further details on specific areas within County Carlow are available through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register its interests. I encourage the Deputy to get constituents to do so because people then get updates as to when they will get deployment in their houses.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I wish to give a few more examples. A constituent of mine in Dolla recently built a new house. His next door neighbour has full broadband but my constituent was told he is in the amber zone and cannot get connected even though the fibre is only 100 m away.

In Holycross in my constituency, there are three houses together in a rural area. The houses on the left and right have high-speed broadband but the one in the middle is not yet connected even though technicians have called to that house three times.

It is the same story in Killenaule, Littleton and Horse and Jockey where people are trying to work from home and run businesses. Some of them only need 200 m of cable to be brought to their door to give them high-speed broadband but it is still not being delivered.

These are just some examples of the complaints made by constituents about how Eir is treating rural Ireland and its roll-out of the plan. People are extremely frustrated. Eir continues to ignore and disregard the complaints and requests of customers and it is currently getting away with it.

Rural broadband is essential infrastructure. We need delivery of it and Eir needs to up its game.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** As I said, I did not go through all the names because there are so many. I welcome this €32 million for broadband for County Carlow. It is essential now more than ever that we make sure the delivery is quick. I know from working with Carlow County Council that it will be fully supportive of this. I know the people of County Carlow will welcome this. We must make sure it is there for everybody because everybody deserves broadband. It will be part of life that we have a proper connection and a proper service. It is something we all require as part of our daily life now. I will not go on too much about it. Good communication is key here in working with residents, the GAA, schools or businesses to make sure it is done as soon as possible. It is more than welcome.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I thank both Deputies for raising the issue. County Tipperary is as much an important part of the national band plan as County Carlow or, indeed, any other county. I look forward to providing details of the same investment we are going to have to make in that county. That does not excuse or remove Eir from the necessity to start providing customer service in a way it is not and so that its reputation is not being damaged by the level of delay. As Deputy Cahill said, customers are finding it difficult to even make contact with the company.

I will say to both Deputies that the whole project is aimed at getting broadband connectivity to every single house in the country. The national broadband plan was set out as a seven-year project. We will see if we can shorten that. I believe that is possible, primarily, because the demand for the product now will make a real business case for National Broadband Ireland to connect as many houses as quickly as it can.

Post-Covid, this habit of remote working or working from home will be embedded into ev-

eryday society. We will, perhaps, see that rather than working or commuting five days a week people might commute three or four days a week, and those one or two days at home will be facilitated by having broadband. Having a complete national roll-out whereby no house or area is left behind facilitates it. The key measure of success will be not just getting to where broadband passes the house but with the householders taking it on. That will be an imperative now post-Covid. I hope that is the greatest stimulus to accelerating the roll-out.

In other areas we are relying on Eir, which is rolling out high-speed broadband in significant parts of rural Ireland. It is ahead of schedule on that. As Deputy Cahill said, it may have a problem with its customer service but the quality of the actual broadband when it is introduced is this fast-fibre high-speed connectivity.

I mentioned other providers. SIRO, for example, is another company rolling out high-speed broadband in other towns, villages and cities across the country. We have, therefore, an effective roll-out happening. I want to see it happen faster but that does not absolve the companies while operating it from making sure their customer relations are working effectively. I will pass on some of the Deputy's comments to the company when I meet it next because it is important that the experience of his constituents is heard.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister. In light of the debate we have just had, I will take the unusual step of saying that I am refusing, unfortunately, an inordinate number of complaints from Deputies from all around the country about the service their constituents have received from Eir. If I did not have my own constituency experience, I would find that surprising. Eir's customer service is appalling and it raises profound questions about whether ComReg is doing its job.

### **School Transport**

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I thank the Minister for taking the opportunity not only to be here tonight but for re-arranging the session we were supposed to have last week.

We all agree the restrictions have been hard on many people and many different sectors. They have had unintended consequences which have placed particular difficulties on how people go about their lives.

Keeping schools open has been particularly important for everybody in the Chamber and in society. With the level 5 restrictions in place, Dublin Bus is only operating at 25% capacity. It creates undue hardship on service users in Dublin and on school children who are trying to get a bus to and home from school. The capacity is simply not there to deal with the level of demand needed.

While I am raising the issue with the Minister tonight, I am sure I am not the first one to do so through parliamentary questions and otherwise.

*10 o'clock*

It is important that we work to rectify the problems.

I have in front of me a case study report from a school in my constituency, St. Declan's College in Cabra. The report gives a sense of what is happening for pupils in the school and the

difficulties they are experiencing. Students have been left waiting for up to two and a half hours in the evening before a bus arrives with sufficient capacity to take them home. Those children are not getting home until close to 6 p.m., having waited in the cold, and must then eat their dinner and do their homework. Some students have to walk 1 or 2 miles further down the road to see whether there is an emptier bus that they can board. Students have reported as many as 15 buses passing by as they stand waiting. Some bus drivers allow passengers to get off their bus but do not allow the schoolchildren to board. There is an obvious and very real safety risk that comes with having schoolchildren standing at the side of the road in wet, cold and inclement conditions. The situation in the morning is equally as bad as in the evening, which is resulting in children arriving to school late and missing their first class, with all the consequences that go with that. I am interested to hear how the Minister intends to rectify this problem.

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Covid-19 health emergency has had a profound impact on the public transport sector due to the fall in passenger numbers and associated drop in fare revenues. The Government has committed to ensuring essential transport services are protected and supported for the duration of the level 5 restrictions. The continued operation of public transport is vital and, as such, it is designated among the essential services that have carried on through the crisis. I thank both the public and commercial operators and their staff for their ongoing work in providing this vital service.

A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services through the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures throughout the network. The Government's living with Covid plan clearly sets out capacity guidance for public transport at each of the five risk levels. The plan also provides guidance for the public on using public transport at the different risk levels, including a stipulation that wearing face coverings is mandatory and encouraging use of off-peak services and sustainable active travel options where feasible.

Due to the rising incidence of Covid-19 infections, for a period of six weeks from midnight on 21 October, the Government introduced level 5 restrictions for the whole country. At the current level of risk, public transport operators are restricted to using only 25% of the passenger-carrying capacity on their vehicles. The plan's guidance on working from home where possible and the closure of social, leisure and other facilities have reduced the demand for public transport well below normal levels. The advice is aimed at ensuring public transport is safeguarded for those who need it, including front-line workers and, critically, students. The move to 25% capacity utilisation on public transport is one of a suite of measures introduced under level 5 following recommendations from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE.

Issues arising from the reduction in capacity presented on some services at the commencement of level 5, especially on early morning bus services in the Dublin region. Both my Department and the National Transport Authority, NTA, are closely monitoring public transport demand and will continue to be guided by public health advice. Since the move to level 5, the NTA and the bus operators in Dublin, Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland, have reallocated a number of vehicles and drivers across the network to enhance the capacity in areas that are experiencing capacity issues. Approximately 43 buses have been redeployed by Dublin Bus since 22 October to mitigate the impact of the capacity restrictions and reduce the number of passengers being left at stops. Where possible, these vehicles are being deployed during peak demand times, particularly for school travel. These measures are assisting in reducing passengers waiting at stops. Currently, all available vehicles are in use. While the reallocation will

ease the situation, it remains the case that there will be instances of people having to wait for another bus. The advice is, as I said, to try to avail of other modes of transport, if possible, and to bear in mind that journeys may take longer at this time.

The NTA is monitoring very closely the effects of the reduction in capacity, in conjunction with the public transport operators. They will continue to take direction on this matter from the relevant Government emergency planning bodies, including the Department of Health and NPHET. Any actions being undertaken by the NTA and the public transport operators will be guided by those agencies and the advice of the Chief Medical Officer.

We are very aware that this is a real issue for people, especially in Dublin and, in particular, for students. It was especially bad in the first few days of the level 5 restrictions but it improved slightly in the second week. We are monitoring the situation week by week. Dublin Bus has done a remarkable job, not only in putting on additional buses but also in terms of its workers coming in to do earlier shifts to cope with the morning peak in demand. I have been talking to both Dublin Bus and the NTA about this and they are very aware of the difficulties. The tradition and attitude in Dublin Bus is that one does not leave a child at a bus stop. Drivers have a huge responsibility in this area and it is not easy. That is the culture in the company and I hope it helps to alleviate the current difficulties.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I am afraid it does not alleviate them. When the Minister came off script at the end of his reply, he was a bit more honest about what is happening. I fully appreciate that the culture of Dublin Bus is not to leave any child at a bus stop. The drivers make a remarkable contribution to our city. They are generally friendly and reliable. However, at this time of level 5 restrictions, there is a very serious difficulty in that there are simply not enough buses to operate at 25% capacity. As a result, children are being left at bus stops in the morning, afternoon and evening. They are being left to walk in the rain and cold. We are facing into another three weeks of level 5 lockdown, which means another three weeks of this problem continuing.

The Minister talked about monitoring the situation but there is not really time to do so. We have been told throughout the pandemic that it is important to act swiftly. I am not sure what that looks like in terms of devising more of a Dunkirk strategy that would see as many buses as possible, private or otherwise, reallocated to come into service. The current situation is simply untenable. In a few weeks we will be coming out of a lockdown that was shorter than the first one and we hope to see an increase in capacity. The problem, however, is that we could be back to level 5 in January. The current situation is causing untold hardship in schools every morning, with children coming in late and wet from the rain. The same thing is happening on their journey home. I do not doubt for a second that the Minister is taking this issue very seriously but the outcome needs to be a lot better. The situation that is arising at bus stops throughout the city, from Monday to Friday, is not tenable and it is not fair. We can do better by our students.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The difficulty we have is that we are constrained by the public health advice, which is based on the assessment of the need to reduce the amount of contact among the population. Under the level 5 restrictions, bus services are reduced to 25% capacity. That is the real difficulty. We are reviewing the situation on an ongoing basis but any change must be agreed by the public health officials and they do not want to change the rules and standards in the middle of a period of restrictions at a particular level.

As I said, there was a particular problem with bus services in the first few days of the level

5 restrictions when the numbers of buses in operation reduced. The numbers have been rising again in recent days. The Deputy is relating what people are experiencing as they go about their daily lives. Drivers have a certain amount of discretion as to whom they allow to board their buses but we do not want to put the whole of that huge responsibility on them. They have to make a call and we will back up the drivers in whatever approach they take. We have discussed other options with the NTA and other ways of making this very difficult situation better. There is no easy solution other than possibly going back to NPHE and agreeing a different public health approach. That is not an easy thing to do at this time. We will look at the bus transport situation as part of the ongoing review of level 5 restrictions. There may be an opportunity at the interim review to change things.

There is a further issue to consider when we come out of level 5, when even the 50% capacity limit will present real difficulties as we start to return to normal. We are a slight outlier in Europe in that we probably have more restrictive measures in place than is the case in other countries. A lot of the safety issues surrounding public transport are to do with the level of mask-wearing. Compliance in this regard is pretty universal in our case. Another factor is how passengers behave and manage their own safety. Again, most people in this country are very conscious of the issues and are acting in a way that is very sensible. The review we are doing will be concerned not just with what we are doing at the current level of restrictions, which in the case of public transport involve a 25% capacity limit, but what we can do when we get back to levels 2 and 3, where we will probably find that the 50% limit is causing difficulties. We do not want people to leave public transport completely. At the same time, we want to do the right thing in public health safety terms. That is the difficult balance we have to get right.

### **Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)**

### **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

#### **Proposed Legislation**

95. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to the concerns and suggestions brought forward by stakeholders and experts at the pre-legislative scrutiny meetings on the climate action and low carbon development (amendment) Bill at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action; his plans to amend the Bill to take account of these concerns and suggestions to strengthen the Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35129/20]

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I want to ask the Minister about the climate action and low carbon development (amendment) Bill. As the Minister will be aware, the Bill is currently undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny at the Joint Committee on Climate Action. The committee is just

coming to its conclusion. I thank all the various stakeholders. I want to know if the Minister has heard from the stakeholders on the positive suggestions that they have brought forward and if he will be accepting and making amendments to the Bill.

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The draft text of the climate action and low carbon development (amendment) Bill was published on 7 October and referred for pre-legislative scrutiny at that time. Those proceedings provide a welcome opportunity for detailed examination and debate on the text of the Bill by members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action and by witnesses. The committee commenced pre-legislative scrutiny on 14 October and I understand it is ongoing.

I have followed proceedings and note that a number of witnesses have attended to date from a range of backgrounds and provided valuable evidence. I understand these proceedings are to conclude shortly. This is an important element of the legislative process and I look forward to considering any report prepared by the committee as soon as it is available. In this regard I expect to be in a position, subject to further consideration and having sight of the committee's report, to take on certain recommendations from the committee ahead of commencing the legislative process in the Oireachtas. While the Bill remains priority legislation for the Government, I will await the outcome of this pre-legislative scrutiny before finalising its content.

I appreciate and think useful the work that is being done in the committee. I believe it will bring real results in improving the legislation before we go into the full legislative process.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I welcome the fact that the Minister is open to accepting amendments. There is some degree of consensus emerging, certainly that there is an amount of work to be done to improve the legislation. Will the Minister outline the expected timeline, working on the basis that the committee's report will be ready in the next week or two, for further progress on the legislation?

I ask the Minister to speak to a point relating to public involvement and public engagement and the opportunity that exists with the passing of this framework legislation to include the public voice in decision-making around our climate action obligations. It is an issue that came up consistently in the deliberations of the committee and I merely want to hear from the Minister in terms of his openness to improving the Bill in the context of public engagement.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** On the timing issue, when we first published the legislation I expressed the possibility that the pre-legislative scrutiny would be quite short and much shorter than usual. That is because there is a certain urgency in my mind in getting the Bill passed so that we can start implementing its measures next year. In that way we can include 2021 in the first five-year plan, and there is real urgency for us to raise our ambition on climate action. It has taken longer than I had originally expected but that is not unusual. It is appropriate if the committee has been doing good work in assessing it, which I think it has. I would still be hopeful - I cannot force the hand of the committee on this - for us to have the report in the third week of November, as was the window I was hoping for which is not that far from now. The benefit would be I could implement a number of amendments reflecting on what the committee has done and that would give us time to get back into the Dáil in a fairly timely manner. I will come back on the issue of public consultation later on.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** There is a range of issues that have been raised, as the Minister might appreciate, from the range of stakeholders whom I again thank. I refer to the strength of

the language, for example, on the targets and the need for, if not interim targets, certainly checks and opportunities to correct the path if we are going astray. That is a significant ask and I would ask the Minister to address that.

On the question mark over the 2050 target, given the changes at a European level and the climate target plan there, where we are proposing to reduce emissions by 51% between now and 2030 and they are saying at least 55%, does the Minister think there is a fundamental issue there and a need to recalibrate at this stage? Is that something he is looking at?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** On that last point, we should be careful that we are comparing like with like because one of the unfortunate difficulties is we are starting on effectively a zero level not having achieved any of the reductions that we had expected by 2020 and for us to get to 51% is the full 51 yards. In the European Union, most of the countries are significantly ahead of us in the emissions reductions that they have already achieved and it is the equivalent of starting a 50 m race where they have a 20 m, and sometimes a 25 m, head start on us. Our level of ambition will be way beyond any of our European comparator countries because we have so much catching up to do. We can do it. It will be good for our country.

The more public consultation we do to get a widespread understanding of that and public buy-in to the solutions in a bottom-up way the better, but no one should underestimate the scale of the change. No one has ever done a 7% per annum reduction in climate emissions.

I was following the committee proceedings with the likes of Professor Kevin Anderson, and others whose work I know well, who is absolutely right. If one is adhering to the Paris climate timetables to meet a 1.5°C temperature increase limit, much more aggressive and ambitious timelines would be needed. I will be honest. First of all we have to show that we can achieve the existing level of ambition. If we can do that, I would have no problem accelerating but no one should underestimate the scale of the challenge ahead of us.

### International Agreements

96. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the response by Ireland to the withdrawal of the United States of America from the Paris climate agreement; the impact the withdrawal will have on obligations of Ireland under the agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35326/20]

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I submitted this question just after 4 November when the United States had withdrawn from the Paris climate agreement. They say a week is a long time in politics. Things look a little different now but I would still be interested in the Minister's thoughts on the decision of the United States, the time that has been lost since the United States first indicated it would leave in 2017 and how it looks now with new President-elect Joe Biden, hopefully, coming into the White House.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I might send on the script. As a personal reflection, and I hope I am not breaching a confidence here, the Taoiseach mentioned to me that he was speaking to President-elect Joe Biden this evening - he had to leave the Questions on Promised Legislation for that phone call. The Taoiseach said to me in the conversation one of the key points that President-elect Biden made was that they were going to be rejoining the Paris climate agreement. It was, for him, one of the key messages he wanted to get across in the conversation.

That is a really welcome development.

I was in Paris at the signing of the Paris climate agreement and the sense of hope and expectation it raised is not all lost. It is close to being lost if we do not proceed with urgency now but it is still the only and best legal framework we have for international collaboration in achieving its object.

I was fortunate to meet the Chinese ambassador yesterday. In a visit to me, his primary message was that they are looking to achieve a more ambitious national declared contribution sooner than 2060 to net zero. I believe that has been helped by the European Union taking the position it has in going for the higher targets that we mentioned with Deputy O'Rourke earlier. This virtuous circle, I hope, in terms of the increased ambition from Europe, faster ambition from China and now America pledging to come back within the international agreement, gives us some hope that there might be a race to the top rather than a race to the bottom. The Americans rejoining the Paris climate agreement is about the best news I have heard in a long, long time.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I think so. The Paris climate agreement was signed in 2015. The Minister was present. He was not an officeholder at the time. I am not sure if he was a Deputy. It is worth saying it just shows the Minister's commitment to this goes beyond what office he holds. Many people on the left feel the need to caveat their congratulations to Joe Biden by saying they do not share his politics. I am not going to do that. I am delighted someone of such decency has won the presidency in America. I am especially delighted to hear the report the Minister has just given us that in his conversation this afternoon with the Taoiseach, Mr. Biden indicated his intention that the United States will rejoin the Paris Agreement soon after his inauguration on 20 January. Everyone knows it is not a perfect agreement but at least everyone is on the pitch playing the same game and with the Americans, who emit 15% of the world's carbon, coming back in it at least gives us some hope and hopefully we will have a race to the top. Will the Minister, in his capacity as our Minister with responsibility for climate action, be writing to the President-elect to follow up on that call with the Taoiseach? What other actions will he be taking between now and then?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It might be slightly above my pay grade but the Taoiseach might be writing to him. I hope we may be welcoming him here shortly because I think it has been reported that the President-elect is expecting to come here. On a related topic, I had a further meeting last week with the Governor of California, Mr. Gavin Newsom's top climate officials. This is not just at federal level but is also at state level. In those technological centres, in particular, where innovation is coming from, they are committed because they see their state burning and the risks associated with climate change becoming very apparent and real. We can operate in co-operation with a whole range of different actors. What gives me a certain confidence regarding the President-elect, Mr. Biden, is that within his Democratic Party he has alliances with the likes of Senator Bernie Sanders and the sort of zero-carbon and keep it in the ground divestment movement Senator Bernie Sanders tapped into and he did not shy away from that during the election campaign. It probably lost him a good chunk of votes in some states but it gained him votes elsewhere and that strong commitment to divestment from fossil fuels in the election campaign gives me real hope.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** It was encouraging for those of us with a passion for climate action that during this campaign, which took place during a pandemic and which was in many ways a referendum on the other fellow, anyone listening to Mr. Biden's message would know that the

climate action agenda was running right through his campaign. That is very encouraging for the future. The Minister has given us a good answer there.

On the tech industry, I have a question coming up in a couple of minutes' and we may have a different view on its relationship with the climate.

### Fuel Poverty

97. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if the rolling out of green infrastructure, including smart meters, EV charging points and home retrofitting, have been subject to a human rights and equality impact assessment as required under section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35127/20]

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** It is vital our progress towards a carbon-neutral 2050 and a greener future is done in a fair and just way. Have key climate proposals, such retrofitting, the installation of smart meters and electric vehicle, EV, charging points, been subject to a human rights and equality impact assessment as required under section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The achievement of the goals set out in the Department's statement of strategy are dependent on the efforts and professionalism of my staff and underpinned by the values set out in the Civil Service Renewal Plan. The Department, in its dealings with staff, stakeholders and citizens on actions to address climate change, including policies on smart meters, EV charging points and home retrofitting, is committed to the public service ethos of independence, integrity, impartiality, equality, fairness and respect.

The programme for Government sets out the Government's response to the significant challenges facing the country, including Covid-19, decarbonising our economy and creating a sustainable future for all. A new statement of strategy for my Department is currently being developed in accordance with the requirements of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

The strategy will set out the vision and mission for my Department for the next three years and the key objectives, outputs and related strategies across the broad portfolio for which we are responsible. It will, *inter alia*, address the comprehensive and ambitious suite of commitments in the programme for Government to be delivered by my Department. An important part of the development process involves scanning the external environment to ensure that the strategy reflects changes and challenges in society and the economy, including any statutory requirements such as the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** It sounds as if they have not been equality-proofed, so to speak. It speaks to the point of the actual impact of policy decisions of Government and the need to do away with the notion of "them and us" in relation to the green agenda. It seems to frame much of what happens and that is underpinned by the implications in the real world of policy decisions on the green agenda. I want to ask about some of the retrofitting programmes, specifically the warmth and well-being energy efficiency programme and the better energy warmer homes scheme. Those are important schemes to protect some of our most vulnerable living in fuel and energy poverty. They are stymied at this time due to Covid. There are significant delays in delivering on those programmes. Can the Minister give me an update on those?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Taking the issue of retrofitting, section 42(1) of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 states:

A public body shall, in the performance of its functions, have regard to the need to—

- (a) eliminate discrimination,
- (b) promote equality of opportunity...

I could go on but what we are doing with the retrofitting programme is meeting the requirement in that section. I cite the fact, and this is from memory, that of the €270-odd million in funding the Government has committed next year to retrofitting is a budget commitment to this area that is huge and beyond compare. Some €70 million or so is going to be in social housing, targeting the homes of those who are typically, but not always, on lower incomes. Similarly, the warmer homes scheme is one which, as the Deputy said, is specifically targeted at those in receipt of fuel allowance, where there is 100% support for it. I think it accounts for more than €100 million of that overall budget so in our framing and design of this, it is very much designed to target social justice improvements as well as environmental and building quality improvements.

The Deputy is right that the system did suffer somewhat due to Covid-19 but we are continuing the work right through level 5 because it counts as essential construction work. I asked my officials about this the other day and they informed me it is proceeding and is not being delayed by Covid. It is subject to every on-site assessment but there is not a restriction on that work at the moment.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** There is a significant delay in terms of a backlog. I certainly welcome the funding and would encourage a significant ramping up of recruitment of workers to address that. I also acknowledge the fact that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul indicated that there are around 400,000 people living in fuel and energy poverty. Age Action indicated that there are in the region of 2,000 excess winter deaths related to fuel and energy poverty. I reference the strategy to combat energy poverty 2016 to 2019. Is the Minister going to take on that baton and follow through with a number of the recommendations, including, for example, the establishment of an independently-chaired energy poverty advisory group? Is this something the Government is committed to and will commit to in the time ahead?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** This is part of a massive investment in the area. This is a project of a scale that is probably one of the biggest investment projects in the history of the State, and for the private sector as well. On the backlog, the Deputy is right there has been a severe backlog with the likes of the warmer homes scheme. That is one of the reasons that in the budget, as well as increasing the actual quantum we are providing, we got agreement for an additional 57 staff within the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, and 50 staff within my Department to ensure we are equipped to deliver this scale of ambition. Included in that will be a full suite of measures to implement the objectives on the eradication of fuel poverty. The best way of eradicating fuel poverty in the long run is for us to meet our objective of going to every single house and removing the need to burn fossil fuels and the bills that come with that. Improved public health will come with better-insulated, warmer buildings so a large number of the additional 107 staff joining the existing Department and SEAI complement will be going into this very area and aiming to tackle fuel poverty.

## Warmer Homes Scheme

98. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the warmer homes scheme and its effectiveness in view of the fact there is a two-year delay in Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, inspectors visiting homes approved by the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35282/20]

**Deputy Seán Canney:** My question also relates to the warmer homes scheme and its effectiveness. In view of the fact there is a two-year delay in SEAI inspectors visiting homes, never mind getting the work carried out, I would like more insight as to how we will deal with this. As the Minister says, construction is an essential service and I do not see why the delays are not being dealt with. All I hear is that in my constituency there is a two-year waiting list for an inspector to come out.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The SEAI better energy warmer homes scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low-income households vulnerable to energy poverty. To date, more than 142,000 households have received free upgrades under the scheme, making their homes warmer, healthier and cheaper to run. The value of works carried out under the scheme now ranges between €5,800 and €28,500 per home, depending on the starting condition of the property and suitability for the measures available.

Eligible homes are allocated for initial survey on a first come, first served basis, and as the Deputy has said, the average time between application and survey is now 21 months. This wait time is a result of strong demand for what is an extremely popular scheme. There are currently more than 7,000 homes at various stages of the scheme work programme.

The SEAI originally estimated that works would be completed in approximately 3,500 homes under the scheme this year. Delivery has however been negatively impacted by Covid, particularly between March and June when the scheme was fully paused in line with Government guidelines. In line with the wider construction sector, retrofit works are continuing, subject to a full risk assessment and compliance with all available guidelines. Activity under this scheme is now expected be closer to 1,500 homes this year.

Budget 2021 provides €109 million in capital funding to support lower income households to retrofit their homes. This is the largest budget ever for this purpose. It is expected that this funding will support free energy efficiency upgrades for up to 5,800 lower income households, in line with the programme for Government. Capacity by the industry to deliver increased activity will also be increased due to a new, broader contractor panel to provide works commencing this month. Recommendations on the implementation of changes to the scheme to better target those most in need will be finalised shortly.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Minister for the reply. The answers I receive from the SEAI are that it takes up to 24 months. We also have a situation whereby people have an expectation but are being told they have to wait two years for the inspection. There seems to be a huge amount hinged on the fact that all of this has to be carried out by the SEAI. I cannot understand why local authorities are not being used. They administer the housing adaption grants and the mobility aid grants. Why can this not be administered at that level? We have also created more bureaucracy because the SEAI has to approve the contractors, when most contractors doing this work are already approved in one way or another and can certify their own works. It would make for greater efficiency and greater speed in getting the works done.

I ask the Minister to consider reviewing all of this in light of the fact there is huge demand and there is a budget. How much of the budget will not be spent this year and will be carried over?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I do not have the figure but I will ask the Department to come back to the Deputy directly on this. As I said, there will be significant carryover on this, as in other areas. A lot of this is because in the first Covid phase between March and June, the construction sector by and large, like the rest of the economy, was shut down. We still have ongoing issues in terms of building up the contractors' capability and capacity to deliver a lot of this work. The Government has been adopting the right approach in that in the budget the Minister, Deputy Harris, indicated significant investment with up to 1,500 apprenticeship places specifically in the area of retrofitting. Previously it used to be bedevilled by stop-start contract arrangements whereby contractors would have to wait until early in the new year to know when they would get work for that year. They then had a short window during the summer when they did the work and they stopped again in the autumn. What we did in the July stimulus this year was change the rules so we can run 12 months of the year and right the way around.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I am delighted to hear some movement has been made to try to streamline the whole process. It will be a pity if we do not take the issue on board with regard to the panels we create for the SEAI-approved contractors list. It is something I notice in my own area. Not many contractors are on the list because they are not interested in it. We have to make it more attractive for the local contractors to get involved. I was looking on the website today and I think I would have to go to Mayo to get a contractor for Galway. I wonder why this is. It is also very cumbersome for people to try to find a contractor on the list. There is a little bit of shaping up to be done in terms of making sure we deliver the benefits. We have the money, and if there is a budget carryover for next year, we want to be able to increase the capacity. I know the Minister is doing this but we need to increase it further and perhaps keep an eye on how the funding is being spent and how quickly it is being spent. The Minister is right that we cannot have a stop-go attitude.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** There is a lot of shaping up to be done. In truth, any underspend this year has been spent on our obligations regarding the European Union renewable heat targets, which we did not meet. We have had to buy our way out of that obligation. I would far prefer that we had spent the money on putting in new energy efficient homes with heat pumps so we would meet our renewable heat targets. There is a huge amount of shaping up to do.

The Deputy is right with regard to the contractors. Perhaps a lot of contractors looked at this in the past and thought it was too small, too stop-start and too uncertain. Now they know that for the next ten years by law the carbon revenues we will get from the carbon tax will be allocated. This will be some €5.5 billion for the retrofitting industry. This is only one of the revenue streams we will need. We will have a variety of schemes and revenue sources, including private financing, that will make this a €50 billion industry in the next two decades.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Minister.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Any contractor who is thinking forward, and they are doing so, will see this is an area they need-----

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

## Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

### National Broadband Plan

99. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of the national broadband plan in County Cork. [35090/20]

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** I apologise to the Minister because we are back to broadband again but I assume over the next few years the Minister will be well used to listening to various Deputies speak about it. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of good and reliable broadband to ensure all citizens can avail of remote working, education and other essential on-line services. Will the Minister outline the plans for and the fast-tracking of the national broadband plan? Will he make a statement on the matter of the roll-out of the national broadband plan, with particular reference to Cork?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The high-speed broadband map, which is available at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie), shows the areas in Cork which will be included in the national broadband plan. As of this week almost 122,000 premises across 25 counties have been surveyed by National Broadband Ireland, NBI, which is ahead of the full-year survey target of 120,000 that had been projected by the company. Of this figure, some 16,432 premises have been surveyed to date in Cork. This activity informs design solutions for the provision of the fibre network, and NBI crews have started initial works for the build covering approximately 4,000 premises in the Carrigaline area, including Cullen, Templebreedy, Carrigaline, Ballyfoyle, Douglas, Ballypheane, Glasheen, Mahon, and Kilpatrick. The first fibre to the home connections are expected next month and they will be subject to technical testing and validation prior to a wider release of the area. I am advised that, from the end of January, retailers will be able to resell the service and householders in these areas will be able to order high-speed broadband provided via the NBI network.

Further details are available on specific areas within Cork through the NBI website, which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website [www.nbi.ie](http://www.nbi.ie). Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence.

Broadband connection points are a key element of the national broadband plan, providing high-speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll-out of the fibre to the home network. As of 30 October, 187 sites have been installed and the high-speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites, and by the Department of Education for schools. Fifty-nine publicly accessible broadband connection points, BCPs, across the country are now live, with seven of these in County Cork. In addition, Clogagh and Ballycroneen national schools in Cork will also be connected for educational access as part of the BCP initiative.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** I thank the Minister. My office has been inundated with broadband queries since the onset of this pandemic. My constituents are very frustrated. I often hear from households of five and six people where both parents are working from home and three or four children are trying to continue their studies online, both at second level and third level. It is nearly impossible for them to do this because of their poor Internet connection.

I have made several representations to Eir and NBI but because many of these Eircode postal codes are included in the national broadband plan, I am informed there is nothing that can be done, and I receive a generic response, much to my frustration and that of my constituents. One of my constituents recently remarked: “I work from home using my phone through a hotspot and do not have Wi-Fi fast enough to do my job”. Other constituents drive to nearby public buildings to access basic services and people at home are unable to give their schooling or studies their full attention.

Unfortunately, this is becoming the norm in my constituency. We have all now accepted that the pandemic will be with us for the foreseeable future. Can anything be done for my constituents in the short term or is it simply a case of waiting for the roll-out of the national broadband plan?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** If Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan does not mind, I would like to also respond to what was said earlier by the Ceann Comhairle during a debate on a Topical Issue matter because the case he made is proper and important. We represent our constituents and at this moment in crisis, when people are dependent on these services, for them not to be able to get a response from the companies providing the services is a real issue of concern. Whatever about my comments and those of other Members, the fact that they came from the Ceann Comhairle in the middle of our debate is something I will bring to the attention of ComReg and Eir. This deserves real attention from the company and the regulator.

That said, the challenge that we all recognise is that we need to accelerate this during Covid. Deputy O’Sullivan mentioned the family situation and I can see this in my own home, where there are six of us on various devices, and if anyone cannot get broadband, he or she is cut off. There is a particular challenge in rural areas, where there may often be a distance from the nearest connection, and it is a question of how that is rolled out. It was originally set to be a seven-year project and we are looking to see can we accelerate and shorten that. The vast majority of houses will be delivered in the early years and it will only be the very difficult to reach houses that are being put back to that later date. The incentive for the company now is that the demand is so great, and I hope we can accelerate this project to the best of our ability.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** I welcome the comments of both the Ceann Comhairle and the Minister. It speaks volumes when the Ceann Comhairle expresses an opinion like that. One need only look at any Twitter account in regard to Eir’s customer service. It is nearly legendary at this stage that people are dissatisfied with the level of customer service they receive from that provider in particular.

The elephant in the room is the lack of information for so many people. Many of the requests are common to all of our offices weekly and many of the misgivings and problems people have with their providers could be addressed with more up-to-date information on those providers’ websites. If there was a timeline for various villages, towns and rural areas, so they know broadband will be coming to them in, for example, quarter 1, quarter 2 or quarter 3, it would provide great relief to those people to know that it is coming. I would appreciate it if the

Minister could progress this issue.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** At the Estimates committee meeting last week, a number of Deputies echoed Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan’s comments by making the point that access to information, particularly in regard to roll-out plans, will be a key issue. I reverted to my Department during the week and we agreed that we need to look again at how we map out some of the work that is going to be done. It is hard at the moment because a lot of the work that is being done is survey work, so we will not know what the actual timeline is until that survey work gives us some broad indication. One way we might approach this is to work through local councils or other agencies to try to make sure there is better communication. People can now register on that *nbi.ie* website but only some 16,000 households have registered thus far. This website will give them updated information on when their house is due to be reached and what the broad timelines are. We can start by trying to promote that, and I am promoting it, to try to give people more information. We will work with the county councils to give them an update and, in that way, help local representatives and Deputies to give a service to their constituents.

### Data Centres

100. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the status of plans to develop efficiency standards of data centres as outlined in the programme for Government under the heading “Regulation Driving Climate Action”; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35068/20]

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I was encouraged to see a reference to data centres under the climate action section of the programme for Government. My concern in regard to data centres is that they are a blind spot, not only for the Government, but for governments and states throughout western Europe and North America. I would like to hear the Minister’s thoughts on the Government’s plan for dealing with the carbon emissions from these massive buildings.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Government statement on the role of data centres in Ireland’s enterprise strategy acknowledges the role of data centres as part of the digital and communications infrastructure for many sectors of our economy. The statement also noted that data centres pose considerable challenges to the future planning and operation of Ireland’s power system. Such challenges arise in terms of renewable energy policy, generation adequacy, security of electricity supply and electricity customer costs.

The programme for Government commits to developing efficiency standards for equipment and processes, particularly those set to grow rapidly, such as data centres. The ICT sector needs to undergo its own green transformation. Earlier this year, the European Commission adopted Shaping Europe’s Digital Future, which includes an objective to foster an open, democratic and sustainable society. Key actions include initiatives to achieve climate-neutral, highly energy efficient and sustainable data centres by no later than 2030. I note that the EU ecodesign regulation on servers and data storage products sets minimum standards around the environmental impact of these products and requires that circular economy principles will be mandatory for suppliers of this type of equipment from next year.

The climate action plan also provides that the IDA will use its new strategy for 2020 to 2024 to fully integrate decarbonisation objectives across its portfolio of clients. This strategy will seek to ensure new large-scale enterprise investments in Ireland, including factors such as

location and power purchase agreement opportunities, are aligned with the build-out of the grid to maximise renewable sources. We have seen recently a number of unsubsidised corporate power purchase agreements, purchased by data centre operators, in the Irish market and I hope we can encourage more. When data centre operators purchase electricity directly from renewable generators, it contributes towards the State objective to decarbonise our electricity system without any subsidy from electricity customers.

In addition, the Government's climate action fund is supporting South Dublin County Council to develop an innovative district heating project in the Tallaght area, using waste heat from a local data centre. The Tallaght district heating scheme will provide low carbon heat to public sector, residential and commercial customers, with the objective of decreasing the level of emissions associated with the use of fossil fuels for heating. This project will provide valuable information in regard to the synergies between district heating and waste heat recovery from a data centre. This will inform future policy for the use of waste heat in appropriate locations and where technically feasible.

My Department is working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the relevant energy bodies to implement the commitments in the climate action plan and the programme for Government.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** The Tallaght district heating scheme is very welcome and is something we support. However, it does not allay any concerns I have in regard to data centres. According to EirGrid, by 2028, data centres, along with other large users, will consume 29% of Ireland's electricity. We are already Europe's data centre capital, with Amazon, Google and Microsoft having operations here. Dozens of centres have opened in recent years, bringing the total to 54. We have ten centres under construction, including a €1 billion Amazon hub in Mulhuddart, west Dublin, and another 31 centres have planning permission.

These centres do not get the same attention as the agriculture industry, the aviation industry or the fossil fuel industry but they should and, in fact, they should get more attention. They are jobs poor and carbon heavy. People drive past them in industrial estates on the outskirts of towns and because they do not have two smoking chimney stacks going into the sky, they do not attract the same amount of attention. This is a flawed model. I am not encouraged that there is enough detail in the Minister's response to suggest that we are truly going to tackle what is being done.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Every industry will have to operate within the planning framework where we go to net zero emissions by 2050 and 50% reduction in the next ten years. A key to that will be energy efficiency. We focus all the time on the generation side but efficiency is vital. Looking at the use of electricity across a range of different sectors, we have seen significant growth of our economy without a commensurate growth in electricity. We can do this.

The development of data centres, and EirGrid is the key company which manages and oversees this, can only work in tandem with the development of our grid and our renewable electricity system. We will not allow one industry to tip us over the edge in terms of our emissions profile. It has to contribute but if, as the Deputy said, we get 75% or 80% of our electricity from renewables by 2028, which is feasible, then we can make that equation work. In the subsequent decade, when we are looking to develop some 30 GW of offshore wind, particularly in the west coast, the south-west coast and so on, there is the possibility for us to run a digital, modern economy, electrifying transport and industry, and including data centres. The scale of

the power we will have available to us will be a multiple of any use. It will be low carbon and relatively low cost compare to other locations. We can only make this work in a way that is carbon neutral.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** My other concern is that these data centres are light on creating jobs. For a building of such size, there may only be a couple of dozen workers there. We are dedicating large spaces to companies like Amazon, which has appalling workers' rights records throughout the globe, to create these massive data centres.

I know these corporate purchasing power agreements are unsubsidised but I am concerned about them because it is the beginning of corporate creep into our energy generation at a time when our energy security is not certain. The Minister is strong on this and there is much in the programme for Government on energy security but we are not there yet and these data centres will be hiving off and keeping for themselves much clean renewable energy generation to go into centres which, although storing data, are not creating jobs. Is it cumulatively a total good? I am not convinced it is.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** We are starting an energy security review. It is looking at the wider context in terms of gas networks and so on but when one starts looking at it, one realises that to have a full review one has to see the full picture and that includes demand, which includes these operations and others. It is an important part of our economy. As the Deputy said, the data centres themselves are relatively small in terms of jobs but many of the companies operating them here have tens of thousands of workers in my constituency and in the Deputy's. There is a connection in having the data centres, which are in many ways the core of the business, and being able to attract other elements of the business. That is hard to prove. I go back to the basic level of asking someone if they have a phone and if they use it. If so, that is the data centre. The phone is just an extension of the data centre. We are not going to remove our use of our phones any day soon. We need to work with and set the highest standards with the companies and say we will only do this if it works in a low-carbon the way, including the use of district heating, having the most energy-efficient centres going and using our comparative competitive advantage in renewable power. That model can be sustainable.

*Question No. 101 replied to with Written Answers.*

## **Electric Vehicles**

102. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the status of his plans to support the development of infrastructure for electric vehicles. [35091/20]

**Deputy James O'Connor:** Electric vehicles are the future of our personal transportation system, particularly for long journeys and in rural areas. We need to have more of a discussion around how we put in place the infrastructure we require to sustain that type of transport system. Will the Minister give the House some guidance as to what steps his Department is taking to fulfil some of the actions that are required?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Government is fully committed to supporting a significant expansion and modernisation of the electric vehicle charging network over the coming years. We have committed €10 million from the climate action fund to promote the charging network and

this has leveraged a further €10 million investment from ESB. This intervention will result in 90 additional high-power chargers, each capable of charging two vehicles, 52 additional fast chargers, which may replace existing standard chargers, and 264 replacement standard chargers with more modern technology, with each consisting of two charge points.

Since the delivery stage of the product commenced in October 2019, four multicharger sites have been delivered, one each on motorways in Galway, Kildare, Laois and Meath. The programme to upgrade 50 standard chargers to fast chargers has already commenced with 13 installations now in place. In addition, 159 standard chargers, each with two charge points, have been replaced, bringing the total number of those chargers nationally to 318.

My Department also provides support to the SEAI public charge points scheme. This scheme provides funding to local authorities for the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which would facilitate owners of EVs who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles on the public street to charge their EVs near their homes. A total of 75% of the capital cost is provided through a grant up to a maximum of €5,000 per charging point.

My Department will continue to support this scheme through the grants provided by the SEAI and in parallel is developing a charging infrastructure strategy in line with the programme for Government. This will ensure capacity keeps ahead of demand, while also putting in place guidance for local authorities on how best to expand the network of public charge points at local, national and regional levels.

Work is currently being progressed to expand the EV home charger grant to include shared parking in apartment blocks and similar developments. However, there are a number of complex planning and legal issues to address before we can expand the grant in an appropriate manner so as to include the required categories of shared parking. My Department is working closely with the SEAI and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to address the issues.

On new build, it should be noted that the EU energy performance and buildings directive requires member states to ensure that appropriate infrastructure is installed in all new residential and non-residential buildings as well as those buildings with more than ten car parking spaces for the purpose of enabling the installation of a larger stage of charging points for electric vehicles. It is intended that the EU requirement will be transposed into Irish law by the end of this year.

In addition to the schemes outlined above, the Department of Transport is also undertaking an EV small public service vehicles, SPSV, charger project, which will see the installation of SPSV-dedicated EV chargers at Dublin and Cork airports and at Heuston train station in Dublin, Colbert train station in Limerick and Kent train station in Cork. In budget 2021, additional funding has been allocated to extend this dedicated infrastructure network further and dedicated recharging network is key to supporting the sector in making the switch to greener, cleaner alternatives.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I welcome the Minister's efforts so far to deal with this issue. What needs to be explored in Ireland is our conversation around having a system in place where we are moving from a fossil fuel-based cars industry towards a greener one. There is much ap-

prehension and fear among many families which is damaging consumer confidence in the car industry around purchasing vehicles. I strongly encourage the Minister to tackle that issue in the next number of years so that there is a degree of certainty as to whether it is a wise move to purchase an electric vehicle, to focus on hybrids or to buy a car that runs on diesel or petrol, which some families are still considering. I am a keen motorist with an interest in this area and I know from talking to people in this industry that that is a fear. I would appreciate it if the Minister responded to that.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** There is definitely a growing demand among the public for public EV charging points, from people living in apartments to tourist destinations to car parks. Macroom Town Council, for example, led on this a number of years ago and installed one of the first charging points in Cork. I acknowledge the Minister has made funding available to local authorities. However, there seems to be little interest among local authorities in accessing it. In the past year, only two of them accessed the funding and less than half made inquiries.

*11 o'clock*

Has the Minister engaged with local authorities in order to energise them in accessing funding and putting in place electric vehicle services for the public, whether in Ballincollig or other places across County Cork? Has the Minister engaged with the local authorities and is it possible to energise them and get them accessing the available funding?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will start by replying to Deputy Aindrias Moynihan. As it happens, I had a meeting with Cork County Council last week on the issue of sustainable travel in general. I take every chance I get to encourage local authorities to make an application for funding and look to develop their infrastructure. The benefits, as I see it, are setting out a direction of travel. We are running a towns first strategy aimed at bringing life back into the centre of Macroom and any other town. It would help if we could put good quality infrastructure in the centre of towns. It would be particularly appropriate where there are rows of terraced houses, tightly knit together. It is hard to service those houses with electric charging points because if three or four households in a row have an electric vehicle, there would be a difficulty on the distribution grid at that level, as well as the potential problem of getting a parking spot outside the house and so on. Having that sort of infrastructure would be a part of a town first revival.

I was impressed with the engineers and officials I met from Cork County Council. There was a lot of discussion around public realm and investing in the centre of towns. This is now part of the public realm infrastructure.

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

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I have not yet responded to Deputy O'Connor, if I may briefly run over my allotted time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Go on.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I believe that the future will be all electric. Certain other players, including the likes of Toyota, would say that hybrid cars have a real advantage. Toyota would say that a hybrid vehicle is running on electricity 80% of the time, taking the energy from the brakes, and that there is efficiency because there is a large number of cars for the amount of battery power required. The reason I think electric vehicles will prevail in the long run is that there are fewer moving parts, the fuel costs are a fifth of those of other types of car and the

maintenance cost is a fraction because there are fewer moving parts. They are simply better cars. They are coming in for certain.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I thank the Minister for his response. I will reiterate, to a certain extent, that there is a lot of fear among families who are purchasing an electric vehicle. It is an expensive thing to do. My constituency is very rural where there is no option for public transport and people need to buy cars every few years, depending on the mileage they are doing and so on and so forth. I feel there is a lack of clarity around purchasing vehicles at the moment and what the transition is going to be like. We are moving towards an electric-based system and I agree with the Minister that it is the future. We, as a country, are seeing significant investment in green technology and transport. The Minister knows that his Department has recently invested significantly in Youghal and Middleton with the new greenway system, which is welcome. It is coming in at a cost of €10 million.

A strategy would be welcome and a prudent move from the Minister. It would certainly quell a lot of fears that consumers and families out there have around this particular problem.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I mentioned the problem of the distribution grid. When we are using heat pumps as well as electric vehicles, probably the biggest engineering and technical challenge is how do we do that in an urban area. We will not have that problem in one-off houses in rural Ireland because cars can be charged right outside the door of the house. That vehicle and a heat pump can be managed. There will be new home energy management systems coming in which will turn the vehicle or the pump on or off and get power going backwards and forwards. The range of these vehicles is improving. We have access to renewable wind power in many rural parts of the country. This is probably going to be a rural solution first. It will probably be more difficult in some of the urban areas because of the charging difficulties we would have in apartment blocks, terraced housing and semi-detached houses. It will not be easy. One-off rural housing is a perfect target market for electric vehicles as their range comes up and costs come down. The quality is there, as I said. The maintenance costs are lower and the fuel costs are a fraction of other types of car. I see this, first and foremost, as a rural solution.

## **Landfill Sites**

103. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if additional funding is being made available through the landfill remediation programme at the landfill site at Kerdiffstown, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35102/20]

**Deputy James Lawless:** My question inquires about the progress of the remediation of the Kerdiffstown landfill and, in particular, what additional finances may be forthcoming in relation to same.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** In the year to date, funding of almost €3.4 million has been provided through the landfill remediation programme for the project at Kerdiffstown. It is expected that further funding in the region of €2 million will be drawn down by Kildare County Council by the end of this year.

Following the completion of the 2021 Estimates process last month, I expect to be in a position to allocate funding of €23.5 million to the landfill remediation programme next year to

continue the remediation of environmentally-degraded, discontinued landfill sites operated by local authorities and private landfills taken into State ownership. A significant proportion of this overall allocation will be directed towards further remediation works at Kerdiffstown.

On receipt of confirmation of 2020 total funding from my Department, Kildare County Council entered into a contract for final remediation work. The contract was awarded after the completion of a successful procurement competition. Significant work has already been completed on the site in making it safe and in securing appropriate access to allow for final remediation works to be carried out. The contractor for the final works is due to mobilise on site later this month and the contract is of 54 months' duration with project completion scheduled for 2025. Funding beyond 2021 will be determined in the context of the annual Estimates process and the funding requirements of the project.

Kildare County Council has a page dedicated to project progress on its website where regular up-to-date information on Kerdiffstown Park is provided.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I thank the Minister for that positive answer and acknowledge that €23.5 million is quite a significant sum. I know that is not all for Kerdiffstown but is for general landfill remediation. The €3.4 million and extra €2 million that the Minister has committed to this year amounts to a total of €5.4 million, if I have that right.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the issue of Kerdiffstown landfill. This has been a long battle. The Minister probably recalls me raising it on numerous occasions during the previous Dáil with the then Ministers and at the Joint Committee for Communications, Climate Action and Environment on which the Minister and I sat. It is a good news story that started off as a very bad news story. I am sure the Minister and the House are familiar with the background. This landfill reached national attention when smoke and fumes were blooming out across the N7. That was the nadir of the whole debacle and various unauthorised developments and activities were going on at the site. It went up in smoke and the place went on fire with all sorts of toxic substances within it. That shone a negative light on the landfill.

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

**Deputy James Lawless:** Do I not have a few minutes longer? How long do I have?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The clock says the Deputy has no time but I ask him to go on.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I will not come in again to ask a supplementary question. I will leave my contribution at this. The battle over the landfill was a long one. It is a good news story that we are out the far side of it.

I will briefly mention the Kerdiffstown residents' group, the cleaner Naas group and other groups. I will also mention Kildare County Council and the people under the stewardship of Joe Boland who have brought matters to this point.

On a historical note, things go full circle. My predecessor in this role and former Deputy, the late Michael Fitzpatrick, raised this issue in 2007 with the Minister's predecessor, former Deputy John Gormley, when it was first breaking. I worked with then Deputy Fitzpatrick at that time and he pressed this issue. It is really positive to see it come full circle.

I regularly drive past the landfill on the way home and it is amazing to see the work that has gone on. It is not yet open to the public, as the Minister knows, but one can see the remedial

work that has taken place if one looks through the fence or the gate. It will be a park. There will be vantage points, a path to walk around and playing fields within it. It is an ugly duckling that has become a swan and it is a credit to all involved.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is a sad tale but I hope it is one that has a somewhat better ending, as the Deputy says. It was a quarry, dating back to the 1950s. In 2003, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, issued a waste licence. A revised licence was issued in 2006 but the EPA then had to take court action in 2009 because there was significant odour pollution at the site. The EPA found that the site was not operating in accordance with the licensing conditions. It was effectively abandoned in 2010, when enforcement actions were being pursued, and the EPA took possession of the site in 2010. A fire broke out on the site in 2011, as the Deputy said, requiring an emergency response by the State. That is the sad tale of why we are here. The issue is real and relates to odours and to leachate into the River Morell, which is a tributary of the Liffey. This is a shocking example of how the cost of protecting our health increases when we do not look after our local environment. The expectation is that we will be able to manage it and that, at the end of this process, we will be able to restore it safely into a multi-use public park. That will mark the end of what has been a sorry saga.

### **Post Office Network**

104. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if supports will be put in place for the post office network in view of the significant financial challenges facing the network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34562/20]

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I raise the issue of the challenges facing the post office network. An independent report by Grant Thornton recently concluded that the network is at a critical juncture and the financial viability of the network is being challenged like never before. The report projects that the annual cost of running the post office network in 2021 will be €70 million and that it will generate a retail revenue of €53 million, leaving a €17 million shortfall. Can the Minister outline if he will give consideration to the recommendations contained in this report?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The importance of the post office network has been clearly demonstrated during the pandemic. We have seen a range of initiatives carried out through our post offices which have helped to support local communities, the elderly and vulnerable. However, the serious decline in the volume of mail and the impact of Covid-19 on footfall through post offices has had a severe impact on the postal network. I am aware of the concerns of the Irish Postmasters Union, IPU. I am also aware of the findings of the Grant Thornton report, which was commissioned by the IPU.

It is a long-standing policy of the Government that postal services will not be directly subsidised by the Government. However, we remain fully committed to a sustainable post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure in both rural and urban areas. The programme for Government recognises that a modernised post office network will provide a better range of financial services and e-commerce services for citizens and enterprise, as part of our commitment to a sustainable nationwide post office network.

An Post put in place a strategic plan, covering the period from 2017 to 2021, in response to

the structural challenges faced by the postal sector. In order to implement the plan, the cost of which was estimated to be in the region of €150 million, the Minister for Finance provided a loan of €30 million to the company in December 2017. The cost of supporting the renewal of the post office network was €15 million and the continued fulfilment of a five-day mail delivery service cost another €15 million. As part of the delivery of the plan, the company was split into two distinct business units - An Post Mails and Parcels, and An Post Retail.

An Post is transforming its retail network by delivering new products and new formats. Among other things, it is diversifying and growing the financial services products it provides to individuals and SMEs to include loans, credit cards and more foreign exchange products, it is offering local banking in association with the major banks, and it is providing a full range of State savings products. Two new dedicated sub-brands, An Post Money and a new business-to-business brand, An Post Commerce, have been launched. An Post's investment of €50 million in the network is about getting communities to use the enhanced services in their local post office.

The Government believes An Post has untapped potential to do more and to make a further significant contribution across many areas of public, business and community life in Ireland. With an evolving mandate, An Post can emerge as a central hub for a wide variety of valuable community-focused services. We will work closely with An Post to see if there is scope to channel additional services through the network. All options will be considered fully and efforts will be redoubled to give effect to our commitment to ensuring a sustainable and viable post office network.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I appreciate that the Minister's Department is considering the Grant Thornton report, but we need to do more in the current climate, given the crisis we are experiencing now. This is an important issue, as acknowledged by the Minister. The post office is a vital service in many towns and communities throughout the country, particularly in rural areas. As the Minister has mentioned, during the Covid-19 lockdown the post office assumed the role of a social contact and provided a reassuring knock on the door for many people, especially our elderly and vulnerable.

The post office is at a critical juncture. During the Covid-19 pandemic, its transactions are estimated to have decreased by approximately 25%. I acknowledge that it is a long-standing Government policy that postal services will not be directly subsidised by the Government. However, we find ourselves in unprecedented times. In 2017, the Minister for Finance provided a loan of €30 million to the company to support the renewal of the post office network and its continued fulfilment of a five-day mail service. Can the Minister consider a further loan to make up for the existing deficit?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Government has continued to look at this matter. Today, we announced a series of further Covid-related payments, in this case to the aviation industry because it is in real trouble. I would not rule out whatever further measures that the Government might have to consider.

The Deputy is right when he says that the 25% reduction in footfall is a real issue. An additional cost of €6 million has been incurred in post offices to pay for PPE and other protection measures. There has been a further acceleration of the decline in mail revenues and volumes. Traditionally, in recent years, it was declining by approximately 7% per annum. The decrease has been closer to 10% or 15% this year. As in many other sectors, business is down. The factor

that compensates for this is that revenues from the parcel business are up 100%. That is probably true for many businesses involved in the online system.

The success that An Post has had in recent years in turning its fortunes around, getting back to break-even or to profit and having a very positive outlook compared to what people might have expected in these difficult circumstances has resulted from its approach of aiming for markets for new products for which there is a real demand and being innovative in looking at new opportunities. In addition, there are Government services that we can distribute through the post office network. I commit to doing anything I can to get as many of those services as possible delivered through the post office system.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I acknowledge what the Minister has said. I ask that both he and the Government continue to monitor the situation. It is imperative that we do all we can to support our post office services. I ask the Minister to comment briefly on the public service obligation model which is used in other countries throughout Europe, including France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Such a model was advocated in the Grant Thornton report. I acknowledge the role that An Post and its staff have played throughout the pandemic in being a port of call for people who need to touch base with someone. I wish the firm and all its employees the very best coming up to Christmas.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I join the Deputy in thanking the workers in the post offices for the really good work they have done throughout the year in this Covid-19 crisis. The Deputy mentioned European examples which we will look at. I should also mention, further to our previous discussion, that An Post availed of a European Investment Bank loan of approximately €40 million as part of its strategic investment plan. We have been tapping into European funding as part of the overall plan. Government funding is not the only funding that has been provided. We will look at other models in other countries while reviewing the Grant Thornton report.

### **National Broadband Plan**

105. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address the broadband deficit in the areas of east County Kildare particularly Eadestown, Rathmore and Killeel in view of an increasing population density, a high concentration of persons working and studying from home and little progress to date on rolling out fibre infrastructure to the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35101/20]

**Deputy James Lawless:** I understand that we covered some of this issue during Topical Issue matters last week. Can the Minister comment again on the predicament of rural east Kildare with regard to broadband provision?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I remember the Topical Issue matter. I hope to get the placenames right in this case, rather than including west Kildare in my east Kildare line-up. My response is similar to the one I gave earlier in response to a Topical Issue matter.

The national broadband plan, NBP, intervention areas are set out as those areas that cannot be met by targeted commercial operators. Premises in the amber area in the map will be provided with high-speed broadband through State-led intervention, the contract for which was signed last November with National Broadband Ireland, NBI. The blue area on the map represents those areas where commercial providers are currently delivering or have plans to deliver a

high-speed broadband services. The NBP will offer users a high-speed broadband service with speeds of 500 Mbps from the outset. This service will reach over 90% of all premises in the country. This is expected to be delivered within the next four years.

Details on east Kildare are available through the NBI website, [www.nbi.ie](http://www.nbi.ie), which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register its interest in being provided with deployment updates. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress on delivering in their local areas and specific updates on their own premises. I am advised by NBI that, as of 4 November 2020, almost 122,000 premises across 25 counties have been surveyed, which is ahead of target. Surveys have been completed in the following areas across County Kildare: Killashee, Oughterard, Naas rural, Rathmore, Eadestown, Kill, Kilteel, Carnalway, Gilltown, Ballymore Eustace, Bodenstown, Naas urban, Newtown and Donaghcumper. The next step is for National Broadband Ireland to develop network designs to deliver the new fibre to the home network to these premises, followed by pre-build and build works.

Broadband connection points are a key element of the national broadband plan, NBP, providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll-out of the fibre to the home network. As of 30 October, 187 sites have been installed with service provider contracts being done by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education for schools.

Rathmore National School and St. David's National School in County Kildare will be connected for educational access as part of this initiative by the end of the year. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise other schools with no high speed broadband within the intervention area for connection over the term of the national broadband plan.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I thank the Minister and for his engagement on the previous day also. He is very on the ball on this issue and his geography is spot-on today so there are no issues in that regard. Rather than repeat what was said in the debate last week I will focus on a different aspect today. The national broadband plan is under way, which is great, and we want it to happen as quickly and effectively as possible, but is there merit in also looking at measures to complement that and to make it easier for private or public providers to get in alongside that to allow for greater coverage penetration? In the previous Dáil I introduced the broadband planning framework Bill to enable that. It was working its way through the Houses before the Dáil was dissolved. The type of things it sought to do included planning synchronisation across different planning authorities; a register of assets that would be maintained by the Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg; a central depository where kit and infrastructure would be re-used if it is already in place; mandating site sharing so if there is already a mast or a duct on a particular hillside or road it would be re-used rather than reinventing the wheel; and ducting to the door, which may be of interest to the Minister, in that a change in the planning mandate that ducting be provided to the door be part of that new build planning framework.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Deputy is absolutely right that we should not simply rest on our laurels or wait for the national broadband plan and not do anything else. There are large areas in other parts of the country not in the intervention area and we have to have an eye on them. Competition does help here, particularly where a technology evolves. There may be innovation occurring in fixed wireless or other wireless systems that may even move into areas we had not expected. We should certainly encourage and support that without interfering directly in the

market.

The way the national broadband area is configured is, by tradition, more rural. In terms of the way the previous agreement was done with Eir, the first surrounding area around a town would typically be an Eir area where it is rolling out high speed broadband very successfully, even if its customer service is letting it down. The area beyond that then is the national broadband area. It is not just the national broadband plan. We also tend to have Eir doing the hinterland area around most towns. In the larger towns and cities we tend to have competition, be it from the cable provider or a range of different providers including SIRO, Eir and a number of others, so it would be more difficult in rural Ireland. That is why the national broadband plan is there but we may see other potential providers.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I welcome the Minister's interest in considering other possible options. A parallel path could be mapped out. The NBP is providing broadband to as much of the country as it can, particularly in those rural areas, but there is nothing stopping us from facilitating others in that regard. I welcome the Minister's commitment to accommodate competition in that space because I believe that competition lifts all boats. It is important to have a technology mix also because the NBP is predicated upon a fibre infrastructure, which we know is currently the scientifically fastest option, but from a practical point of view I refer to the likes of fixed wireless, which the Minister mentioned, although not satellite, which can create an expense. Other options that may be able to get services to certain areas faster, albeit that fibre is the ultimate choice, may be coming down the track at a later stage but getting a better service to certain areas sooner and then having fibre coming in in due course is something to keep an eye on.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I fully agree that there are developments in fixed wireless and other non-fibre based solutions but that is what we have gone for with the national broadband plan. It is largely fibre based. I remember talking to the engineers around the configuration of that. They found it was optimal in terms of meeting the needs of the national broadband plan. There was not a blind spot ruling out fixed wireless but if I remember rightly they found a difficulty with the configuration, particularly of our pole network along the roads, and getting an equivalent high quality provision using fixed wireless. No matter how many shared masts or other fixed wireless configurations there were they found it very difficult to get the coverage in with the dispersed nature in hollows, behind hills and so on in terms of one-off rural housing. That is why the fixed fibre option was the one picked.

*Questions Nos. 106 and 107 replied to with Written Answers.*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are running out of time. I want to go to Question No. 108. We have a short amount of time for Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh to ask her question.

### **Warmer Homes Scheme**

108. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the status of and position regarding energy upgrades as part of the better energy warmer homes scheme planned for 2020 due to the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35175/20]

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I welcome the Minister's earlier answers on the SEAI

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scheme and the warmer homes scheme. On the additional 107 staff, who are they to be employed by? He will be aware that my main concern is the waiting list for the warmer homes scheme. Last month, 7,300 people were waiting of whom 345 are in Mayo. How will they be prioritised? Who will decide who goes first? Will it be according to medical need or how will it be done? How will the Minister get more contractors in each county to be able to clear that backlog?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Of the 107 jobs there are approximately 50 within my Department, primarily in the energy sections. There are so many different projects going on at such a scale we find that we need additional resources. It is about the ability of the State to deliver but sometimes we meet a constraint. Fifty-seven will be in the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. It is an independent public agency but an agency of our Department so it is very closely connected, and that is a matter for the agency itself. It has already started that hiring process. One of the immediate urgent needs will be to recognise that we do have a backlog in the likes of the warmer homes schemes, partly due to the constraint in the resources of SEAI to be able to meet upscale demand, the constraint in the contractor space but also because of the unprecedented level of demand; it is a very popular scheme. It is up to SEAI to manage that. It uses other agencies to assist in the processing of it. We need to streamline and accelerate it and make it much easier for both contractors and householders. It is a slow enough process in my experience. I am aware that many contractors and householders have had difficulty in terms of the day-to-day management. It is not the most fast response type system. I am hoping that many of these additional resources will smooth out the process of applying and the process for the contractors to ensure they are spending most of their time working on the buildings and that it is a very easy process for them to register and carry out the work. SEAI has been a very reputable agency for a long number of years. It was given a challenge to scale up a massive new retrofit programme. The agency will have to be the key star actor in this.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

The Dáil adjourned at 11.30 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 11 November 2020.