



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 18 Samhain 2020

Wednesday, 18 November 2020

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Working from Home (Covid-19) Bill 2020: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Alan Kelly: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am sharing time with my colleague, Deputy Ó Ríordáin. Sometimes Governments and all politicians are accused of being out of touch and behind the times. Sometimes the criticism is merited; sometimes it is not. When it comes to this topic, the rights of workers working from home, that criticism is very much merited and accurate. Current Irish law as it relates to working from home is either outdated, unworkable or non-existent. I am thankful that other parties and the Government are now following the Labour Party’s lead in addressing this issue.

This year, 2020, has been like no other. All of our lives have been transformed by the pandemic and its knock-on effects. The impact on the working lives of hundreds of thousands of Irish workers who are now working from home has been immense. At the start of the year, there were around 200,000 Irish workers working from home on a regular basis. As a result of the pandemic, that number more than trebled to 700,000, which must represent the greatest change in working life in a single year in Irish history. The implications in the long run, even if a vaccine is rolled out and we defeat this virus as I believe we will, could be enormous for Irish society, for everything from transporting and commuting to regional development, industrial policy and everything else.

People’s priorities have changed. Covid has been a disruptor. According to a survey conducted earlier this year by Mental Health First Aid Ireland, we are facing significant and varied challenges due to the mass shift to remote work. Survey respondents reported negative physical ramifications as a result of working from home, as well as issues related to mental health and well-being. Over a third of respondents reported that they were not happy with their work-life balance. The report concludes that as boundaries are blurred between work and life, workers have found it hard to switch off, mainly due to the removal of the commute to a physical office location as the time and space to move into work mode has been removed. Some 42% of those surveyed agreed that they found it difficult to maintain the boundaries between home and work life and almost half of all respondents, 49.3% to be exact, worked over their contracted hours.

In the context of the huge shift to remote working that has taken place this year among Irish workers, these are extremely significant findings. While the nature of work may be changing at a rapid pace, the need to protect the rights of workers will never change, nor will the determination of the Labour Party, which I have the privilege to lead, and all its members and elected representatives in this House, the Seanad and across Ireland, to protect those workers and advance those rights. However, the laws regulating working from home in Ireland are either non-existent, unworkable or completely out of date. The Government is, once again, miles behind the curve when it comes to adapting to changes in our society. We are eight months into this pandemic and it will go on. Whatever excuses the Government may have had for not bringing Irish law up to date when it comes to working from home at the start of the pandemic, it has no excuses now. The law as it relates to working from home is badly in need of being reformed.

For these reasons, and as a responsible Opposition party, the Labour Party has introduced the Working from Home (Covid-19) Bill 2020, in order to protect the rights of workers who are in mass numbers working from home. We are proposing two new protections for workers working from home. The first is giving all workers the right to switch off. This is a fundamental and very important protection that ensures workers are not being put under pressure to work all hours. I think we can all acknowledge that the higher levels of connectivity made possible by advances in IT and mobile technology in recent years have been a double-edged sword for workers. While it is now much easier for people to stay connected with one another, it is now much more difficult for workers to take a break and get away from dealing with issues in work. This can and does lead to workers being pressurised into working very long hours and responding to messages late into the night, particularly younger and more junior workers. Dare I say it, we could all learn about that ourselves in these Houses.

This always-on culture can have very negative impacts on the physical and mental health of workers and on family life. More time spent on laptops and mobile phones late into the night means less time to spend with loved ones, children and families. This can lead to more stressed, harried and pressurised workers, and all the knock-on emotional effects this can have in families. It is time to put an end to this always-on culture. Workers deserve the right to switch off. The Bill requires employers to inform their employees what their policy is in relation to out-of-hours communication and gives protection to employees from being punished for failing to respond to emails or other communications out of hours, which is completely unacceptable. We would not be the first country in Europe to do something in this space, as France, Italy, Spain and Belgium have all passed legislation to tackle this issue. Ireland is also one of the few EU countries without any modern protection in our employment law for remote working.

The second key protection which the Bill offers is to make sure workers have a workstation in their home which is suitable for their working needs and that the cost of running the office is not being transferred from employers to workers, by requiring employers to pay a fixed tax-free amount to cover the costs of working from home, such as higher heating, electricity and broadband bills.

The current law in this area is an absolute dog's dinner. Under it, employers are effectively required to inspect the homes of their employees to ensure that they are suitable for working from home. I do not believe this fact is well known, but I am sure the Tánaiste would agree that it is completely and utterly ludicrous. It is a law that is not acceptable; it is unenforceable and simply wrong.

We have proposed a pragmatic solution, namely, that an employer be required to provide

the equipment that an employee needs but does not have, and pay a fixed amount to cover the costs of the worker of working from home. It is a particularly important issue for people who are working in low-paid employment and those who are renting. If an employer adopts these two measures, then the legal obligations are considered to have been complied with.

However, we, as legislators, need to act on this issue and we need to act now. The law needs to catch up with the lived reality of 700,000 workers in Ireland who are, as we speak, working from home, often in cramped and unsuitable spaces. There is no time to waste. To be frank, this issue should have been dealt with by the Oireachtas years ago.

This is not a time to do what this Government has repeatedly been doing. I respectfully ask the Taoiseach to consider this. The Government has kicked the can down the road repeatedly on the positive and sensible proposed legislation we have introduced. It then regurgitates and positions it as some form of Government initiative, such as our proposal on sick pay.

I ask the Tánaiste not to kick this can down the road and to not delay, because action is long overdue. We, in the Labour Party, are calling on the Tánaiste, the Government and, indeed, all parties in the House to support this Bill and bring our laws on remote working into the 21st century. Irish workers deserve nothing less.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The very point of the existence of the Labour Party is to protect the worker against exploitation. Protecting the worker means that, at times and circumstances change, legislation has to change. Things do not stay the same. That is why when we bring forward proposed legislation in the House it is always with an eye on the worker, the reality of the vulnerability of many people who are at work and that often employees can be exploited.

There is no greater exploitation than to insist that workers never stop working, always have to be switched on and are constantly under some kind of employer surveillance and must answer emails, be at the end of the phone and be constantly contactable and have to second guess whether they can spend free time with family, children, leave the house or even go on holiday, which, it is to be hoped, can happen again soon. This always on culture is incredibly corrosive. It is very difficult for people to manage the terms of the mental health.

It means people are never free of their employer. They cannot really have a work-life balance. Rather, they work and work and work from the moment they wake up. In the modern world the first thing people probably do before they even turn to their partner is look at their phone. For many people in work, a message will be waiting to be answered. When an email comes in in the evening, there is an expectation that it will be answered.

If people do not answer a call or an email or respond to communication from an employer there are consequences. The chances of advancement in a job will be curtailed. The feeling is that people have to be responsive and always be in a position to answer. That is not good for anybody's productivity, work-life balance or a society or a country that is trying to raise a society that is at ease with herself. It is not good that all people who are trying to have a fully rounded existence do is work.

This is not just a Monday to Friday phenomenon; it is all the time. It involves weekends. If emails, messages or phone calls come in on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday the expectation is that they must be responded to. Junior employees on low wages want to protect their jobs and career advancement. There has to be an absolute right in legislation to switch off. Only a

few countries in the European Union have this right, but Ireland has to legislate for the right to switch off.

Workers have a right to not always have to be working. Workers have a right to free time. They should be able to put a phone or laptop away or closed down a computer without feeling that they will lose out in terms of their employment advancement prospects.

We can have legislation, but employers will know that while there may be a right not to answer an email an employee will feel that he or she has to. Employers have to have policies laid down by legislation to ensure that employees can point to the policies and say that they were working within company policy and they did not respond to an email or phone call. If people were to respond to an email or phone call, that would be designated as work and people would be paid for it accordingly. We could have a much more productive society that would work better for employees and employers if there was a basic right to switch off.

In terms of remote working, we are again lagging behind many of our EU colleagues in not having legislation to cover this area. As stated by my party leader, Deputy Alan Kelly, the number of people working from home has grown from 200,000 at the beginning of year to 800,000 at this point.

It is the more vulnerable workers who we are worried about, namely, people who are working at the end of a bed, in a bedroom that they may share with a sibling or in an overcrowded space. Socialisation in work, workplace mingling, sharing stories and coffee culture will be important for many people as they go out into the world. They are losing out on that, which is very unfortunate.

We have to have protections for younger workers. Employers have to step up and ensure employees are protected or have the resources within their homes in order to do their work to a sufficient standard. Far too many children in this country do their homework at the end of stairs or lying on their stomachs in front of the television due to overcrowding. That is also the reality for many of our workers.

As we move forward, try to battle our way through this pandemic, rebuild our economy and consider a post-Covid Ireland, that is where the attention of the Government needs to turn in terms of how we will reconstruct our society and economy once the pandemic has subsided. Are we just going to revert back to where we were? One of the tragedies of the last crisis was that we just went back to where we were, which was certainly the case with the housing market. I plead with Government not to make the same mistake again. Huge societal issues have been exposed by this pandemic that need to be rectified and a radical approach to this is going to be necessary. It may be desirable in the future that many people will work from home. This would ensure that many of our rural towns will keep their young people, will ensure that this drift to large urban centres is not necessary, will ensure that we do not have this crazy traffic gridlock every day in many other urban centres and if it is their wish and their wont workers can legitimately work from home in the future. This is something that may be desirable from an environmental perspective but we have to have laws, regulations and legislation laid down in order to protect and encourage workers and to also encourage employers in that scenario.

We ask that the Tánaiste might instil some vision into Government policy to look forward into this post-Covid-19 space about how our economy and workers might work.

In summary, the Labour Party wants, as always, to protect the worker. As work and employ-

ment practices change we want to protect those employees. We cannot have a situation where the only way people can live their lives effectively and earn a salary is never to stop working. We cannot stand over that. Unfortunately, in our party, we view the potential for employers to exploit is very high which is not something that we say lightly. It is our experience and the experience of many people on our side of the argument that employers have a chequered history of exploitation when it comes to the worker if they are allowed get away with it. This new phenomenon of always being “on” is a classic example of where an employer has an opportunity to squeeze more and more out of a worker. The only chance outside of a trade union - we know that we have restricted trade union and collective bargaining rights in Ireland - is that the State would do something in order to protect workers. The Labour Party exists in order to provide a legislative backing to the trade union movement. It is why we are here, is why we introduce legislation like this and why we hope the Government will look at it in a positive manner, unlike other legislation we have brought forward. Workers have the right to switch off and to have protections under law when they work from home.

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle agus leis na Teachtaí. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue and I thank the Labour Party for using its time to discuss it today. The Government wants remote working, homeworking and blended working to become part of the new normal based primarily on choice. If done right the benefits will be significant in reduced business costs, better work-life balance, more balanced regional development, less traffic, fewer greenhouse gas emissions and time saved on the commute been used for a better purpose. Surveys done so far indicate that perhaps 10% or 20% of employees are keen to get back to the office as soon as possible. Another 10% to 20% would like to work from home permanently. The majority of employees want blended working, working some days in the office and some days at home or some days in a remote hub. That is what we should try to strive to facilitate.

We all know that the overuse of phones and digital devices has been linked to everything from stress, burnout and sleeplessness as well as to strained personal relationships from that device that is always on and never more than a few metres away, buzzing, flashing and beeping. This is an experience that all of us are familiar with given the jobs that we do. Many people admit that they are glued to their phones and laptops late into the evening. This phenomenon predates the pandemic and the creeping intrusion of electronic communications far beyond the normal working day, even into mealtime, is not just about remote working, nor is it new. While there are clear advantages to flexible working and working remotely, a long-acknowledged potential downside to the use of mobile and other electronic communications devices is the expectation that we are always switched on, always contactable and always available. That is not how it should be.

I welcome the Labour Party Bill as an important contribution to the debate in this area and the Government will not be opposing the Bill this morning. I agree that we need to reduce the intrusion of work-related digital devices after working hours in order to balance workers’ professional and personal lives and we need to discuss how best we do that.

The Bill proposes to amend the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 to provide employees working remotely with the right to switch off from work-related electronic communications out of working hours and to disapply certain provisions of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. While supporting the central premise of this Private Members’ Bill, the proposed amendment to the Organisation of Working Time Act is quite rigid. It is important

to consider the value that many workers place on workplace flexibility. Electronic communications play a central role in enabling that flexibility. Any new arrangements would need to consider the specific needs of the company and also the personal needs of the staff member, both of which are important. For instance, it would be meaningless and counter-productive to prevent an employee systematically from connecting after 7 p.m. when he or she is part of an international team that needs to communicate with people in different time zones. Similarly, later evening access would be useful for an employee who wants to stop working between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. to take care of children and then reconnect in the evening when the children have gone to bed. People also often use their daily commute on a train or bus to get ahead of things before they arrive in the office. Being contactable and connected might actually allow that person to take that weekend away which might otherwise not be possible or to make it to children's match or school play.

At the company level, new business models and global value chains with just-in-time production require increased flexibility. That flexibility for businesses and workers is important and we need to ensure that we safeguard it but we also need to ensure that it is not abused and that the proverbial baby is not thrown out with the bathwater to make remote working harder not easier. The challenge perhaps lies in differentiating between the misuse and abuse of digital tools and legitimate working arrangements that permit connections outside of standard working hours, which is sometimes for the employees convenience as much as it is for the business's productivity.

Ireland also has a comprehensive body of employment legislation including the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 which already sets out maximum working time and minimum rest periods for employees. Apart from a few limited exceptions, the terms of the Act apply to all employees regardless of whether they are based in an office, at home, or working remotely. The Act places an obligation on employers to ensure that their employees take regular rest breaks and do not work excessive hours. Under section 25 of the Act, an employer is obliged to keep records of working time of their employees. These records are subject to inspection by the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. In practice, however, they still tend to operate on the old model in which work is done in a single designated workplace. We all know that has changed a great deal over the years.

That being said, I know that the right to disconnect has been a significant topic of debate both in Ireland and throughout Europe in recent years. There are several work strands to this issue which are already well underway. I should point out that commitments on remote working and indeed sick pay were made in the programme for Government published last June, none of which should be seen as a response to this Bill which came after that.

First, I will publish a remote working strategy before the end of the year. It will include proposals on a network of digital hubs to be built around the country, some of which are in place already, tax and expenses arrangements to facilitate remote working to ensure that the cost is borne fairly and benefits shared, the right to request work remotely and to have that considered properly and fairly, proposals on the right to disconnect and supports for businesses to make the digital transition.

Second, my office is currently examining the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 in the context of the right to disconnect to consider deficiencies in the legislative framework that should be remedied. I recently asked the WRC to examine what can be done through the development of a new code of practice or set of guidelines to ensure that both employers and

employees are aware of their existing requirements and entitlements under the Organisation of Working Time Act. It is important that employers and employees alike understand the existing requirements and entitlements as they relate to the right to disconnect, including in a remote work scenario. I am conscious that any changes in this area need to strike a balance and to be based on consultation between employers and employees. That is how the best laws are made. I will discuss the national remote working strategy and the issues arising from it, including the right to disconnect, with unions and employer bodies this afternoon at a meeting of the leave subgroup which I chair in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

I turn to the proposals for safety and health legislation. The underlying principle of the occupational safety and health legislation in Ireland is that workers enjoy the same basic entitlement to a safe and healthy work environment regardless of their status. Equally, all employers have the same basic duty of care to provide a safe and healthy work environment and to ensure work practices are conducted in as safe a manner as possible. While I accept the good intentions behind this Bill, my officials and I have some concerns that the proposed amendments could disapply aspects of the occupational safety and health legislation, may have the effect of compromising our robust legislative protections and could compromise the employer-employee relationship. It could actually diminish workers' rights in some circumstances and create new inequality between public and private sector workers, which we believe is undesirable. I appreciate that neither of these things is the intention of the Bill. Perhaps they can be teased out at the committee in pre-legislative scrutiny.

If people have difficulty or concern relating to the provision of a safe working environment when working from home, these concerns should be brought directly to the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, in the first instance because it can provide tailored, practical advice. I am confident that many genuine concerns can already be resolved within existing legal protections and we are keen to see more real-life cases being examined by the HSA and the WRC to test the effectiveness of existing laws and procedures.

One of the positive effects of our debates on our upcoming remote working strategy will be to encourage conversations between employers and their staff, with people working together to explore and agree what their expectations are, and, more importantly, to understand what their obligations are. At the very least, I believe every workplace should have a remote working policy dealing with matters such as the right to disconnect.

I think there is strong agreement across the House that remote working is a positive thing in the round and a general agreement on the issues we need to work on. The sudden shift to remote working this year, prompted by the pandemic, means that what might have happened in ten or 15 years happened in the course of a few days. It means that we as policymakers must now play catch-up. I am keen to move ahead as quickly as possible, starting with the publication of the remote working strategy next month, and I look forward to working with colleagues on these issues over the coming months.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I welcome the Tánaiste's statement to the effect that the Government will not oppose the Bill on Second Stage. That is a welcome move. We welcome the fact that the national remote working strategy group will meet today. That is important. What we want to do with this Bill is ensure we enshrine the right to switch off in law while at the same time recognising that flexibilities need to be built in for individuals in their workplaces as befits their circumstances and in concert with their employers. Nobody is arguing against that flexibility. Working mothers, in particular, and commuters need to have that blend so that they can

go to the office or work from home as needs be. Childcare is an essential component, especially for working mothers and working families. We have seen the evidence of the effects of the first lockdown for working mothers. Research from the National Women's Council showed that it was having a detrimental effect and leading to stressful situations for working mothers who were literally working all hours and, in the first lockdown, having to take care of children. It affected working mothers in the main.

We want the principle of the right to switch off to be enshrined in legislation. We want to improve the rights of workers by providing employees who work remotely with the right to switch off from out-of-hours work-related electronic communications. This is important for their mental health, for those caring for children and for other vulnerable people who need support. I note the points made by the Tánaiste in respect of the Organisation of Working Time Act. It is important to note that nobody is seeking to amend that such that every employee would not be entitled to at least 11 hours of rest in every 24 hours and every employer would not permit his or her employee to work for more than 48 hours in a week under that Act. Nobody is talking about amending that Act to the detriment of workers, lest the impression be conveyed that that is the case.

The Tánaiste referred to some concerns that he had in respect of the diminution of workers' rights, which is absolutely not the case in this legislation. We seek to strengthen the rights of workers; allow for a new paradigm to exist whereby people are, by necessity, working from home; and ensure we do not have a dystopian future. We have seen evidence of employers monitoring workers at home through the use of applications of Time Doctor, ActivTrak, TerraMind and StaffCop, where surveillance applications are being applied to workers who work at home at all hours of day and night. We want to ensure that we as a Legislature legislate for the new phenomenon in a way that protects workers' rights and allows for some protection from the point of view of both occupational health and safety and ensuring the Organisation of Working Time Act is applied and strengthened.

Deputy Ged Nash: The cost of working from home has shifted from the boardroom to the back bedroom. Many of the up to 800,000 workers who have done some or all of their work from home since late March can attest to this. Approximately 36% of the entire labour force is in this position. A recent survey by Taxback.com has shown that nearly nine in ten remote workers have seen an increase in household expenses in recent months. This includes broadband connection costs and more utility bills, such as the additional cost of home heating, which will further increase during the cold winter months. The question is who should shoulder the burden of this cost. It should not be the householder, whose home now doubles as his or her workplace.

The home working tax relief was a little known rebate, known only to a few before Covid-19 hit our shores. For many, it is not an easy relief to navigate. Some people have told me that they have needed the support of friends who are accountants to get their claim in order. Even if they manage to get their claim in order, the meagre amount on offer is hardly worth their while as it fails to cover a fair fraction of the increased costs associated with working from home.

I heard calls this week from some Independent Deputies at the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, for enhanced tax credits to support those who are working from home to meet their additional costs and to help to purchase equipment. This proposal got very short shrift from the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, thankfully, and from me. Taxpayers, including those who cannot work from home, should not be supplementing the

bottom line of large companies that shift the cost of remote working on to the employee and therefore, indirectly, on to the State. Legally, as the Tánaiste has outlined, the employer still has an occupational health and safety duty of care to the employee, as some significant working time cases have confirmed, and in our view, the employer ought to provide the desk, the safe chair, the safe working space and the IT equipment to ensure that people can discharge their duties, whether they are working in the office directly, working from home or working in their local pub. Companies have to pay their fair share and it must be made compulsory for employers to contribute to the costs of remote working.

As well as the clear financial costs, there are clear social costs to working from home, particularly for women, who still bear an unfair and disproportionate share of the unpaid domestic workload. Repeated surveys, with which the Tánaiste will be familiar, have shown the challenge of juggling childcare with work commitments for remote workers, which relates largely to the woeful inadequacy of affordable and accessible childcare provision in this country. This alone will not be enough. We need to ensure that parents have the time and mental space to be present with their children outside of their assigned working hours, and to do this we have to ensure that the lines between home and work life do not become so blurred that they simply merge into one. The right to switch off is a key tenet of our Bill. It will ensure that working parents have a better work-life balance and are never forced to choose between their work and family in their free time.

Our movement, as my colleague, Deputy Ó Ríordáin, stated earlier, has fought long and hard for the right to, for example, a five-day week and paid holidays. Advances in technology were meant to liberate us from the workplace; instead, the technology enslaves us. The machines were supposed to work for us, but for too many workers in 2020 Ireland and throughout the world, we now work for the machines. The time has come to clock out of the always-on culture, which is what the Bill is all about. This is the new frontier and we have to conquer it for the benefit of our society and citizens throughout the country.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am sharing time. I thank the Deputies for introducing this legislation and providing the opportunity to have the discussion. Before I get into the substantive issue of the right to disconnect and the need to protect home workers, I must point out that for workers, the best defence against exploitation is to join a union and vote left. That was true in the 1940s, when my grandmother was a shop steward with the Irish Women Workers Union; in the 1950s, when my grandad was a shop steward with the Irish Transport and General Workers Union; and in the 1960s and 1970s, when my dad was organising with the National Bus and Rail Union. It was true when I was a shop steward and it remains true today. That does not mean we shirk our responsibility as legislators - it means that the best defence that working people have against exploitation, and the best chance they have of decent work, is to vote left. I refer not just to joining their trade unions but also to getting active in them, which is very important.

I will now address the issues raised by the legislation. Covid-19 has turned people's lives upside down. That is an established and unassailable fact for many workers, who may have been seeking for years the right to work from home and may have been engaging with their employers. As a former trade union official, I engaged with employers to seek remote working for workers, or a version of blended working, but it was resisted by employers. They felt that it would not work or that they would not get the same level of productivity out of a worker if he or she was off site. Overnight, people moved out of offices and had to work from home. That had a number of effects, one of which - I would say this, would I not? - was that it proved I was correct when I advocated for workers to be able to work from home, because productivity in-

creased. We saw that an attempt at a work-life balance for workers was much easier to achieve.

Another effect of the move to home working was that it exposed the conditions that many people live in. It is all very well for the Deputies to say somebody should have the right to a desk, but if he or she lives in an overcrowded apartment, where will he or she put the desk? The policies of successive Governments mean that generations of one family live in one house. This presents an opportunity to reimagine work but also to examine the lived reality. One of the Deputies mentioned “the lived reality”. For many, the lived reality is a trial because they just do not have the space, the facilities or perhaps the peace and quiet due to the presence of multiple generations in one home. We need to examine that and how workers can be supported.

The Tánaiste will be aware, because we have engaged on this on a number of occasions, that I think we need to consider providing remote hubs for people, not in industrial estates but in the main street, where people can avail of facilities such as broadband, which many people do not have at home, so that they can work remotely. It is not only about working from home; it is also about not commuting and the capacity to be able to work remotely. The Tánaiste does not disagree with me on this and I look forward to having a broader engagement with him and his Department about these hubs. They will form a vital part of the issue. Nobody wants to spend hours upon hours commuting. Covid-19 has shown that workers are productive, that the boss can get what he or she needs and that we can avoid the commute. To do that, however, we need to recognise that for many people, working from home is not an option. We know well that the rules on the minimum space allowed for an apartment were changed. Many people, therefore, live in tiny spaces. Where will they put their desks and how will they manage to work from home? They need to be accommodated.

I might just mention legislation I will publish later in respect of the carry-over of annual leave. Similar legislation was brought in by the British Government. The UK Organisation of Working Time Act is more or less the same as ours. It was brought in because it was deemed necessary and I believe it is necessary here. One thing we have learned because of the pandemic is what an essential worker really is. When I was growing up, if someone had asked me what an essential worker was, I probably would have said a nurse, a garda or somebody such as a firefighter or someone perceived to be on the front line in that way. The pandemic showed us, however, that supply chain workers, cleaners and people in retail are also essential workers and many of them have been working considerably more than their contracted hours. They have annual leave they may not be able to take because the pandemic has not gone and we still need them.

I hope that other parties will support our legislation when it is tabled because it is important to be able to carry forward annual leave if the person has not been able to take it in this leave year. While many employers might facilitate that, many will not. I do not think anybody in the House would like to think of people storing up annual leave simply because they cannot take time off, as essential workers, and are not able to get the benefit of the leave. The benefit of the leave is the time off, not necessarily the money in exchange for the leave. Many people will want the time, which is worth a great deal more to them. One thing the pandemic has exposed is the nature of essential work. Essential workers are not just the people who, traditionally, we would have assumed were essential workers. They are, in fact, the people doing the cleaning, the people in supply chains, the people in retail and all the others who kept us going during the pandemic.

The issue of remote working and the right to disconnect is one the Tánaiste and I have

discussed previously. I acknowledge the work done by the Financial Services Union, the Communication Workers Union, SIPTU, Fórsa and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. There is no reason to delay. They have been working away on this and have the facts, the figures and the statistics. They can point to international examples and they know how easily it can be done, but they also know how important it is that it is done. If a worker cannot switch off and does not have the right to do so, he or she will be always in work. That will take a toll while the person tries to do everything else that he or she has to do. Workers need the right to switch off, to turn off their devices and to know there will be no comeback. A couple of wits responded to me on Twitter by saying workers could just switch off their phones. It is all very well to say that, but without the right to do that there can be consequences.

It is important that we are having this debate. I welcome the Deputies tabling the legislation and I look forward to working with them to get it through the House because it is an extremely important tool that workers need.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: As a former shop steward, I, too, thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this Bill. It is a Pauline conversion by the party that facilitated the imposition of austerity on ordinary workers and their families, but it is a welcome conversion nonetheless.

Last week, my colleague, the Sinn Féin spokesperson on enterprise, trade, employment and workers' rights, Deputy Louise O'Reilly, introduced a similar Bill to give workers a legal right to disconnect from work outside their working hours. Covid-19 has highlighted the huge change in work practices that has been gradually inching its way towards home working for those who can do it.

The number of people working from home regularly has more than trebled as a result of the pandemic. It may be one of the few positives from this pandemic that some of the thousands of employees who left Kildare and Laois for work every morning will no longer have to make that journey when all this comes to an end. That will have a major benefit on their work-life balance and on our planet. However, these developments, if left unregulated, can sometimes end up being damaging and stress inducing and may make jobs more difficult. Countless workers have spoken of how they are exhausted and stressed in their job due to their employers contacting them late at night and requesting a task be completed for an online meeting the next morning. Many have reported an always-on culture where workers are expected to be contactable and available to respond to work emails, calls and messages at every hour of the day, seven days a week. Reading emails and messages outside of our normal working day can make it difficult to let go of work-related stress, especially for those home workers who do not have the luxury of a separate work space as it can influence their mental health, affect their mood and sleep patterns and intrude on family time.

There has been a strong campaign among trade unions to deliver a right to disconnect for workers. I commend the work of the unions on highlighting that. Employers need to put in place a right to disconnect policy to establish the hours when employees are not supposed to send or answer work-related emails, texts or calls. We need to protect our workers and their mental health. They deserve nothing less.

Deputy Thomas Gould: As a former shop steward, I welcome this Bill. As the Minister has heard, working from home needs to be recognised as a specific form of work. For some people, working from home is great but for others it is a nightmare. We need to recognise that and put in place protections to ensure that those who are working from home do not lose out on

rights and entitlements.

The labour market think-tank, Eurofound, found that Ireland had one of the highest rates of working from home in Europe during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. It also found that in terms of working from home, the work-life balance was particularly difficult for people who had children under the age of 17, and it was noted that it affected women more adversely. We all know that working from home has its challenges, but overcrowding in homes across this State has disadvantaged many people who are trying to work from home. That especially affects women.

As difficult as it can be to concentrate on work, and we all have those days, can we imagine how difficult it is for some people to concentrate if they are sharing a small home with their mother, grandmother or children? We expect people to work in conditions where there is noise and chaos, with everyone on top of each other in small rooms of a small house.

We are in the midst of the worst housing crisis in the history of this State, which has seen generations of families living together in overcrowded accommodation. We are also seeing young professionals being forced to live in battery cage, disgracefully cramped conditions. Some of them go to work to get out of that accommodation and we are now expecting them to work in it. It is not sustainable or feasible for those people to do that. When they can simultaneously cook their dinner, put on the washing and lie in their studio apartment, it is understandable that working from home presents unique challenges and sets of difficulties for different people.

Without ensuring that every person in this State has a proper home, we are putting people at a disadvantage. Their work and their prospects will suffer, and long-term harm will be done. People need a right to switch off. It is to be hoped this Bill will give people the right to do that.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill and I commend the Labour Party on bringing it forward. The fact that the Government will not oppose it is welcome.

I read the explanatory note on the Bill and in the crisis we are in, this is probably one of the times where we could use the common-sense approach. Many speakers referred to the stress of working, whether at home, in the office or travelling to and from work. There is a saying that a happy worker is a productive worker. There are many advantages in this legislation. The first section of the Bill, which provides the legal right to disconnect, is the vital component. As a politician, I try to switch off at the weekend but generally I do not because I feel I might let somebody down if they cannot contact me. "hen someone is contracted to work for a company, however, and it is their livelihood, there is a vital component in this in that having a happier, more family-friendly atmosphere should be of benefit to both the employer and the employee if they can work together.

Tweaks will have to be made to the Bill and it will go to the next Stage but the one aspect we have to address is that the majority of people who work from home use the Internet and we have a serious issue with rural broadband. Deputy O'Reilly spoke about hubs in towns, which is an excellent idea. It is about providing anything that can allow us move forward in that regard.

Section 2 refers to the Organisation of Working Time Act. That is vital because when people are employed, they feel obliged to answer the phone 24-7 to their employer, which should not be the case. It is about giving people boundaries. If people have some form of normality in life and they are happy in work, they are happy to do the work. When they are less stressed, hassled

and there is less deflection, they can concentrate on what they are employed and paid to do.

There is an in-depth explanation of the Bill and I could speak about that for the next half an hour, but in terms of conditions and so on, I believe this Bill will be of benefit to both employers and employees. There are many other benefits to working from home such as less commuting, less hassle and a better atmosphere. Many years ago I worked in construction. My children were six and seven years of age. I was 16 years with the company but I left it because I was not seeing my children enough due to working away from home. There are huge benefits in this Bill. It is self-explanatory. I again commend the Labour Party on bringing forward the Bill. I hope to God it will come to fruition and benefit everybody in society at what is probably the worst time we have ever witnessed in the history of the planet, but we have come to the stage where we are planning for the future, and that has to be welcomed.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank the Deputies for bringing forward this legislation. The first part of the Bill, which aims to strengthen workers' rights within the current context of Covid-19, is very welcome. It is widely accepted now that work-life balance is fundamentally important.

11 o'clock

With advances in technology and people being accessible more easily we must catch up in law and make sure a worker's right to disconnect from work is protected. Workers' rights are something I have long fought for as a member of Unite. I know all too well the importance of the power of collective bargaining, when ordinary workers come together to protect themselves and their working conditions.

As the Bill sets out clearly, any time spent by an employee in accessing, considering and responding to work-related electronic communications is working time. This is the message we must embed in this important legislation. It cannot be the case that employees are put in a position that phone calls or emails are extra work time, whereby the employer benefits from an employee's attention outside of working time and it should be considered as such. The issue of the right to disconnect is being examined at European level, with the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions stating it is important to get it right in terms of work-life balance and safeguarding workers' health and safety. It is my understanding that France and Italy have already legislated for this matter, which demonstrates that a legislative precedent is set.

My colleague, Deputy Louise O'Reilly, introduced a Bill to the House to deal with this matter and I commend her on her work on this. Her legislation would make it a requirement that employers put in place a right to disconnect policy to establish the hours when employees are not supposed to send or answer work-related emails, texts or calls. This would be put in place in consultation with the employees and, where applicable, the relevant trade union. It, therefore, would allow employees to waive the right to disconnect but only with their consent. This is a very important principle, as it means the employees and their unions should be at the centre of discussions on when they are available outside of working hours in times when they might be in need of flexibility. This principle should be remembered when we are debating legislation on workers' rights to disconnect. Flexibility is sometimes necessary but not at the expense of the employees' well-being and safety. I am happy to support the legislation in principle as it strengthens workers' rights. I hope we can continue to respond to our changing working environments due to this pandemic by keeping workers' rights, safety and conditions

as core values in our society.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I thank the Labour Party for using its time to bring forward this legislation. In 2019, the CSO reported that 18% of people in Ireland were working from home, mostly one or two days a week. These people generally worked in large companies, with home working more prevalent in the multinational sector. The pandemic changed everything. Overnight, whole industries moved to remote working. In July, a survey conducted by Microsoft indicated that 72% of organisations had implemented remote working policies. The latest CSO labour force survey indicates that 36% of the workforce is working from home and while the figure will shift as restrictions change there is no doubt a significant proportion of the workforce will continue to work from home when we emerge from this pandemic.

An NUIG survey in October showed that 94% were in favour of working remotely on an ongoing basis for some or all of the time, which was an increase from 83% at the start of the pandemic. The number of people who want to work remotely every day is 27%, which is more than double the findings of the previous survey, which was 12%. A total of 23% of those asked said they would think of relocating due to the ability to work from home and 7% have already moved. We need to think about housing policy from this point of view. Covid has really raised even more serious questions about the whole issue of co-living than there were to begin with. Housing policy is part of what we need to consider.

We also need to bear in mind that there will be shifting attitudes on this as people change and get used to a different form of work. We have to take a long view on this and look at the data. There is a clear need for a suite of legislation in this area. Policies designed for an office environment will not always suit a home environment. Extending current policies to home creates many grey areas for workers and employers. Who is liable if a worker is injured at home if they develop posture injuries from poor seating? Many studies have examined the extent of remote working and its impact on workers and there are clear divides in the research. Research carried out by employers and employers' groups tends to be more positive towards remote working than research carried out by unions. We have to pay attention to this. Issues of people with neck strain and other such issues because of not having the correct type of equipment are very serious.

Fórsa carried out a survey in August, which indicated serious challenges. Its survey of 4,000 public sector workers revealed that more than 80% of those who favour home working want a hybrid arrangement, whereby people can work between home and the workplace. Just over a quarter, at 28% of those surveyed, said a manager had asked them about their home working set-up from a health and safety perspective. I would have thought that would be a standard practice. One third said their employer had not provided the necessary equipment and, significantly, a minority of 12% have no access to essential technology such as broadband. We all hear from people who have to drive to sit outside somewhere so they can work from their car.

Home working is not as popular among young workers aged under 30, which suggests where they live matters with regard to sharing or being in a family home setting. A survey carried out by the Financial Services Union, FSU, in April and May showed challenges for people working from home. This survey of home working staff revealed that 44% feel pressure to answer calls and emails outside of working hours and 56% have seen an increase in work intensity. A total of 66% reported an increase in work-related stress. Research carried out by the University of Limerick in 2019 for the FSU revealed that one in four workers in the banking and finance sector is expected to answer calls and emails outside of working hours. There

really have to be controls on this.

New European research shows that almost 40% of EU workers started working from home during the confinement. The latest EU working conditions survey shows people regularly working are twice as likely to work 48 hours or more a week than those working in employer's premises. They are six times more likely to work in their free time and they are the groups of workers most likely to report waking up repeatedly during sleep. They are never able to shut off or differentiate between work and home.

Workers are entitled to security and safety at work. Safety at work must now extend far beyond the narrow parameters of the old. It must embrace positive mental health. No worker should be left feeling stressed and harassed by the demands of technology. Everyone is entitled to live their lives outside of the paid working day. There is also a presumption that workers are able to work from home and that they have the space, equipment, broadband and childcare necessary to do so safely. I do not know how many women I have spoken to, particularly young mothers, who feel their lives and entitlements have gone backwards. This is part of the reason many want a hybrid system.

We welcome the Bill but we want it to go further. We want to ensure that workers benefit from the power of technology and the increased flexibility it provides. This must include looking at options such as the right of workers to set their own hours. We also think a four day week is something that should be considered in this context. There is plenty of evidence to show it raises productivity. Burning out workers is the last thing that should happen. We want to ensure people have access to high-quality hubs based in local communities, which can provide a positive working environment and promote local investment. We must ensure the voices of workers and their communities are central in the shaping of the future of work. The Government has an opportunity to give workers a valuable forum through sectoral task forces and it should set out in the national economic plan how it intends to do this. The model of excluding workers from task forces which will determine their future, as we have seen with the task force on tourism, is not satisfactory. We cannot leave economic policy to employers alone; it is too important for that. Ireland's way of dealing with the rise in remote working has been to continue the voluntarist model of industrial relations. Too often, the Government presents an opt-out model and employers opt out. If we are serious about giving workers a voice, we must introduce proper collective bargaining legislation and ensure that workers are represented at board level.

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is clear that in the best traditions of capitalism, many employers and firms in this current crisis have decided not to waste a good crisis. For them the pandemic is seen as an opportunity to wrestle greater productivity from workers. One study suggests that the productivity of workers working from home has risen dramatically, by up to around 13%. This change, from one end, avoids long commutes and expensive travel for workers, but that advantage has been wiped out by employers enforcing long hours and placing greater demands on workers to work for longer. The expense of that work, in terms of the work space and the electricity, heating and Internet costs, etc., are piled onto the worker. Even at this stage of the Covid crisis, we see that this may be a permanent change that many employers want, and many workers may want it, but it should be a choice for them. There is cost to it in terms of the physical and mental health of workers, their relationships and the impact it has on their families. Therefore, this Bill is welcome. The State has an obligation to regulate and put in place safeguards for workers, but there is a problem, because this State has never liked regulating any spheres of the workplace. Workplace safety and regulation were outliers in terms of enforcement and the impact of our regulatory bodies. This is especially true when it comes to

the rights of workers. We pretend that there are two equal sides in the workplace, namely, the employer and the worker, and we talk about a voluntarist model of industrial relations. That really is code for the odds being stacked against workers. There is still no statutory right to union recognition, no statutory pay scheme or an obligation on employers to fund one, and we have one of the lowest rates of employer PRSI contributions in Europe. None of this is an accident. It is planned and it has been the outcome of policies of consecutive, conservative governments led by the two big parties and sometimes half a party in coalition with them - traditionally that has been Labour Party but currently, it is the Green Party. We face a problem. We are debating the need for real change to regulate the frontiers of exploitation in workplaces and the new workplace being at home for many workers, but we have a very poor record and have utterly failed to regulate many spheres for workers.

I want to return to the issue of productivity, because productivity growth is very obvious and there are benefits for the employer from the working from home model, but it is not surprising that this is not being passed onto workers. A recent study showed that in respect of the share of the national output in terms of wages, in 1995, 55% went to workers, and by 2015 that had dropped to 44%, and we have seen the biggest drop in the 37 countries surveyed by the OECD, which provided the data. Workers here remain some of the most productive in Europe, but according to the National Competitiveness Council, Irish productivity rates and levels have been above the OECD average and Ireland has had the bigger output among the OECD countries, but we have not seen that in terms of wages. If workers are to work from home, if decent legislation is passed to protect their rights, where, then does the increased productivity get paid back to them? There is a need for trade union organisation, for the recognition of trade unions and for the right to free collective bargaining, because all the benefits will all end up going one way.

We welcome the Bill, but do so with no illusions on the task ahead, that to turn the tide on the exploitation of workers in this country, we have to rebuild the trade union movement and rebuild parties so that workers are really represented in this House.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Workers want to live; they do not just want to exist and to live to work. They deserve not just decent wages, but also a proper work-life balance. In recent years we have seen big corporations trying to squeeze every last drop of energy and productivity out of their workforces, expecting them to be always on and always available. Instead of freeing people up to live their lives, new technologies are being used tighten the screws, to increase the control of the employer, to decrease the autonomy of workers and to chip away at workers' personal time. That has to stop.

Workers deserve a right to disconnect, to clock off and to leave their work at work. The unions have been fighting for this, and in other countries the right to disconnect has been won. However, the Irish bosses and their representatives in government have opposed such a right for any workers. Corporate lobbyist IBEC argued during the election that, "any legislative intervention on working time is likely to bring unhelpful rigidity to an increasingly flexible world of work." Of course, the bosses view any rights for workers or regulation on businesses as unhelpful rigidity. In their books, they miss the flexible world of work that existed 100 years ago, where workers had no rights, where they were picked off the docks by corporations and the corporations controlled their lives. Unfortunately, we know that when corporate lobbyists tell the Government to jump, they are asked, "How high?" To fight against it, we need a legal right for workers to disconnect, as proposed here today, but more, we need strong and fighting trade unions, and a left government with socialist policies willing to take on the corporations.

Workers' rights must also be put front and centre in the discussion around working from home. With Covid, we have seen many businesses that could and should allow employees to work from home, refusing to do so, instead insisting on their workers putting their health at risk by travelling into the office. Other companies are telling people to work from home, but are not providing the necessary supports for their workers to do that. Working from home means extra costs: desks, chairs, equipment, and let us not forget, light and heating bills. Instead of the company paying to heat the office, the worker pays to heat their own home. Keeping the lights on and the radiators warm all day adds hundreds of euro more to the cost of living, and too often that is falling on the shoulders of workers. Instead, bosses must be made to cover that cost. The €3.20 per day work from home payment will be welcome and should be mandatory for employers to pay, but even that will not cover the full cost, as it based on 10% of the cost of home bills, but if one is working from home for 40 hours or more per week, it is much more than 10%. It is time to protect workers and workers' rights, not just now during Covid, but in the long run, too. Proper supports for those working from home will be an important first step towards this.

Finally, I have a general point. The Covid crisis is likely to have massive long-term impacts on how people work and want to work. An idea whose time has come is that of moving to a four-day week, or a 30-hour week, without loss of pay. We have seen a massive increase in the productivity of workers, but wages have stagnated over recent decades while working hours have been increased. In other words, the surplus is being hoovered up by the bosses. It is time for workers to demand a shorter working week without loss of pay. A move to a four-day week would not just improve people's living standards and their work-life balance, but it would also have major environmental benefits in reducing emissions.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Prior to the pandemic, there were remote workers in roughly one in ten households, but today there are remote workers in four out of ten households. This is as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic. While Covid-19 and the resultant lockdowns will peter out over the next 18 months or so, remote working is now becoming mainstream. It is going to be a key part of our future working environment, as will the issue of blended working, where people will work at home for a number of days per week, may hotdesk for other days in the week and may go into the corporate headquarters of their company one day per week, one day per fortnight, or a couple of days per month. All this is being brought about by the significant investment taking place as part of the national broadband plan and we have already seen the commercial investment that has been stimulated by the action of Government. We now have a situation where close to four out of five homes in this country have access to high-speed broadband and over the next couple of years the remaining cohort of the population will get access to high-speed broadband.

One particular issue is not getting the attention it should whereby some homes will be left behind and as a result those people will not be able to work remotely. Some are not able to work remotely now. Some will not be able to work remotely in the future because they will not have the capacity within their broadband network. The resale value of their house will be significantly undermined if they do not have access to a high-speed broadband network.

From next month, National Broadband Ireland, NBI, is rolling out fibre-optic cable to communities right across this country. People need to check their colour on the national broadband plan map on the Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie. People in dark blue areas on that map who do not get a minimum of 30 Mbps consistently, day and night, need to report this to the Department and have the national broadband plan adapted so they are included in the State intervention element.

We are talking about 80,000 homes in towns and villages and even in the centre of this city that do not have access to high-speed broadband at the moment. We are currently dependant on operators reporting difficulties in connecting homes in order for those homes to be included on the State intervention element of the national broadband plan. Unless people check their colour code and report it along with their Eircode to the Department, they could end up being left behind.

I have had instances of people saying they are not getting 30 Mbps, but it is grand and it will do them fine. It will do them fine at the moment but in four or five years' time, when their neighbours on either side have fibre-optic cable and connect up all their devices - heating, lighting, audio and television systems along with working from home - those people will not be able to do the same. Those people will not be able to sell their home because they do not have access to that fibre and all because they shoved their hand in their pockets back in 2020 and said saying they would be alright.

It is imperative that people act now with regard to it. We have an ideal time during the lockdown to do that because significant demand is being put on fibre and on broadband capacity at the moment. If, therefore, people are going to have problems with their broadband, it will be now. I strongly urge every single home in the country to go onto the national broadband plan website at www.broadband.gov.ie and check the colour code. If their area is dark blue on the website and they do not get a minimum of 30 Mbps day and night then they need to report that quickly. National Broadband Ireland is now beginning to pass homes and once it has passed it may not necessarily come back to those particular communities and those individuals could lose out. They could be left without high-speed broadband in the future and could be in a situation where they will be unable to sell their homes.

Those who find their home is in an amber area on the national broadband plan website need to do two things. They need to go to the National Broadband Ireland website and register their Eircode so they will be updated on when the broadband is coming to their home and community. They need to look at how that fibre cable is going to come from the nearest pole to their front door. The slowest element of delivery of the national broadband plan is connecting it from the pole to the door. People need to decide if it is coming via the pole and the existing line of sight from the pole to their house. If so, they need to make sure their trees are pruned back. They cannot prune those back between March and September so they need to do that work now rather than looking at the fibre-optic cable on the pole outside their door and waiting until September until they can be connected.

If they are connecting by duct, they should check a duct is in place or go onto the National Broadband Ireland website. The specifications are there for anyone who is building a new home or putting down a new driveway so that person can put the ducting in place now in advance the contractor coming. It is imperative that people do not sit back but that they act quickly and check their colour code on the national broadband plan website and ensure they get delivery of a high-speed broadband solution for their home. They will be able to work remotely in future and their family and the future generation will not be left behind. They will not be in a situation where if that property is disposed of in the future it will be unsellable because they do not have access to what will be a basic piece of infrastructure, that is, high-speed broadband.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about working at home. To be honest, everybody's dream is to be able to work at home but, unfortunately, in my constituency it is not a reality. It is the type of country in which we live. Many other politicians

have spoken to the Minister of State about communication and the need for a proper broadband service.

We do not have a proper broadband service in west Cork. We must ask many questions about how ComReg acts because there are many issues with regard to Eir. My office is inundated with issues regarding Eir. It is untouchable. Everybody is standing back and ComReg seems to be afraid in to take it on. It is a body which is paid a hell of a lot of money in this country and it has little answers for people who suffer great deals of anxiety around trying to work at home and who cannot do so.

There is a need for broadband whether it is in places like Sandycove in Kinsale, Kilmacsimon, around Inishannon and all the way back into Bantry. We have the same issue. We had a breakthrough, in fairness, for people who were trying to work from home in Gaggan. It became a national issue. They had to go to the local churchyard in Bandon to get a proper Internet service. I spent months with Three mobile and other operators to try to get that sorted and it took every bit of time we had. It took me six months but eventually, in fairness, Three mobile erected a mast that has given people maybe 100 Mbps of broadband in Gaggan, which is what they wanted. It was able to deliver that through this extra capacity being given out at present because of Covid-19. It is something we need to look at further.

I thank companies such as Digitalforge which has really given a fantastic broadband service. It is unfortunate it is up to a private operator to try to deliver a broadband service to the people of west Cork and most areas covered by Digitalforge. It provides a top class service to the best of its ability for a wireless operated company and gets little assistance from the Government. We need to focus on the wireless companies. Seeing as Eir and others cannot deliver broadband to the door, we need to look at those which can, such as Digitalforge. ComReg is paid by the State and needs to be answerable to the State.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In County Limerick, a person can look at the map and see the orange areas and all the different areas they say we have broadband. Nineteen houses built by the local authority in Patrickswell, which is within walking distance of Limerick, had no broadband. A company called Imagine offered to give them broadband because Eir could not give them a connection and claimed it could take two or three years. My office is inundated with calls from people saying they cannot get connections.

My office has an Eir connection and we did a small study on Eir. For the past two months we have been trying to contact Eir over a small issue in our office. We have nine hours of office time given to Eir and we are going around in circles. This is where our problem is. There is no infrastructure within Eir, and we depend on companies like Imagine to provide broadband to people in our areas.

There are factories in Kilmallock. Fibre broadband is provided in the town, including as far as the mart in Kilmallock, but Celtic Engineering, 100 yd behind the mart in Kilmallock, does not have broadband. Irema which is making masks for us does not have broadband. It is in an industrial estate 100 yd off the main route. The statistics that National Broadband Ireland is giving us are absolute bull. It is provided to the main routes and not going off the side routes. It is doing townlands; it is not coming off the main roads. The statistics being given to the Government are false.

As Deputies, we get calls every day identifying where the faults are and we are trying to

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patch it in, but Eir is not answering our calls. It is sending us around in circles and not doing its job. It advised us that in certain areas in County Limerick it will be seven years before people will get broadband. We then need to go to other companies to see if they will fill that gap. This is not right that 100 yd from a fibre cable, a factory with 300 or 400 workers cannot get connected to fibre broadband. Companies like Eir should be held accountable and give the proper statistics to the Government.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I also support the Bill. It is fine and dandy, and admirable. However, like previous speakers have said, we cannot do it because we do not have the facilities. ComReg should be stood down because it is useless, toothless and fruitless. I met one of them recently. I was aghast. I pulled in on the way home to get some diesel. I saw this massive jeep with a 202 registration with fancy decals probably worth €50,000. That is not what we want. The people want service. They need to be out there to insist that Eir is not doing it. Eir has abandoned the people. Eircom and Telecom Éireann were proud-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to be careful in his comments about Eir. No one from Eir is here.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We have more fresh air than we have Eir.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am just alerting the Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Someone has to say it and we are all saying it. My secretary often spends 50 minutes, an hour or more contacting Eir on behalf of unfortunate elderly people whose landlines are out for three or four months and they have no pendant alarm. It is a disgrace. That is the problem. I heard my secretary screaming down the phone, "Please do not switch me on to someone further." People are going around in a circle and it is all falsehoods and a waste of time. People out in the country now at this time of year when it is dark from 4 o'clock have no line for up to six months and they cannot get anyone at the end of it. It is a disgrace. It was the name of a service, but we do not have a service. It is a shame in 2020. We will be commemorating Michael Hogan and Bloody Sunday next week in the fight for Irish freedom. We are being raped and plundered by these companies which are getting millions. There is more talk about-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has used the word "rape". He is identifying companies and using the word "rape". Please-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I better sit down.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The reason we have the problem is that no one will deal with it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is okay. The Deputy can talk about the problem, but I ask him to withdraw the word.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I do not mean rape in the sense-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am talking about funding. I cannot use the word "pilfer" either, can I? I will sit down, so, and shut up. We have no service and it is a disgrace that people

cannot get a basic service to work from home. They cannot even work in the towns where they cannot get broadband, never mind working from home. It is all nice and dandy to talk about it, and the people will go back to the country and live in the hovels where they were. This is supposed to be a modern country. Once a year I go to Medjugorje in a Third World country. It has the best of broadband, and the best of water, and we cannot have it here after all the millions spent on it. It is shocking. I do not want to use those adjectives, but that is what is happening.

The people are being hoodwinked and blinded. There is no need for ComReg because it is not doing its job. If any of us were not doing our job we would be sent off by the electorate and hunted, and rightly so. People in a company not doing their job are cautioned, go through disciplinary procedures and get dismissed. However, these people can just drive around in their big jeeps having a good time and to hell with the people.

Deputy Joan Collins: I support this important and timely legislation. While the Labour Party brought the Bill into the Dáil today, it is a shame that when it was in power between 2011 and 2016 it could not have introduced similar legislation when it had the majority to get it passed.

Obviously the Covid pandemic has greatly increased the numbers of people working from home. Notwithstanding that, International Labour Organization figures show that just under 9% of the workforce were already working from home and it is a tendency that is likely to increase. It is a part of more flexible working arrangements, facilitated by the advancement in technology, the Internet, computers, smartphones and so on.

However, we have seen how flexible working arrangements, which might suit some workers, are increasingly used in a very abusive way by some employers. The use of zero hours, if-and-when contracts, part-time working and often a complete disregard of the Organisation of Working Time Act requirements for breaks both during and between shifts are major problems in the hospitality sector. The key area that is open to abuse in this situation is for employers to expect their workers to be permanently on call, which is already a reality for many workers. The right to disconnect is crucial. I know that Deputy O'Reilly has also introduced a Bill dealing specifically with that question. I urge Deputies to support that Bill, as I also do.

This Bill will ensure that the Organisation of Working Time Act, which provides a minimum of 11 hours of rest between shifts and a limit of 48 hours to the working week, and the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act will also apply to home workers. Legislation on workers' rights is extremely important and much more is required in this area. However, legislation is only one aspect of defending and advancing workers' rights. The question of enforcement is crucial as is the knowledge of those rights by individual workers. The key here is the right to be in a trade union and to have that trade union recognised by the employer. That trade union needs to represent the employee properly and be a fighting trade union.

Working from home can now mean workers being isolated, making it more difficult to interact with fellow workers and to act as a collective when negotiating with an employer. While supporting the Bill, I cannot overstate the importance of workers being in a union whether working in the employer's workplace or at home. I support the Bill.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the important Bill before us today, the Labour Party's Working from Home (Covid-19) Bill 2020. I am glad that the Government has accepted the Bill, but I am concerned that its inten-

tions for it might be slightly different from those of the Opposition.

Firstly, having the Bill will probably create a more positive working environment for everyone here. The ushers, service officers, people working in the questions office, parliamentary reporters, cleaners, political staff and others as essential workers are required to be here very often until completely unreasonable hours. Employment and working standards here should be setting the benchmark to be reached in other workplaces across the island. Listening to RTÉ's "Today with Claire Byrne" show recently, and talking to any of the many cogs in this big wheel, would make one wonder about how compliant the Houses of the Oireachtas Service is with our own obligations under employment legislation.

The issues of the right to switch off and the access that employers have to employees have become far more prevalent in this digital era. Having our work emails synced to our mobile phones or iPads or just the one mobile phone for personal use as well as work use, for example, have all blurred the lines of when someone is or should be available for work.

The all-important work-life balance has been steadily eroded over recent years with the capitalist society pushing us all to work longer hours and be more available to employers, clients and colleagues at all times of day or night even while on annual leave. With Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael constantly pushing up the pension age, when do we think we will get the opportunity to relax and spend time with family? I am a strong advocate of the Four Day Week Ireland campaign and look forward to seeing it gain momentum. A four-day week would represent real change for workers.

Covid-19 has changed how we work. Overnight, people were asked to stay home and to work from home, while schools and crèches closed. People were expected to juggle their caring responsibilities while working a full, productive day from home. Many were also struggling with broadband connections, access to necessary IT infrastructure and the constant "sorry, you're on mute there" refrain on Zoom calls. People's normal working hours became skewed and I fear that this new flexibility and accessibility of employees will be abused by employers. Instead of this being a positive opportunity to address the benefits of remote working and flexible working hours, it has generally been used to squeeze as much productivity out of people while ignoring any negative impacts on their mental health.

There is a gender aspect to this also. Research this year has shown that even in cases where both parents are working from home, it is still the woman in the relationship who is taking on most of the unpaid work and caring duties. A recent survey by Eurofound, the labour market think tank, found that Ireland had one of the highest rates of employees working from home during the pandemic. Around 40% of paid hours worked by employees were undertaken at home, while the figure in Belgium was highest at 52%. The survey also showed that people working from home who had children under 17 were most likely to experience work, life conflict, with an article in *The Irish Times* reporting that this conflict was most notable for women. The article noted that 22% of respondents working exclusively from home reported difficulty concentrating on work because of family obligations, compared to 8% of those working in other locations.

Working from home has the potential to increase participation in the workforce by people with disabilities and with caring responsibilities, as well as by those living outside of cities and urban centres. I welcome this Bill. It will not fix everything but it is a small step in the right direction. It will amend the 1994 Terms of Employment (Information) Act to include a new

paragraph around work-related communications outside the hours of work, amend the 1997 Organisation of Working Time Act to insert a new section 17A on the right to switch off and apply the 2005 Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act to employees working temporarily from home. As Deputy Collins just argued, it is also important to encourage, if not oblige, workers to join a union. That would be significant in terms of looking after their interests.

I have not even mentioned other issues such as those living in overcrowded accommodation without access to workspaces and the myriad inequalities this pandemic has shone some much-needed light on. Let us take the awfulness of this year and make something positive for the future. Do we want to see people working from home or living at work?

Deputy Damien English: I thank the Labour Party for initiating this debate today. The discussion on its proposed Bill is focusing our minds on the issue of remote working, the benefits of which we all understand. There is no doubt that working from home or working remotely, even in non-Covid times, when properly planned can provide significant benefits such as a better work, life balance for everyone, with reduced daily commutes and less negative impacts on the environment through reductions in traffic and air pollution. It also has great benefits for our regions and local economies, including our towns and villages. Our communities are strengthened by having people at home more often and not having to do long daily commutes. In my county, people can spend three or four hours in their cars going to and from work and that is true for many other counties. We all benefit from having people working closer to their home, whether they are remote working in their house or working in a hub that is provided privately or through the State.

We can make much progress here and build on the success of the past couple of years but I must stress that this must be done in a planned way. Covid-19 resulted in many people working from home in an unplanned way. They were trying to work, to survive and to manage everything, which was very difficult and put them under much pressure. The focus of today's debate on this Bill and of what all sides of the House are bringing forward should be on having a planned remote working strategy. That is what the Government is trying to achieve and facilitate to the greatest extent possible.

As recently as yesterday I had a very good discussion with the social enterprise and not-for-profit organisation, Grow Remote. It is very focused on this area and has been giving great advice to all stakeholders, including employers and employees, for the past few years. It is very focused on driving change and is a great organisation. We should all take heed of its advice and get involved in its work as much as possible.

A better work, life balance leads to higher employee retention. Digital technologies remove geographical barriers to recruitment as well as offering savings on office space and other facilities to the benefit of local areas. Of course, broadband plays a major part in aiding that. I am conscious that many of the contributors to this debate who were calling for more and speedier broadband are the same people who opposed the efforts of the last Government to improve broadband provision. Thankfully, we persisted and signed the national broadband plan contract. Approximately €100 million per year from the taxpayer along with other private money will ensure that we reach everyone's home with fibre broadband in the years ahead. I agree that the quicker that is done, the better. We should focus our minds on working with the contractor to see if we can do it quicker because we need it. That said, I would remind Deputies that they did not want the contract a year or two ago. I am glad they have come on board now and are buying into it and the importance of progressing it.

Covid-19 has certainly accelerated the move to working from home for a greater number of people and this has brought its own challenges for both employers and employees because of the speed with which it happened. I welcome today's discussion and, as the Tánaiste already advised, the Government is committed to facilitating and promoting remote working going forward. As a primary response to Covid-19 my Department launched a new web page dedicated to providing guidance for employers and employees on working remotely. This central access point provides all the current Government guidance available on remote working. In July my Department launched a public consultation on the existing guidance on remote work to understand how it could be improved. The consultation received more than 500 submissions from workers, employers, business groups, representative organisations and special interest groups. Some of the main topics arising in the submissions have been aired during this debate while others have not. They include the right to disconnect, tax and financial incentives for remote working, occupational health and safety issues, broadband provision, data protection, cybersecurity and training. We are working through all the submissions at the moment.

It is clear that any proposals for specific legislation on the right to disconnect would need to be carefully considered in order to avoid unintended negative consequences. Such legislation must be fit for purpose and enforceable and will be prioritised by the Government. Given the diverse range of sectors that avail of mobile technology and remote working, a one size fits all approach may not be appropriate. For example, some submissions received in the public consultation suggest that guidance on disconnecting and on working hours should be flexible in order to reflect that fact that Ireland is an open economy, trading in a global environment. The guidance must accommodate companies and employees who are operating across multiple time zones. Similarly, flexible systems for logging in and out of work over a longer period of time were suggested to accommodate employees with caring duties. We will have to put some work into this but we are committed to doing so. My Department will work with other Departments to bring forward a national remote working strategy which will be published in December. I am looking forward to everybody contributing to the discussion and debate on that.

There are issues of concern with this Bill relating to health and safety and the protocol from the HSA. We will have the opportunity at a later Stage to tease through some of the points with the Labour Party. There are some issues that need to be teased out further but time does not permit me to do so today. I am also concerned by the distinction drawn in the Bill between public sector and non-public sector employees and their employers. Our health and safety legislation which governs health and safety standards in workplaces must be consistent across all employers, regardless of their status. We do not differentiate between the public and private sectors in that regard but we can tease through these issues at a later stage.

Deputy Robert Troy: As our country continues to navigate the global health crisis, remote working and enabling digital technology have become more important than ever. My Department is aware of the potential benefits that remote working offers to employers, employees and society in general. These benefits include increasing participation in the labour market, attracting and enabling talent, enabling balanced regional development, alleviating accommodation pressures, improving work, life balance, reducing the amount of time spent commuting and reducing carbon emissions. That being said, we need to strike a balance. I am conscious that so many people are working from home in an involuntary capacity to assist in our collective efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19. I want to thank them for their continued forbearance. Remote working can pose challenges to people's ability to socialise and to their mental well-being. If private homes are to operate as places of business, employees cannot be expected to respond to

work-related emails or phone calls outside of their normal working hours. A work, life balance needs to be maintained.

I welcome the Labour Party's Private Member's Bill as an important addition to the debate in this area. The Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy English, have given their views on the domestic situation. I want to refer to what other countries are doing. The right to disconnect has been a significant topic of debate throughout the EU in recent years. Only four member states have introduced specific legislation giving a right to disconnect. There is a lack of consensus at EU level on the need for a specific directive in this area. The scope of legislation on the issue, and the way it is implemented and enforced, varies between countries. It should be noted that, in all instances, collective bargaining plays an important role. Under the French law, for example, companies with 50 employees or more are required to negotiate with employee representatives in order to determine the conditions of use of electronic communication tools. No legal definition of the right to disconnect is given under law. Instead, it requires employers to choose the most practical way to implement that right, taking into consideration the nature of their business. Under the French law, the right to disconnect must be included in mandatory annual negotiations with trade unions. While the provisions of the law impose an obligation to negotiate on the right to disconnect, they do not impose an obligation to reach an agreement. If no agreement is reached, the employer is still required to draw up a charter setting forth the terms and conditions under which employees can exercise their right to disconnect. It would be helpful to look at some of the best examples of what is being done in this area elsewhere.

The Labour Party's Private Members' Bill provides for employers to give their employees, free of deduction of tax, a flat-rate payment of such amounts as may be approved by the Revenue Commissioners to meet additional expenses incurred. I advise Deputies that there is already an administrative practice in place that is sufficiently flexible to allow for workers to have their expenses met by employers without giving rise to tax liability. The current value of the allowance in question is €3.20 day, which equates to €16 a week or €842 per annum. This is in addition to the fact that equipment may be provided without giving rise to a benefit-in-kind charge, including the provision of telephone lines and broadband facilities where private use is incidental. The tax issue raised more generally will be considered as part of the examination by the Department of Finance of the feasibility and merits of changing tax arrangements to encourage more people to work remotely, in line with the commitment in the programme for Government.

Even before the pandemic, the traditional nine to five was gradually giving way to more flexible and fluid ways of working. For many employees with customers and colleagues based in locations across the globe and in multiple time zones, working after 5.30 p.m. has become necessary as part of their day-to-day work. I am conscious that restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19 mean it is mandatory for many people to work remotely who otherwise would not be doing so. This underscores the need for a coherent strategy for remote working. The pressures of needing working space in the home, working and caring for children and limited social contact all demonstrate the need to continue to roll out more working hubs in every county and provincial town.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I am sharing time with Deputy Howlin. I thank Deputies for their contributions to the debate and the Government for its response. It is welcome that the Bill is not being opposed on this Stage, but there are a number of bridges we need to build between the Government's view of the legislation and where we want it to go.

There is one issue that I need to nip in the bud right away and it relates to the Tánaiste's contribution. I hope he did not misread the intent of our Bill. To be clear, its purpose is not to stifle flexible work. It is designed to put in place the health and safety infrastructure that is required for workers to work safely from home. We are very much aware of the flexible working arrangements that exist among the workforce. There may have been an intent by the Tánaiste to misrepresent what we are trying to do. In terms of the concerns he expressed, nothing could be further from the truth. We are saying that we need to put the protections for workers in place first and, after that, we can move on with the promotion of flexible work. It is important to state clearly that even if workers are working from home, the provisions of the Organisation of Working Time Act still apply in terms of breaks and rest periods. That point needs to be hammered home in response to the Tánaiste's contribution at the beginning of the debate.

A number of different issues were raised in the course of the debate, one of which was broadband provision. That particular discussion went off in a whole other direction and some Deputies used the opportunity of this debate to make their own points in that regard. Having said that, there is no doubt that broadband provision is an issue, both in rural Ireland and in the main cities. To give an example, the residents of a large new apartment block right in the centre of my town of Swords have no access to broadband. I am dealing with a person living there who is a nine to five worker, insofar as such an arrangement exists these days, and is working from home. This person is sharing the apartment with a shift worker who is working on the front line in the health service. The individual is trying to do the normal, everyday work, which used to be done in the office, from the end of the bed, with no space for a desk, chair or anything like that. When this person has to take a telephone call, there is the consciousness that, on the other side of a paper-thin wall, is a hospital shift worker who is trying to get some sleep during the day. That is the reality of working from home for many people at this time. Our Bill is looking to tackle that, not in a holistic way but in a very important way.

Several Deputies talked about taking a long view. Working from home is going to be a reality for the long term. As such, we need to look at the options for working within communities, which is a useful option for people who have to commute long distances, whether from the suburbs and hinterlands of our major cities or from even further afield. There are people who travel halfway across the country every day to work. We need to consider how we can provide workspaces in local communities, towns and villages. Such facilities would enable people to leave the house and engage in active travel, such as walking or cycling, to get to their workplace. This might be done via hot-desking or short-term lets of industrial and retail units in towns. It would help to regenerate towns as money circulates in local economies and is spent on main streets. It would be good for the environment and good for people's mental health because they would not be working from the end of their beds or in otherwise cramped conditions in their own homes.

There are many other aspects to this debate but I must pass over now to Deputy Howlin. I want to put on record my thanks, and the thanks of the Labour Party, to all the trade unions that have done Trojan work in getting the issue of the right to switch off into the space where we are debating it more regularly in the Chamber and bringing forth legislation that can effect real change. Ultimately, the best way for any worker to tackle precarious work in all its forms is to carry a union card. That message needs to go out loud and clear, not only from this side of the House but also from the Government side. Joining a union will help to protect workers, improve rights for all and help to move our country forward.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: As the son of a trade union official, I begin by joining Deputy

Duncan Smith in encouraging people to join, and be involved in, a trade union and to work towards the universal right to collective bargaining as a fundamental underpinning of workers' rights. I thank all Deputies who contributed to the debate. It is heartening that there was no voice against our legislative proposals. All the various perspectives and opinions within the House support the Bill.

I heard the contributions of the Tánaiste and the two Ministers of State, all of whom said they would not oppose the Bill on Second Stage. One of the Ministers of State talked about farming out aspects of the Bill to be considered by various institutions or organisations and thanked the Labour Party for contributing to the debate. I want to make the point that the Dáil is not a debating chamber outside the legislative process. This is the legislative process. The Bill we have brought before the House is specifically designed to address issues that are real for many hundreds of thousands of workers at this time. They need the measures we have outlined. I hope we will have goodwill from the Government to ensure our proposals are not just part of a debate but a means of moving towards legislative change.

12 o'clock

"Working from home" was for many a phrase that was heard or something that was talked about rather than something they considered doing themselves. Covid-19 changed all of that in an instant. The nature of work post 2020 has changed permanently. Businesses and employees alike have discovered that, for many, it is possible to be productive, to achieve targets and not to have to face the daily commute to work. Employers, many of which had been sceptical, found that this was possible.

It is a point worth underscoring that what we have in mind is not a prescription for everybody. It must involve choice. Many contributors have said that this will not be possible for many people because of their living circumstances or their family or home situations. Nobody should be forced into a particular form of work. That is why collective agreement through a trade union is the ultimate way in which this should be handled. That does not mean, however, that we can abandon our fundamental duty to underpin in legislation the rights of workers not to be exploited in any way.

We always believed technology would come to liberate workers. I remember that, many years ago, the notion was that technology would get to a point at which we could all have endless leisure. The reverse is true. A new tyranny is often imposed by the ability to contact employees constantly and the expectation of bosses that one will respond at any time. That cannot be allowed to continue. I visited a very large technology company in this State in recent times. Allegedly, no one had fixed working hours but, in truth, they were constant slaves because they were all permanently logged in and online. Not only was their work being monitored at all times, but it was being benchmarked against all that company's workers across the globe. They did not even know whether they were doing well or not. We have to come to grips with that sort of tyranny now. The legislation before us is a small but really important step in that direction.

As has been said, other countries are ahead of us in understanding this issue and in enacting legal frameworks to begin to monitor and regulate the new work environment effectively. The Minister of State has said that only four countries have legislated in this way. Why can we not be in the vanguard? If four countries can do it, why not all countries? Why can Ireland not set the pace for the ideal working conditions for workers?

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As I have said, a lot will have changed after the unprecedented year of 2020, much of it for the worse. Let us learn the best lessons. Let us provide a new work framework for those who want to work from home and who can do so. Let us deal with all the issues the many contributors have outlined which need to be dealt with. Let us start by enacting the measures we have set out to protect workers at home, to ensure that they are not out of pocket or under tyranny and to allow a different work pattern to prevail into the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday, the Taoiseach's Government voted to block the Dáil from putting questions to the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, regarding the appointment of the former Attorney General, Séamus Woulfe, to the Supreme Court. His claim that this would impinge on the separation of powers is utter nonsense, as he well knows. In the Dáil in 2017, the Taoiseach said that any attempt to use the separation of powers as an excuse to avoid accountability in respect of a judicial appointment was "bogus". He will know that, on that occasion, a debate was held and questions were put.

The Government is clearly circling the wagons. This morning, Green Party Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, was wheeled out to make this same bogus argument on radio. The Government knows that the Minister is accountable to the Dáil and is duty-bound to take questions. The Government came into office on 27 June. Séamus Woulfe stood down as Attorney General on that date. The proposal to appoint him to the Supreme Court came to Government on 16 July, just three weeks later. In addition to Mr. Woulfe, three sitting judges had also expressed an interest in this position. The Minister did not have just one name to consider, but four. She needs to explain very clearly how she whittled down that list of four names to one. By what criteria was that selection made? With whom did she confer and collaborate? Who did she inform? Why did the Minister fail to inform the Taoiseach and Government colleagues of expressions of interest from these judges in advance of the decision to appoint Séamus Woulfe?

It beggars belief that no member of Government asked whether there were other applications. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the leader of the Green Party were all left out of the loop in a Supreme Court appointment. Not one of the three men charged with leading Government asked questions about this important matter. If this is true, it is remarkable. In the endgame of government formation talks between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the Taoiseach announced that the position of Attorney General would be rotated in line with that of Taoiseach. The position was central to the horse trading. Séamus Woulfe, the outgoing Attorney General and a long-term member of Fine Gael, was appointed to the Supreme Court.

In 2017, the Taoiseach described the appointment of former Attorney General, Máire Whelan, to the Court of Appeal as "an insider appointment" and said that "it stinks to high heaven." In that case, he was incredulous and angry that other applicants for the position had not been treated fairly. It is, therefore, very strange that he did not ask if there were other applicants on this occasion. When calling for a debate and a session of questions and answers in 2017, the Taoiseach said that the Government's reaching for the separation of powers was "bogus" and he criticised the Government for resisting taking questions. He was right then but he is very wrong now. Blocking the Dáil from putting questions to the Minister for Justice stinks to the high-

est heavens. It raises the question of whether this was the type of insider appointment against which the Taoiseach railed three years ago.

For the sake of clarity, for transparency and to ensure this Oireachtas can do its job and discharge its responsibilities, I ask the Taoiseach to ensure the Minister, Deputy McEntee, comes before the Dáil to make a statement on these matters and to take questions.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I have taken questions on this issue as Taoiseach. I took them yesterday and I am taking questions right now. The Deputy is asking questions and I am going to take them. The Deputy's question was very interesting. At the outset, I must say that her assertion that there was horse trading involved in the appointment of Paul Gallagher as Attorney General and some connection to the appointment of Mr. Justice Woulfe to the Supreme Court is an untruth and a false assertion. She should withdraw it because it impugns the integrity and ability of the present Attorney General, who has had nothing to do with that. It is historical precedent that the Attorney General is appointed by the Taoiseach of the day. That has always been the position. There has always been an important relationship between the Taoiseach and the Attorney General in any Cabinet.

It was also interesting that, in the Deputy's question, she wanted to ask the Minister, Deputy McEntee, who she collaborated with and on what criteria did she judge. That is the very reason why in my opinion the Minister, Deputy McEntee, should not actually have to say or to compare judges with a person who was deemed suitable by the Judicial Appointments Advisory Board. I do not believe politicians should be embroiled in negotiations on who should or should not be a judge. I do not think that is the function of politicians.

When I learned that the Judicial Appointments Advisory Board, JAAB, chaired by the Chief Justice, Mr. Justice Frank Clarke, and by the presidents of the other four courts, in addition to representatives of the Law Society and the Bar Council, had deemed Mr. Justice Woulfe suitable to be a Supreme Court judge, that was good enough for me. I have no interest in embroiling myself any further. Notifications may be sent in and representations may be made by judges to the effect that they would like to be considered for particular positions. The Minister for Justice of the day brings one name to Cabinet. As far as I was concerned, the fact that the Judicial Appointments Advisory Board was satisfied that Mr. Justice Woulfe was a suitable candidate for the Supreme Court satisfied me and I was not going to second guess it. That is the point.

On the case of Ms Justice Máire Whelan - I do not want to embroil the Judiciary because the said person is a member of it - JAAB was not used on that occasion. Be that as it may, JAAB was involved in deeming Mr. Justice Woulfe as a suitable candidate. The Deputy is tantamount to saying that in future, the Minister for Justice should come to the Dáil and say which candidate he or she picked or recommended to Cabinet against the other candidate or candidates and on which criteria. I do not agree with that. Dáil Éireann is not the place to decide on that. The Judicial Appointments Advisory Board is the current body for that but in the future the commission that we intend to establish will be the way to do this, and the Government is committed to a judicial appointments commission. That was before the previous Dáil. Our view of that is that the chairperson of that should be the Chief Justice, and that would represent the right balance in our view and we have said that. That is my position on that and we will introduce the legislation to establish that commission. We will also engage with Members of the House on that because that is an important reform of the process for the selection and appointment of judges and it would take it further out of the realm of the political domain.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach's response is incoherent gibberish and he knows it. The Taoiseach has changed his tune from when he sat on the Opposition benches and correctly challenged the Government of the day to give an account of itself and challenged the then Minister for Justice and Equality to give an account of the process by which a selection for a judicial appointment was made. The standards then are the standards now. The responsibility of the Oireachtas to hold the Government to account remains paramount. The Taoiseach reaches for the JAAB process, even though he knows that was one of two channels through which names came forward. Please do not rehearse that nonsense again. That there was horse-trading around the position of Attorney General is not only truthful, it is a verifiable truth. It played out in the media between Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and, let it be said, the Green Party.

I hear that the Taoiseach does not want to be further embroiled in these questions so the straightforward, correct and proper thing to happen is that the Minister for Justice presents herself and gives an account of those three weeks between 27 June and 16 July and sets out, for the satisfaction of this Oireachtas, the process by which four names became one and four applicants became Seamus Woulfe. That is what this Oireachtas demands and deserves.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin has a habit of continually repeating a claim and then asserting that it is the truth. What the Deputy has just said is an untruth. It is not verifiably true that there was horse-trading involving the position of Attorney General. Stop misleading the House in that regard and deliberately creating a story that has no foundation in fact. The Deputy should withdraw that claim because I know that there was absolutely no relationship between the appointment of the Attorney General, Paul Gallagher, and the appointment of Mr. Justice Woulfe - none.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I thank the Taoiseach and the Government for supporting the north quays project in Waterford. It is a transformative project for the whole of the south east and it might - I say "might" - just be the turning point our region has been waiting for.

As the Taoiseach is well aware, the south east is home to just under 10% of our country's population and it has fallen behind the rest of the country. Each year, we leave behind €10 billion of GDP year on year. My parish's €16 billion of GDP should be a €26 billion economy, and it might be were it to be like the other university regions of Ireland. The region and the whole country pay a massive social cost for this underperformance. We pay for it in higher unemployment, poverty and crime rates, less consumption and services, and of course the hidden cost in the loss of our young and the brain drain from the region.

In recent years, the south east has rightly detected that the Government was actively planning for the prevention of a positive future from emerging in our region. It was preventing a university of scale, the north quays project, our airport expansion, our hospital expansion and the delivery of the M24. These projects were all aimed at fulfilling the potential in our region. We have seen the transformation of other regions and wondered where our future is. I voted for the Government's finance measures and the spending of €10 billion on capital projects this year. I wish to see transparency and equity in the provision of this money. It is great to see that over the next four years, the north quays will see €25 million per year to support the project. For those who shout that I am engaging in parish pump politics, they should hold no fear because I would say there is not a snowball's chance in hell that we in the south east will see the €890 million allocation, although Waterford will see its 2.44% of that if recent history is to be any judge.

The importance of the north quays is welcome but it is not going to close the GDP gap. The

measure that will close that gap is higher education and the building of a university of substance in the south east, equivalent to the capacity and scale of those in Limerick, Galway and Cork. In the programme for Government, the south east is singled out and emphasised as the region where the technological university must be built. Yet with €56 million spent on technological universities by Government so far, the south east consortium is funded behind the Cork, Dublin and Galway-led consortiums. These three regions already have thriving universities. It begs the question of what the Government's commitment is to a Waterford-led technological university that is capable of transforming the whole south east in the way the University of Limerick has transformed the mid-west in the past 30 years, for example. Is the strategy to prevent a university of scale emerging to protect the existing national universities from the competition that we in the south east might bring? In turn, such a strategy would result in holding our region back.

The Taoiseach: Last week's announcement by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on the urban regeneration and development fund allocation of €80.6 million, involving a total package of €110 million, with €30 million committed by the Department of Transport, is a major shot in the arm to the south east. It is essentially a game changer for the city and the region. It demonstrates real intent by the Government in delivering on its programme for Government commitments for balanced regional development, which we need and which is essential for the overall development of the country because it is unbalanced at the moment.

The technological university of the south east is critical to achieving that objective. I have had discussions with the Deputy and with other Deputies from the south east on this. It is extremely important that we facilitate the ongoing discussions that are under way on the establishment of the technological university for the south east, because it is anticipated that an application for technological university designation under the Technological Universities Act 2018 will be submitted by the consortium in April or May of next year. If the application is successful following all due legal processes, the consortium would anticipate technological university establishment by January 2022. That is a significant milestone to work towards, which would have a knock-on beneficial impact in terms of economic regeneration and activity in the south east more generally. The consortium of IT Carlow and Waterford IT has been progressing proposals since 2011, and it is time to really move this forward. As I discussed with the Deputy, there are strong oversight structures. The appointment of Tom Boland, who is highly respected and experienced, as the programme executive director, has given added momentum to the work under way. More than 300 staff are now involved in the various working groups to get this project over the line. The plan has been developed as a joint governing body steering group for the TUSEI consortium and it is moving in the right direction.

Clearly, capital needs will arise in respect of the new technological university. As a former Minister for Education and Science, and having been very involved with Waterford Institute of Technology, when it was creating the new base in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and likewise with IT Carlow, I assure Deputy Shanahan that the Government is genuinely committed to doing the right thing here and to develop the capacity of this technological university as a prime driver of economic activity in the region.

There is strong foreign direct investment, FDI, in Waterford and we should use that FDI base to leverage more inward investment in Waterford and generally across the south east. It is important that we utilise the university as an important leveraging tool when we have discussions with foreign direct investment companies and multinationals which may wish to come in,

but also to provide the research base for our indigenous companies across the south east. They can use the facilities in Waterford, Carlow and elsewhere to help local industry. Collaboration with industry is the great strength of technological universities.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I thank the Taoiseach and note that we met recently to discuss this issue. There has been much talk about a diffused model for the south-east technological university. National policy has been to consolidate services, and that was the logic behind having DIT in Grangegorman and UCD in Belfield. There is no model on earth, however, of a multi-campus diffused university working. It is worrying for us in the south east that we are forced to accept a model of higher education which we know has failed everywhere else. We are being asked to accept consolidation as a means of achieving regional university status for the highest performing institute of technology in the country. The people in Cork and Dublin were not asked to suggest any such model, and I have concerns about the primacy of Waterford IT within this TU-led development.

I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that the Government delivers a workable university for Waterford and the south east, which acknowledges Waterford as the gateway and economic driver of the south-east region. Within that, we need to see reasoned and fair educational modelling. We need to see recognition of the past and future performance of the institutions in the area, particularly WIT which has been completely under-resourced, to be fair, over the past 20 years. We need to see that our track record in achievement in higher education and servicing our students will have primacy within that configuration

The Taoiseach: Unity is strength. The technological university for the south east must be seen in that context. However, Waterford has also grown extremely well in recent decades and it has created its own niche, as has IT Carlow, in different faculties. Each institute of technology has significant strengths. If we talk to people in industry, they all identify the role of institutes of technology as being critical to their growth and to economic and industrial development in the regions. That is a fact. If we look at our life sciences, in particular, from engineering to instrumentation and lab technicians, those areas have been superb. I refer to the quality of graduates who come from these institutes. If I was a Carlow or Waterford representative, I would be confident regarding the quality of that institution and the capacity of that institution to grow and develop. It will need Government support and I acknowledge that, and we intend to provide and deliver that support.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I raise the issue of funding for Irish Water projects which are administered in our county of Kerry. I will give some examples. We have a water main in Farranfore that keeps breaking. It causes awful trouble because it is on a main artery road through our county. From there up to Ash-hill and Farmers Bridge, everything needs upgrading and replacing. An upgrade is also needed to the water scheme at Moyvane and Knockanure. The Kenmare sewerage scheme needs an extension. In the great town of Kenmare, for example, it is not possible to get planning permission for a henhouse, simply because we are being told that until the sewer is extended, it will not be possible to have any more planning permission granted. The sewerage scheme at Kilcummin has been well raised here over many years, and at the same time we are no nearer to having a scheme put in place. I refer to the need for the replacement of the mains from Daly's roundabout in Killarney up to Ballyspillane estate, because the road there is like one in Beirut from water breaks. It would surely be more cost effective to replace the pipework rather than to continuously repair the road. On the way from Glenflesk to Knockanes, a section of piping needs to be replaced, and there is also 6 km stretch which needs replacing in Callanafersy. A part of the work has been done at Lauragh, but from there down to

the church there is 2 km of pipework to be replaced. The infrastructure whole of the mid-Kerry region has constant breaking in this regard, and there is a section on the Office of Public Works, OPW, road in Beaufort where a part of the work has been done, and excellent work it is, but there is much more work to do.

I also highlight one example of an emergency issue which was raised by a local councillor in the Castleisland area, Jackie Healy-Rae, following on from a meeting between councillors and representatives of Irish Water. One housing estate in Kerry, Desmonds Avenue in Castleisland, is served by a cast-iron main which burst in mid-September. Ever since, there have been water quality issues. When tests were carried out on 9 October, ten of the houses recorded iron levels in the water of 1,319 mg/l. Under the drinking water regulations, the limit for iron content in water is 200 mg/l. There is a serious issue here, an emergency situation, and that is down to the cast-iron pipe which is serving that estate and that needs to be replaced. Irish Water's response to Councillor Healy-Rae was that it had no money and will not have any money until 2021. That is not good enough. This is an example of the investment that we need in County Kerry. We desperately need this money. I compliment our excellent staff working for Irish Water, through Kerry County Council, past and present. They have done excellent work. We must remember that these are the people who go out on Christmas Day and late at night in all types of weather to keep the water flowing in our county.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising these issues, but I did not get the name of that estate.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is Desmonds Avenue.

The Taoiseach: To be frank, if that is a health risk, and from the data, the Deputy is suggesting that it is a health risk, there should be no excuse for not sorting that out. We are conscious of the need for Irish Water to get additional capital, and, to be fair, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, gave additional funding to Irish Water in the July stimulus package and in the budget. Something like this issue should be dealt with. I know there are many challenges, and Irish Water has many challenges, but something that represents a clear health risk should be dealt with. We are also committed to further investment in Irish Water more generally.

A huge scale of work is necessary in our water system and it will take several years and investment cycles to resolve the situation fully. Regarding our capital investment plans for drinking water, and for water infrastructure more generally, strong multi-annual allocations are being directed to Irish Water. A funding package of about €8.5 billion was committed in Project Ireland 2040. As part of budget 2021, the Government increased provision for Irish Water's capital investment programme by €100 million, over and above last year's initial allocation, to €692 million. We also provided €87 million as part of the July stimulus package. I will check for the Deputy what allocation from that €87 million in July found its way to Kerry. I will also follow through with the cases raised by the Deputy and will forward those to Irish Water.

We understand the centrality of Irish Water and water infrastructure to the development of towns, to the facilitation of house construction and to the facilitation of industry. We are determined to give it a higher prioritisation in capital allocation because it represents a key part of our capacity to deliver housing and development in the regions. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will bring a policy paper to Government in the coming weeks to set out a route map to achieving this ambition.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Taoiseach very much for that reply. On sewerage schemes, Irish Water seems to want to work in areas where infrastructure is already in place. Unfortunately, there are areas in County Kerry that have no schemes whatsoever, which is hard to believe. Places such as Caherdaniel, Scartaglin and Currow have no schemes at all. How are these areas supposed to develop? How are they supposed to grow? How are we supposed to cater for the future needs of young people who want to live and work in those areas? Planners and national policy always seem to say to people we would rather people live in the village than be looking for planning in the countryside. I have always made the argument that people should be allowed and encouraged to live in the countryside. National policy seems to want to put people into towns and villages, while at the same time people in places such as Caherdaniel, Scartaglin and Currow have no scheme whatsoever. That is ridiculous. We have to ensure that works and funding are put in place.

I want to highlight the holy show of how the work is actually carried out. I declare what could be perceived as a conflict of interest in this, but when it comes to work with the council we have recently heard that it has sought to tender all the work for Irish Water in counties to one individual. That is wrong. We should be keeping in place the smaller contractors in their own areas who have worked diligently along with council staff for many years in providing an excellent service day or night. Again, I thank the people who work for Kerry County Council and I compliment them for their efforts seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his remarks. Generally it is the policy to try to have as much development in towns and villages as we possibly can. Part of the reason is the high cost of infrastructure and the disproportionate cost if new schemes are being developed. We have to prioritise. In Deputy Healy-Rae's first contribution he identified a range of schemes that needed investment, such as in Killarney and other towns. They need to get priority in the allocation of capital.

On the urban and waste water, to be fair, the Environmental Protection Agency's recent report demonstrates that Irish Water is making progress and is improving our wastewater systems. Irish Water has reduced the number of priority wastewater sites listed by the EPA and has increased the number of large towns and cities that now meet the required European Union standards for wastewater discharges. The agency itself will say that it has a long and complex programme of work ahead to deliver wastewater services that fully meet the required standards. To be fair all around there is an historical large agenda of work and progress has been made. Significant capital moneys will be allocated. It is about getting on with the work and getting it done.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar chúrsaí iascaireachta agus go háirithe ar pholasaí an Rialtais, polasaí a foilsíodh i 2019 agus a cuireadh i bhfeidhm ó Mhí Eanáir na bliana seo. Bun agus barr an pholasaí sin - polasaí maith a bhí ann - nach raibh cead ag na trálaeir mhóra a bheith ag iascaireacht taobh istigh de 6 mhuirmhíle ar fud ár gcósta. Faraor, chuir an Ardchúirt an polasaí sin ar neamhní an lá deireanach de Mhí Iúil. Ó shin, tá bearna mhór ann agus tá na trálaeir mhóra laistigh den limistéar sin. Tá mise agus Teachtaí eile ag déileáil le neart gearán ó dhaoine atá thíos agus atá thar a bheith buartha.

My question relates to a policy directive by the Government that came into effect in January 2020. It was published last year and prior to that there was a whole, long history and entry into this policy. The idea and the concepts behind the policy were excellent. They sought to have a sustainable fishing industry within the six-mile zone. More particularly, the documents that

accompany the decision and the consultation process said it was to improve the protection of coastal environments and essential fish habitats and to benefit biodiversity and commercially exploited fish stocks. It was to have socioeconomic benefits for the smaller inshore boats and fishermen and saw the importance of diversification opportunities, with more jobs and a more intimate connection between fishermen, consumers and businesses in the area, among many other advantages. That was brought in after a consultation period. As I said, the decision was made in March 2019 and the policy came into effect in January this year. Three boat owners, or their companies, took a case, which was successful on very narrow grounds. On the last day of July 2020, the High Court issued a very detailed and comprehensive judgment. Many arguments were put up by the three big boats. None of them was upheld by the court except that the Department had failed in its consultation process. Simply, the consultation process was faulty. Once the Department went down the road of the consultation process it had to do it right. Unfortunately, it did not and now we are in the situation where the policy is gone. Mar a dúirt mé i nGaeilge, tá sé ar neamhní. It is not valid. We now have a serious gap and the trawlers are back in Galway Bay and in others bays on coasts throughout the State. What is the Taoiseach doing about that? The consultation process was faulty. To me, it was a relatively simply matter to accept the judgment of the High Court and go back to do the consultation process properly given the importance of the contents of the policy in question.

The Taoiseach: Táim buíoch don Teachta as an gceist seo a ardú. Aontaím go bhfuil an polasaí a bhí ann roimh chinneadh na cúirte ceart ó thaobh bac a chur ar trálair mhóra teacht isteach laistigh de 6 mhuirmhíle ón gcósta. Is oth liom a rá gur olc an scéal é go bhfuil na trálair mhóra ar ais laistigh den limistéar sin. Níl sé sin sásúil i gcomhthéacs an pholasaí a d'fhoilsigh an Rialtas a bhí ann i Mí Eanáir na bliana seo. Caithimid athmhachnamh a dhéanamh air sin agus mar a dúirt an Teachta, caithimid athmhachnamh a dhéanamh ar an gcomhfhreagrás agus ar na déileálacha leis an bpobal agus caithimid slí ceart a chur i bhfeidhm.

I take on board what Deputy Connolly has said. I will engage with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine on this specific issue, on the aspects of the High Court's decision that undermine the policy and on the moves the Department proposes to take to rectify that, if that is possible. I take on board what the Deputy said and will pursue the matter with the Minister with a view to seeing if we can develop a consultation process or other processes that would meet the requirements of the High Court decision.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That was July. We are now in November. Nothing has happened. The Taoiseach is not even clear whether an appeal has been taken. I do not wish to put the Taoiseach on the spot but we know that from July the substantive judgment was given. The order might not have been perfected. Is an appeal under way? If there is an appeal it would not seem to be a very good way to proceed because there will be a further delay. The court did not take issue with the Government's policy and what was behind it, but it did take issue with the consultation process. This is a golden opportunity to do it right because when the Government brought in that policy it was a blunt instrument that affected a certain number of trawlers over 80 m which fish sustainably. Those fishermen were caught in that overall ban, including one earning a livelihood on the Aran Islands and others in the south west and so on. Unfortunately, those trawlers were caught. The real issue was the non-sustainable fishing of sprat, on which the ecosystem is dependent. The bigger boats, by and large, take in the sprat in an unsustainable way for fish meal, while it is caught for human consumption by the smaller fishermen. The consultation process was faulty. There were 900 submissions, the vast majority of them begging the Government to bring in a sustainable policy. This is a chance to go back and look

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at the small number of trawlers that were unfortunately caught by the blunt instrument, separate from the industrial trawlers or those carrying out fishing on an industrial basis.

The Taoiseach: There are clearly a number of issues that must be considered by the Department following the judgment. The Department clearly has to assess the implications for other trawlers and fishermen moving forward.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Has there been an appeal?

The Taoiseach: As I said, I will engage with the Minister and will come back to the Deputy on the policy position the Department will adopt in response to the court decision and how it intends to proceed into the future.

Estimates for Public Services 2020: Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for public services for the year ending 31 December 2020: Vote 42 - Rural and Community Development.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I raise the issue of Dublin Zoo. Zoos across the island are under pressure but Dublin Zoo is in big trouble and we woke this morning to the news that it might face closure. I need not tell the Taoiseach that a closure would be devastating for local employment and the economy, as well as for tourism. Dublin Zoo is one of our key tourist attractions and has occupied a special place for children and families right across the island for generations. The director of the zoo, Dr. Christoph Schwitzer, was quoted today as saying that one cannot switch off a zoo when one goes home. He also remarked that one cannot furlough an elephant, a zebra or a giraffe. There is a need for funding. I have been in touch with the Minister of State, Deputy Malcolm Noonan, about this issue over the last few months. He wishes to be helpful but the fund of €500,000 for zoos is just not enough. I am sure the Taoiseach, like me, does not want Dublin Zoo or any of the other zoos to face closure. I appeal to him to intervene and to ensure the necessary supports are made available. Generally, the zoo is a not-for-profit organisation and does not rely on public moneys but it needs help now.

The Taoiseach: The Government does not want Dublin Zoo to close and we will do everything we possibly can to ensure it stays open. I will be working with the Minister to make sure that happens. This issue came up the last time I was in government, when Bertie Ahern was Taoiseach. To give him his due, he engineered a significant investment for Dublin Zoo which set it in train to become the very modern facility it became. He was a great advocate for the zoo. I was listening this morning and it has been some time since capital funding has been allocated to the zoo by the Government. Given the extraordinary circumstances of a global pandemic, which is a once in 100 years event, the Government has to intervene and work with Dublin Zoo to make sure it is available for generations to come. I intend to act on that.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Regarding judicial appointments, I have no interest in the merits or demerits of any candidate. I have no intention of going into that but I have a responsibility to

the process and to ensuring the Executive is doing its job. The Government is running scared as regards the Minister for Justice coming in to answer questions. That is quite clear. The Taoiseach said there was no link between this and the appointment of the Attorney General. I accept what he is saying but if that is the case, the alternative is that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, did a solo run. The Taoiseach made a very interesting point. He said the precedent is that the Taoiseach appoints the Attorney General of his or her choice but the precedent also is, and always has been, that the Minister for Justice follows the Cabinet handbook and consults the Taoiseach and Tánaiste regarding such appointments. That did not happen here. I want to ask the Taoiseach a question based on what the Minister for Justice said at a committee meeting yesterday, because he seems to contradict what she said. On what date was he, as Taoiseach, informed of the proposal to appoint Mr. Justice Woulfe to this position?

The Taoiseach: The Cabinet handbook was followed. The Minister for Justice of any government brings one name to the Government for a judicial appointment. We would have known on a certain date prior to the date on which the judge-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: What date?

The Taoiseach: -----that the Minister intended to bring the name of Mr. Séamus Woulfe to the Cabinet. As I said before and have said publicly, as a matter of courtesy the then Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, informed Deputy Eamon Ryan and I that Mr. Justice Woulfe had come through the Judicial Appointments Advisory Board. That is it. Before the Cabinet meeting-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: I have answered it. The Cabinet handbook-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Will the Taoiseach answer the question?

The Taoiseach: I certainly have answered the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: On a point of order, the Taoiseach has refused to answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a debate on this. The Deputy asked a question and the Taoiseach has given an answer.

Deputy Alan Kelly: He will not give the date.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I raise the issue of affordable housing for purchase and rent. When will legislation on affordable housing be published? We were promised that it would be published by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage this autumn. Figures published by the Department show that the direct building of housing by local authorities can come in at 50% of the cost of acquiring them from private developers. Given that fact, and the decision by Dublin city councillors this week not to sell the lands on the Oscar Traynor Road to a private developer, will the Government engage with Dublin City Council to bring forward affordable housing on the Oscar Traynor lands for purchase and rent, using finance from the European Investment Bank and the serviced sites fund?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Is the Taoiseach aware that the National Economic and Social

Council reported this week that the Land Development Agency, LDA, can be a game changer in allowing the State to acquire and develop a mixed range of housing following a master plan? Does he agree with me regarding the decision of Dublin City Council to reject just such a development following a master plan? It would have provided 30% social housing, 25% cost rental housing, 20% affordable housing and 25% private housing, which is the sort of the development we want. Is it not a serious threat to that vision to have local authorities, driven by Sinn Féin-controlled authorities, rejecting integrated housing of this type? Furthermore, this represents a threat to the LDA because there is a belief that public land should be solely for one type of housing.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We would-----

Deputy Richard Bruton: If the LDA is to transform the land market, it must provide for all types of housing.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Public housing.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Do not be afraid to say it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

The Taoiseach: The legislation on affordable housing is making progress. I assure Deputy Cian O'Callaghan that there is much work under way in that regard. On the precise timeline, I hope to be in a position to publish that Bill towards the end of the year. Obviously, there are issues with progressing but it is going in the right direction. We had a meeting of the Cabinet subcommittee on housing this week and very good progress was reported on that matter. Likewise, I assure Deputy Bruton that I have insisted on taking a keen interest in the Bill on the LDA in order to get it through. It has been around for a while and there are many complexities surrounding it. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is working very proactively on it with the Attorney General. Why? The Deputy is correct that it has the potential to be a significant catalyst in the development of housing. Generally, because of Covid-19, we will probably get 17,000 or 18,000 houses completed this year.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: Of that number, 9,000 will be public housing. Next year, there will be up to 12,500 social houses out of a potential 25,000.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: We have a long way to go. We need to get master plans and developments off the ground to get the houses built.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. I call Deputy Bríd Smith.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Exactly two weeks ago, I raised the case of the imminent deportation of two care workers from Zimbabwe. I see yesterday Deputy Gannon raised the same issue. The Taoiseach's response to him was: "I do not know the individual cases [about those working in the health service]...If Deputy Gannon has the details [please pass them on]... I will follow them up." When I raised it with the Taoiseach two weeks ago, I passed on the details. I then found out that the Taoiseach's civil servant passed them on to another civil servant who passed them on to yet another civil servant who then got INIS, the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration

Service, to write back to the women to confirm their deportation.

These are women who work in our health service. They may be the same two Zimbabweans who Deputy Gannon referred to yesterday or they may be different ones. If they are another two, then more shame. How does this system work? The Taoiseach says he will take it up and then he kicks it around the civil servants. It then goes back to them to reaffirm that they will be deported. Will the Taoiseach give us an answer that he will deal with it and not kick it to touch with various Departments? Will he actually deal with it and allow these brave health workers, who have worked through the worst of the pandemic-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Deputy.

Deputy Bríd Smith: -----live in this country with respect?

The Taoiseach: Maybe the Deputy can deal with it a bit better as well in terms of process.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I am not the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I have helped people who were on the imminent deportation list. Why? Because people contacted me and gave me the cases personally. I would have seen to it and engaged with INIS and with the relevant Minister of the day, even when I was in Opposition. I did not make a song and dance about it. I just dealt with it.

Deputy Bríd Smith: But the Taoiseach did not deal with this.

The Taoiseach: I take the Deputy's point and will follow that up. Coming in out of the blue raising cases is fine. The Deputy is entitled to do that and it creates profile for the issue. I am not so sure, however, it actually advances the case of the individual concerned. I do not think-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: I did not-----

The Taoiseach: I have the floor.

I did say genuinely to Deputy Gannon that I do not think anyone should be deported to any red zone country during the Covid pandemic. Equally, if people are working in our health service, we need to ascertain their status in our health service and see if we can retain them.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Nothing happened. I sent in the details. This is ridiculous.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The new contract for air search and rescue services is to be tendered in the next 12 to 18 months. It is currently serviced by a ten-year contract with CHC which includes provision of patient transfers from University Hospital Waterford. The contract is estimated to cost between €70 million and €80 million per annum, €700 million to €800 million over the ten-year lifespan. CHC is a private company and many more will be interested in this tender.

Can we not consider using our Defence Forces and Air Corps to deliver most of this service? At the end of the contract, the State would then own the helicopter and monitoring assets. We do not employ private security firms to police our streets. Instead, we invest in the Garda Síochána and our public services. How much of this €700 million to €800 million will we allow to bypass investment in our State rescue and Air Corps services?

18 November 2020

The Taoiseach: Again, I am uncomfortable dealing with procurement issues generally on the floor of the House. Procurement processes should be independent of the House.

I take the Deputy's more general point on the State investing more in its own capacity in air rescue, the Coast Guard, our Defence Forces and the Air Corps. Some progress is being made in terms of recruitment to the Air Corps. I would be happy to see a greater investment. The commission that will be established shortly to examine the future of our Defence Forces will take that issue under its wings.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The whole population is under severe pressure dealing with this Covid situation. Importantly, for the farming community, it is a lonely place and farmers find it hard to get labour if they get sick or whatever.

Officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, however, are insisting on doing sheep welfare inspections. This is ridiculous. They should be supporting these farmers because it might take days to round up all the sheep on hill and mountain farms. One needs good weather but with fog, rain and short days many farmers are unable to do it. This is putting huge pressure on farmers and in my and other constituencies who are forced to do this. Can the Department not use drones or some other technology to deal with this?

I always support departmental officials but they need to be supporting farmers now, both physically and mentally. These farmers are under huge pressure because they cannot get staff if they get ill or Covid. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to call off the wolves here?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: These sheep inspections can be done by drones. Support the farmers; do not terrorise them.

The Taoiseach: To be fair, wolves have not been reintroduced yet in the country.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I did not say that.

The Taoiseach: I am only jesting. I will follow it up with the Minister, Deputy McConalogue.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is a serious issue. Why is the Taoiseach making light of it?

The Taoiseach: I will follow it up with the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will follow it up.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine about the sheep welfare inspectors. I am not aware of the potential for drones to monitor sheep on the headlands. Maybe the Department can explore that as well.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Last week saw a catastrophic landslide on a wind farm construction site at Meenbog in County Donegal. There is quite a lot of video footage showing the extent of the environmental disaster and its impact on a sensitive location. It makes for stark viewing.

The potential for a disaster such as this was well flagged by campaigners due to the inad-

equacy of the governance of the industry. A review was started by the Fine Gael-Labour Government in 2013 but it still has not concluded.

Will the Government commit to a comprehensive review of the outdated 2006 guidelines once and for all in light of the Meenbog disaster and the Derrybrien site which has cost over €2 million in fines, while clocking up €15,000 more every single day due to Government inaction?

The Taoiseach: I am aware of the peat slide near Meenbog wind farm, Barnesmore Gap, south of Ballybofey, County Donegal, which is under construction. The matter is being actively investigated by several statutory agencies, led by Donegal County Council. It involves the Environmental Protection Agency, Irish Water, the Loughs Agency, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, as well as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency having regard to the fact that the development is a transboundary project. A cross-Border multiagency meeting was held yesterday to co-ordinate a response to the significant pollution event that is impacting the Mournebeg River resulting from a bog slide in the townland of Meenbog, Ballybofey. All works have been suspended on this site.

On the issue of guidelines around wind farms, I am anxious to progress these. More generally, if we are committed to phasing out the use of fossil fuels, as is key in our climate change agenda, then we will need more wind energy. Offshore wind energy represents the future. It is something in which we need to invest very significantly and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: -----we will. Over time, the potential of offshore wind energy will outstrip onshore wind energy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. I call Deputy Barry.

Deputy Mick Barry: Yesterday was a day of mass repression in an EU country, namely, Greece. Up to 6,000 police were mobilised against workers' protests. They used tear gas, water cannons and stun grenades. More than 100 people were arrested, elderly people were beaten on the streets, a communist MP was injured and a journalist arrested.

The marches have been called by organisations of the Greek left, including the KKE, Antarsya and Xekinima. They called people on to the streets on the anniversary of the student uprising of 1973 which led to the overthrow of the dictatorship. They were also protesting against the Greek Government's decision to tear up the eight-hour day rule and forcibly to compel people work an extra two hours per day. The Greek Government used Covid regulations stating that only a maximum of three can gather. The demonstrators were masked, however. How can a government declare war on working class people but yet make it illegal for ordinary people to fight back?

Is the Taoiseach prepared to make a protest to the Greek ambassador about the scandalous actions of the Greek State on the streets of Greece yesterday?

The Taoiseach: I will undertake to get a comprehensive report from my Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs on what happened. I am not in a position to make any judgment this morning on what the Deputy has asserted.

1 o'clock

People in all European Union countries are and should be entitled to protest. That said, Covid-19 places very significant restrictions on that right because it conflicts with the competing right of everybody to public health.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: As the Taoiseach knows, the coronavirus has blown the social fabric of our country to smithereens. It has been totally decimated. Social engagement, relationships and possible relationships have been put on hold for almost eight months. Young single boys and girls, couples and men and women of all ages are totally frustrated. We cannot blame bars or restaurants for the increase in cases in recent days. However, as far back as two weeks ago Dr. Tony Holohan said there would be no drinking in bars at Christmas. To eliminate house parties, I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that bars, restaurants and hotels are open under level 2 restrictions. They are clearly the safest places to consume alcohol. That has been proven. People need to have a Christmas.

The Taoiseach: Our first priority is public health and protecting lives. We must never lose sight of that. I accept the genuine position that the Deputy has adopted, but we must never lose sight of our overarching objective of protecting lives and the overall economy. The fastest way to endanger the economy is to have a large increase in cases, hospitalisations and pressure on intensive care units. In its own way, this would do more damage to the economy than the restrictions. That is a very basic logical truth. We can see what is happening all over Europe. Ireland is in the third best position among the European Union's member states where coronavirus is concerned. Sometimes one would not believe that when listening to the critics of the current policy. We have to work on the basis of informed decision-making. We have researched this point. Gatherings and congregations of people cause problems. The virus thrives in that environment. The Government will make decisions next week on how to exit level 5 in December.

Deputy David Stanton: I wish to raise the issue of zoos and aquariums. Some eight institutions in Ireland are involved in the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums. Fota Wildlife Park in my own area is a hugely important resource. It had more than 62,000 visitors last year. It serves very important conservational and educational purposes. Some 18,600 students visited in 2019. I want to support the proposal for an injection of capital funding. On top of that, there are more than 60 licensed zoos and aquariums in Ireland. As I said this morning, they cannot just switch off. They have to feed and look after the animals. They do a good job.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Stanton for raising the issue. As I said earlier, the Government is engaging with Dublin Zoo and with Fota Wildlife Park. It will intervene to support the sector, particularly to keep those facilities open. I take the Deputy's wider point on board.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Ability programme provides funding to 27 local, regional and national projects throughout the country. It focuses on bringing young people with disabilities up to the age of 29 closer to the labour market. The Ability programme is co-financed by the European Social Fund and the Department of Social Protection and is administered by Pobal. The programme is due to conclude in 2021. It is of vital importance to many young people with disabilities in west Cork and throughout the country. What steps is the Government taking to ensure that it continues after 2021?

The Taoiseach: I agree that the Ability programme has been very effective and is an important programme. Programmes of this nature are evaluated by the line Department and the line agencies with a view to improvements and refinements. I will come back to the Deputy on the Department's position. Funding is available for disability services across the board and I

have no doubt that this programme is key to facilitating access to the workplace for people with special needs.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We learned last night that as of last Friday 133 staff at Letterkenny University Hospital were off work. We understand the number could now be above 150. All non-essential services have been suspended. The hospital faces an unprecedented crisis. We are talking about a hospital that was run at full capacity over recent years, so that is saying something. I appeal to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health to ensure that every possible additional resource is deployed to the hospital. As public representatives we are dealing every day with staff and patients' families who are appealing for help in securing additional resources. I appeal to the Taoiseach to do everything he can. I spoke to Dr. Colm Henry, the national clinical officer of the HSE, twice yesterday. I ask the Taoiseach to get behind these calls.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I wish to refer to the programme for Government's commitment to protecting public health patients and ensuring capacity for future surges of Covid-19. As of yesterday, 61 people were waiting on hospital trolleys at University Hospital Limerick. Today there are 50. This is unacceptable and puts patients and staff at unnecessary risk. Last week the University of Limerick Hospitals Group was forced to reduce scheduled procedures drastically as nearly 200 staff at both University Hospital Limerick and Ennis Hospital tested positive for Covid-19 or were deemed to have been close contacts of positive cases. As a result, six wards were closed. Figures obtained by the Irish Patients Association show that, on average, the full capacity protocol was deployed at University Hospital Limerick every second day of the year until the end of September. This would be bad enough at the best of times, but in the middle of a public health crisis this level of failure is totally unacceptable.

The Taoiseach: Both cases illustrate the damage that Covid-19 can do. That is why we have restrictions. It is worth reflecting on the impact Covid-19 can have on hospital services. Hospitals have had to postpone non-essential services because of the spread of Covid-19 among hospital staff. That is an unfortunate reality. We will do everything we possibly can to provide every possible resource to Letterkenny University Hospital. The Deputy should be in no doubt about that. Anything that has to be done will be done. The same applies to any other hospital across the country. As we consider the easing of restrictions it is important to note that they are there for a reason. When there are very high levels of community transmission, the virus finds its way into hospitals and nursing homes. That is the context of the restrictions.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Will the Taoiseach and the Government commit to reviewing the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant scheme before next April? In light of the cost of living and other considerations, the income thresholds are not appropriate to the times we are living in. Students who were entitled to and received the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP will not receive a grant in 2021, which means that many will not be able to continue their education. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that the PUP is not considered reckonable income for the purposes of the SUSI grant scheme in the 2021-2022 academic year. It is very important.

The Taoiseach: The extension of the pandemic unemployment payment to students has been a very welcome benefit to thousands of students throughout the country, understandably, because they would have lost the work opportunities which would have helped them to fund their way through college. There have been some improvements to the SUSI scheme under this year's budget. There will also be a once-off additional increase for those currently on SUSI grants to help them through this year. As for the next academic year, that will fall due for consideration closer to next year's budget.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Debenhams workers were outside Leinster House yesterday following 223 days of picketing for a fair redundancy. Last week, I emailed the Taoiseach's office inquiring if KPMG would be allowed to withdraw stock from the stores during the level 5 lockdown and the response was that it can do so. At a time when we are telling people that they cannot shop for clothes for their children, for newborns or for their families and we are asking them to stay at home, we are allowing KPMG to go into stores to remove stock, which means we are forcing the Debenhams workers to picket during the level 5 lockdown. I understand there is no easy-fix to this very complicated situation but the Taoiseach has the power to fix it. Christmas is coming. I appeal to the Taoiseach to step in and organise a resolution of this dispute.

The Taoiseach: This is a very difficult issue. I will be meeting with Mandate shortly and we will see if we can find a way to try to progress a resolution of this issue.

Deputy Martin Browne: The programme for Government contains a commitment to significantly improve people's lives with reference to the neuro-rehabilitation strategy. I have been contacted by 15-year-old Eabha Mansfield, and her sister, Ciara, who in the space of just a few months this year lost their mother to cancer, while at the same time their father suffered a heart attack. Their father is in University Hospital Waterford as he requires 24-7 care and assistance with feeding and dressing and he has issues with his memory. Scans have shown there is room for improvement. However, he remains in hospital, which is not suitable for his needs, and there is mention of him being transferred to a nursing home. His family are extremely concerned that if he goes into a home, he may never come out again. His daughters have been through a dreadful few months and their family lives have been changed forever. They desperately want to secure an urgent assessment to see if the National Rehabilitation Centre in Dún Laoghaire could improve his mind, memory and awareness. They are afraid daily that he may not remember them. Given the commitment in the programme for Government, can they be assured of a speedy assessment? Can the Taoiseach or the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, help this family? Eabha and Ciara deserve a break. I appeal to the Taoiseach to help them.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I am not familiar with the details of the case. The clinical assessment and recommendations of the doctors are key. Before anyone is transferred every potential avenue of rehabilitation within University Hospital Waterford should be availed of to facilitate the gentleman's recovery or the optimal care for him. I presume the clinicians are identifying a pathway for the patient.

Estimates for Public Services 2020

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move the following Revised Estimates:

Vote 24 - Justice (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €350,994,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Justice, Probation Service staff and of certain other services including payments under cash-limited schemes administered by that Office, and payment of certain grants.

Vote 26 — Education (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €8,378,554,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Education, for certain services administered by that Office, and for the payments of certain grants.

Vote 29 — Environment, Climate and Communications (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €488,923,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain grants and that a sum not exceeding €27,296,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 37 — Social Protection (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €17,132,485,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Social Protection, for certain services administered by that Office, for payments to the Social Insurance Fund and for certain grants and that a sum not exceeding €1,187,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 40 — Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €1,800,071,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, for certain services administered by that Office and for the payment of grants.

Vote 45 — Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €2,402,214,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, for certain services administered by that Office and for the payments of certain grants.

Votes put and agreed to.

Estimates for Public Services 2020

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move the

following Supplementary Estimates:

Vote 20 - Garda Síochána (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €44,325,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Garda Síochána, including pensions, etc.; for the payment of certain witnesses' expenses, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 21 — Prisons (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €14,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Prison Service, and other expenses in connection with prisons, including places of detention, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 22 — Courts Service (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €23,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Courts Service and of the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal, the High Court, the Special Criminal Court, the Circuit Court and the District Court and of certain other minor services as are not charged to the Central Fund.

Vote 34 — Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €432,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, including grants to Local Authorities, grants and other expenses in connection with housing, water services, miscellaneous schemes, subsidies, grants and payment of certain grants under cash-limited schemes.

Vote 42 — Rural and Community Development (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Rural and Community Development, including certain services administered by that Office and for payment of certain grants.

Votes put and agreed to.

Estimates for Public Services 2020: Leave to Introduce

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move:

That leave be given by the Dail to introduce the following Supplementary Estimates for the service of the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020: —

Vote 9 — Office of the Revenue Commissioners (Supplementary Estimate)

Vote 38 — Health (Supplementary Estimate).

Question put and agreed to.

Estimates for Public Services 2020: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move:

That subject to leave being given to introduce the following Supplementary Estimates for the service of the year ending on 31st December, 2020, the Supplementary Estimates be referred to the following Select Committees, as appropriate, pursuant to Standing Orders 95(1)(a) and 215(3):—

Vote 9 — Office of the Revenue Commissioners (Supplementary Estimate) — Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach.

Vote 38 — Health (Supplementary Estimate) — Select Committee on Health.

Question put and agreed to.

Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Consequential Provisions) Bill 2020: Financial Resolutions

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move the following Resolutions:

THAT Chapter 5 of Part 12 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides for group relief, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 124B of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 (No. 31 of 1999), which provides for a levy on certain premiums of life assurance, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 125 of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 (No. 31 of 1999), which provides for a levy on certain premiums of insurance, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with transport will next meet. [35074/20]

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with transport will next meet. [36602/20]

3. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with transport will next meet. [36673/20]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, together.

Issues relevant to the transport sector can arise, as required, at a number of Cabinet committees, most notably the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment. The Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment first met on 8 July. It has met on a total of seven occasions, most recently on 5 November. The next meeting of the Cabinet committee is scheduled for 3 December. The Government continues to invest in our national infrastructure. This is evidenced by the commitment of capital allocation of more than €10 billion in budget 2021, making public investment in Ireland one of the highest *per capita* in the EU.

Specifically, the budget 2021 allocation for the Department of Transport is €3.5 billion, which includes €1.8 billion funding announced for sustainable transport, cycling, walking and greenways and €1.3 billion for national, regional and local roads.

This will ensure that our transport network continues to grow sustainably in to the future, providing viable and affordable transport options, while also working to meet our climate and environmental objectives.

Issues relevant to the transport sector can arise at other Cabinet committees, such as the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change or the Cabinet committee on Northern Ireland and Brexit.

Issues relating to transport are, of course, regularly discussed at full Cabinet meetings, where all formal decisions are made.

Deputy Mick Barry: Aer Lingus workers are still waiting for the Minister for Social Protection to issue an instruction to the Intreo offices to ensure their backdated payments are paid and to ensure they are processed swiftly. Aer Lingus workers continue to suffer real hardship as a result of this issue. I have with me correspondence from a couple who both work for the company. They state that they have furloughed car payments, stopped unnecessary direct debits, tightened their belts and agreed interest-only payments on their mortgage. They are doing everything they can to survive and are not exactly looking forward to when their son writes his Santa letter because they will have to guide him on what they can best afford and not bow to his every Christmas wish. Can the Taoiseach ensure the Minister for Social Protection writes to the Intreo offices requesting that the backdated payments for short-time working are processed quickly?

In regard to taxi drivers, the Covid restriction support scheme excludes taxi drivers because they do not own premises. In regard to the moves made in the budget to deal with the hardships facing taxi drivers, the widespread feeling of taxi drivers is that they do not go far enough. Will the Government revisit this issue and consider including taxi drivers in the CRS scheme?

Driver instructors have written on several occasions to the Minister for Transport asking for a meeting to discuss grievances, including the denial of access to them of basic facilities at the Road Safety Authority, RSA, centres. They have received no satisfactory reply from the

Minister or the Department. Will the Taoiseach ensure that they do so?

Deputy Alan Kelly: We are heading into the Christmas period. Airport testing is a real issue for me. The aviation taskforce recommended testing at our airports in July but, as the Taoiseach will know, it has been left to the private sector to provide it. The State has not stepped in. We now have a fairly small testing capacity being outlined for our national airports. It is clear that the contact locator forms are a joke. Has a risk analysis been carried out in regard to the lack of proposed testing facilities that will be available at airports? That is a simple question which the Taoiseach needs to consider. More people are going to be coming home via our airports at Christmas than any of us expect. This is a big risk. It is a big issue and we need to be able to test people. This has been noted to the Taoiseach now. I do not want to have to return to it because of a failing. There is also the issue of the volume of buses required in Dublin, given the needs of front-line workers as well as children travelling to school. In addition, people are going to be using public transport more over Christmas. I understand that 43 extra buses are being deployed by Dublin Bus. Will the Taoiseach look at that issue? The number needs to be increased dramatically.

Finally, on Project Ireland 2040 and its plans relating to transport, is the Government reviewing those plans which were set by the previous Government? What changes are being made, particularly as regards indexation in terms of capital projects? Have any already been commenced or proposed?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have spoken out repeatedly on behalf of taxi drivers since the Covid pandemic began and their industry was decimated. Before I ask my specific questions, the Taoiseach should understand just what a fantastic service the 26,000 taxi drivers provide. The National Transport Authority, NTA, reported today that of 40 million taxi journeys last year, there were just under 1,000 complaints. That means the percentage of complaints per journey is 0.000025%. I just did that on my calculator. It is an extraordinary figure. I do not think there is any other service about which there are so few complaints out of that vast volume of journeys. However, the Government has effectively abandoned taxi drivers when they are on their knees.

The Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, and grants being provided to businesses hit by the pandemic are being denied to taxi drivers because they do not have a rateable premises. That is completely unfair when the taxi drivers are carrying anywhere between €6,000 and €11,000 in ongoing fixed costs, yet the Government is denying them the grant support they need. The one grant for which they can apply, the restart grant, comes to a miserable €1,000 and the taxi drivers have to sign off the PUP to get it, which is absolutely disgraceful. The electric accessible scheme that the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is talking about setting up will only be available if a person scraps his or her car, which means the vast majority of taxi drivers will not be able to get it

The NTA suggested today that we need to issue more taxi licences when, in fact, by a significant margin, there is not enough work to go around for the taxi drivers who are currently on their knees. I ask the Taoiseach to look into these matters and give real support to the taxi industry and taxi drivers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I wish to raise the issue of testing at airports and ports. Last week, the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Naughton, confirmed that Dublin Airport and Cork Airport have a capacity of just 150 daily PCR tests and that this

will increase to just 300 tests by year end. Even taking account of the 91% fall in passenger numbers recorded last month, 8,500 people still pass through Dublin Airport every day. My colleague, Deputy Darren O'Rourke, pointed out to the Minister of State that the projected increase in testing capacity to 300 by year end would barely cover a single flight coming into the country. I am conscious that at Christmas many people will heed what I assume will be advice to be cautious or not to travel at all, but there will still be an increased number of people coming onto the island.

The president of the Irish Air Line Pilots Association, told the Joint Committee on Transport and Communication Networks last week that he believed rapid testing should be available for arriving and departing passengers as well as for staff working at the airports on a daily basis. That seems to me to be just a matter of common sense. I am concerned and astonished. I wonder why there has not been a comprehensive comparison of PCR, LAMP and rapid antigen testing to identify the effectiveness of each when used in various settings. Is it the intention of the Government to maintain its very hands-off approach to the inevitable public health challenge that will arise from an increase in passenger numbers through the airports next month? More generally in terms of bringing us through this crisis in one piece, why we are still having this debate about the necessity for testing at ports and airports when it is obviously necessary and a priority matter?

The Taoiseach: It is very simple. The public health authorities are not convinced about the efficacy of rapid testing or antigen testing. There is no mystery. That has been the position from the get-go and the beginning of the pandemic. The same applies at European Commission level. There will be a further meeting on this issue this week in terms of co-ordination across Europe. There is no definitive evidence-based Europe-wide approach to antigen testing or other forms of rapid testing.

I met recently with the Dublin Airport Authority. The Government is not hands-off. I am engaging with all of the stakeholders in the aviation sector. They are working with the National Virus Reference Laboratory, NVLR, in relation to LAMP testing and its possibilities. HIQA did its study and analysis. NPHET is currently validating antigen testing out in the community. The feedback or the sense we are getting from the public health advice is that they are not converts to antigen testing.

I am not an expert in testing. I suspect there are very few Deputies who are experts in it. I think there is an issue here that we would like to bring to resolution but it is not one we can address by just stating a particular course is the common-sense approach. It must be one that is informed by science and public health evidence. That is the position in relation to the airports. Testing facilities are being developed in Cork Airport and Dublin Airport.

I visited Cork Airport recently. It was empty. Everything was closed there. Two airlines, namely, KLM and Aer Lingus, operate three or four flights a week if we are lucky. That is the reality on the ground in airports at the moment. Shannon Airport has equally low numbers, if any, at the moment. Knock Airport is the same.

I take the point raised by Deputies in terms of what will happen in the lead-up to Christmas. As I have stated, the Government is preparing its approach to exiting level 5 and that will include the travel issue. The travel issue will be challenging and it does pose risks, as any congregated setting will. How we manage risks and human behaviour is going to be essential in terms of the broader management of the exit from level 5. We have done a bit of work in terms

of understanding what drove the spikes in Covid during the summer and into September and the kind of areas involved or the super-spreading events that occurred in certain locations after certain events. Without question, congregation is an issue. Let us be clear about that. That has implications for the hospitality industry or certain sectors of it. This is going to be very challenging. It is not just about Christmas. It is also about the aftermath of Christmas, the economy and jobs. It is about taking informed decisions that enable us to deal and live with the virus more effectively until the vaccine is fully in place.

I point out to Deputy Barry that I also met with Aer Lingus more generally in terms of the broader issues. I will speak to the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys and seek to get the moneys due to the workers as urgently and quickly as possible because I do acknowledge that many workers and their families are in a difficult position as a result of the impact of Covid-19.

In terms of taxi drivers and in terms of the other supports that Government has introduced, the supports have been unprecedented.

Deputy Mick Barry: Not for taxi drivers.

The Taoiseach: As I stated yesterday, the pandemic unemployment payment is providing more than €100 million a week. The cost of the wage subsidy scheme will be more than €5 billion from March 2020 to March 2021. The CRSS will ramp up fairly fast as well in terms of its supports.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have to move on to Question No. 4. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: The national development plan is being reviewed. That will take on board the projects to which Deputy Kelly referred.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but we have to move on to Question No. 4. We are way over time.

Cabinet Committees

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with education will next meet. [35424/20]

5. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education is next due to meet. [35140/20]

6. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education will next meet. [36519/20]

7. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on education is due to meet next. [36611/20]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 4 to 7, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on education will have its first meeting on 26 November. The committee will oversee implementation of the programme for Government commitments in the area of education, including preparing for post-Covid education. I have had regular engagement and

meetings with the Minister for Education and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science at Cabinet and bilaterally to discuss priorities for the education sector, particularly the management of the impacts of Covid on primary, secondary and third level education. Similarly, I also have regular engagement with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs on priority issues relating to early-years education and childcare.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach said something earlier with which I thoroughly agree, which is that if Covid-19 is widespread in the community, the consequences are felt in the hospitals. We are seeing them in hospitals throughout the country. In that context, we should be concerned about the fact that the reduction in the number of cases appears to have stalled in a worrying manner. While everybody supports the objective of keeping schools open, there are significant concerns about whether the contact tracing of positive cases in schools is adequate to establish whether schools are acting as a vector for transmission of the virus.

I will put it simply. When we closed down the schools during the last period of restrictions, we got community transmission down to almost zero. They have been left open this time and now the efforts to reduce community transmission are stalling. I am not saying the two are necessarily connected, but we need to know. Teachers and parents are expressing concerns that children or teachers who would see themselves as close contacts of confirmed cases are not being contacted by public health teams or not being deemed as such because of the narrow definition of close contacts being operated, which is out of sync with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, close contact protocols. Does this not need to be examined?

Deputy Alan Kelly: My colleague, Deputy Ó Ríordáin, proposed earlier this week that consideration be given to closing the schools a little earlier this Christmas. It is something the Government should consider seriously. Most schools will close with a half day on either Monday, 21 December or Tuesday, 22 December. I do not believe it will make a massive difference if they were closed on Friday, 18 December, in the run up to Christmas. It is a day and a half for half of the schools and a half day for the others. It could potentially be made up later in the year. If implemented, it would give a clear seven days before Christmas Day in which movements could be restricted to a point that would reduce the potential exposure of hundreds of thousands of people to Covid-19. That would make it safer for families and loved ones to see each other over the Christmas season, during which I believe the Government will have to reopen certain aspects of society anyway. The Government should run in line with that. The Taoiseach can follow my logic. School communities, teachers, special needs assistants, SNAs, secretaries, caretakers and support staff have made major sacrifices and have been under massive pressure. It would be a boost for morale and would support public health measures. The unions have also supported this proposal. The Minister said she was not going to do it, but she might be rowing back a little to consider it. All I ask is that it is considered by the Government.

Second, and briefly, will the Taoiseach ensure that SNAs in the sector receive appropriate personal protective equipment, PPE? I am aware of several schools whose allocation simply does not provide for SNAs in their PPE funding.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have previously raised with the Taoiseach the urgent need for remote education for children who live with a medically vulnerable person. Our offices have received correspondence from distraught parents with very serious medical conditions who are terrified of their children bringing home Covid-19. Where the threat to people's health is so serious that families decide to keep their children at home, parents are left with no option

but to register with Tusla for homeschooling. This is not the route they wish to take, nor are they equipped to deliver it. Tusla figures show that 1,000 families applied to homeschool their children in August and September this year, an increase of approximately 500% on the same period last year.

The Department of Education provides an entitlement for children with very high-risk medical conditions to receive remote tuition, yet the children of parents with the same very high-risk conditions have been left in a most precarious position by the Government. The Taoiseach gave a commitment to investigate this matter when I last raised it with him, and I am disappointed with his response. Reiterating public health guidelines to these people on wearing masks and hand washing, valuable as they are, is not a constructive engagement on such a serious matter. These families are greatly impacted as, for them, it is a matter of life and death. The Government has not engaged with the core issue and, as a result, Tusla is now dealing with a backlog of hundreds of applications which have to be screened. The answer to this is that the Minister for Education should instruct her officials to issue a circular, develop that in conjunction with the HSE and enable schools to provide remote teaching for these pupils.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Last month, the Minister admitted to me that it was common practice for PhD students to be required to do five hours teaching work per week without payment. These are workers who are working through the lockdown. They are running tutorials, laboratories and classes in the universities, but are unpaid while students pay extortionate fees to be there. Does the Taoiseach think it is acceptable to expect people to work for free in the universities? I highlighted this two weeks ago and I have since been in contact with more people who are affected. Maria Delaney has written excellent articles on *noteworthy.ie* exposing the low pay and poor conditions facing these workers and others in the universities. This is hidden exploitation taking place under the Taoiseach's nose.

I highlighted the National University of Ireland Galway, NUIG, in particular, and it appears that matters there have gone from bad to worse. This week I was informed that PhD students who had desk space in the Hardiman Research Building, but who have been working from home, have been told they must travel to the university and clear their desks or their stuff will be binned. They are told to ignore the 5 km travel restriction, as it does not apply. Worst of all, there was no consultation with these student workers about this. They had no representation on the committee that decided it, again highlighting the shoddy way they are treated. Postgraduate workers are playing an essential role in keeping the colleges running. If they decided to strike, not a single university or course would be able to operate. In Sweden, PhD students are considered to be workers and are paid a wage for their work. Surely it is time for us to do the same and pay them.

The Taoiseach: First, I am disappointed with the presentation made by Deputy Boyd Barrett, in which he posited the coincidence between the reopening of schools and the rise in the number of cases. He has been a long-term advocate of looking at these issues from an informed perspective. We have done our research, as have NPHET and the HSE. The level of cases after considerable testing in schools is 2% at post-primary level and 2.5% at primary level.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is based on a narrow definition.

The Taoiseach: It is not a narrow definition at all. Equally, in terms of international research in Denmark, France and other countries, there is no evidence that schools act as a vector for the transmission of the disease. The evidence is not strong in that regard. It has been a good

thing for children that we reopened the schools. We should all support that unequivocally. Being out of school will damage children in the long term. In particular, children from disadvantaged backgrounds will be damaged and they will become long-term victims of Covid-19. We had to do it safely, with strong protocols and a strong approach. A great deal of work has been undertaken in that regard.

I have spoken to school principals. I spoke to one last week, who volunteered to me that since Halloween he has found a very big improvement, and he has found his interaction with the HSE very constructive and positive. He said that without my having to ask him. He was appreciative of the resources that had been allocated in terms of the minor capital grants that post-primary schools got for the first time ever this year. They got the second tranche of funding this year for next year. The money has been allocated to them early to prepare for 2021. It is very significant funding that post-primary schools would not have received in the past to help them to get through Covid-19. Primary schools have received the minor capital grant, but we expanded it this year. It has had a beneficial impact on families and on children, so we must do everything we possibly can to keep the incidence of the virus down.

Regarding Deputy Kelly's question, within reason schools generally work their own school calendars and the Department has always been loath to instruct every school in the country to organise its holidays within specific dates. That is something on which the Minister has given her position. I thank everybody in the entire school community - teachers, SNAs, school secretaries and caretakers - for the extraordinary work that they are doing. I also thank parents and children, for whom it has been very difficult as well. It has been a different experience from it normally would be.

In terms of postgraduate workers, they operate at different levels. Some postgraduates receive bursaries and others have contracts. Early postgraduate students might get stipends for tutorials. There are different levels and grades of postgraduate students. I will pursue the issue with NUIG. Not all postgraduates are workers. When I was a postgraduate, I did my tutorials and I got a stipend but I never saw myself as a worker. That said, there are PhD students who work in science laboratories and on research teams. When I met with them, the big issue was career pathways in research. That is where there is a need to give greater certainty and clarity because we want people to pursue careers in science-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----and research and therefore there must be a good pathway in terms of their individual careers and then we can make progress.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach very much. We must move to Question No. 8.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about the students with vulnerable parents?

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry but we are out of time. We are on Question No. 8.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have raised the issue several times but the Taoiseach has failed to answer my questions.

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise to the Deputy, but the truth is that many of the questions take so long that there is inadequate time left to answer. We might need to look at how we structure this process.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The questions should be grouped differently then, a Cheann Comhairle.

Cabinet Committees

8. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland will next meet. [35139/20]

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland will next meet. [36674/20]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 and 9 together.

The Cabinet committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland was formally established by the Government on 6 July 2020, and had its first meeting on 29 October 2020. The next meeting of the Cabinet committee is scheduled to take place on 23 November 2020. In general terms, the Cabinet committee will oversee implementation of relevant programme for Government commitments in the area of Brexit and Northern Ireland and ongoing developments and negotiations. The committee operates in accordance with established guidelines for Cabinet committees and, where appropriate, substantive issues are referred to the Government for discussion and approval. In addition to the meetings of the full Cabinet and of Cabinet committees, I also meet with Ministers on an individual basis to focus on particular issues.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I wish to raise a specific issue that my colleagues, Deputies Howlin and Nash, have raised concerning the Bill on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. The Department of Finance has proposed an amendment that would raise the minimum expenditure required to qualify for the VAT retail export scheme, which is basically tax-free shopping, from zero to €175. This means that in order to qualify for a tax-free rebate, a tourist will have to spend at least €175. This is against all trends in other jurisdictions, but it will also have a great impact on small retailers such as jewellery stores and those selling knitwear, crafts and the arts. Any store that is depending on small sales will be significantly negatively impacted. After the enactment of the legislation, the amended requirement will mean that tourists who wish to qualify for this scheme will have to spend €175. By analysis, this will exclude 80% of current expenditure in such shops. Why is the Government doing this? There must be a reason for going from zero to €175. The people who spend money in craft shops or small artistic venues, who buy small mementos, will essentially lose out dramatically. It should not be the case that tax-free shopping is only aimed at the wealthy who are travelling into the country. Those who come into the country and spend small amounts of money in locations such as the type of shops I have outlined will not be able to benefit from a VAT rebate and that will mean such shops will be negatively affected. I urge the Taoiseach to look at the issue.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I wish to speak about Covid-19 and the necessity of an all-Ireland approach. The worrying stall in the reduction of cases that we are now seeing further adds to the urgency of doing everything possible to try to develop such an approach. Could the Taoiseach give us a report on his latest efforts in that regard and the communications he has had with the Northern authorities to try to push towards an all-Ireland approach? It is clear that divergence is a problem. We need to do anything we can to try to get that all-Ireland approach.

On Brexit, one thing we have learned from Covid, although it has not always been enough

in my opinion, is that we can put in place income supports for working people when they are affected by a crisis. That lesson should also be applied to Brexit and contingency planning for the possibility of a hard Brexit. There is a lot of contingency in terms of supports for business, but there has been no discussion about supports for workers. I think we should have a workers support fund. There should be a Brexit crisis fund to support the incomes of workers who may lose out or lose employment as a result of the impact of Brexit.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I ask the Taoiseach to look into that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: As the Taoiseach is aware, negotiations recommenced this week with the intention of resolving the major outstanding issues on which there is huge concern, including those relating to the Internal Market Bill. Time is running out, so we need to ensure there is a level playing field on the big issues, including fisheries.

The joint committee is working on solutions to the issues regarding trading arrangements between the North and Britain post transition. As the Taoiseach is aware, the Internal Market Bill will return to the Commons, at which point the British Prime Minister will decide whether to reinstate the contentious clauses that breach the Irish protocol and international law. If Boris Johnson does decide to follow this course of action, he risks the trade deal itself, not only with the EU, but also a future trade deal with the United States.

The British Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues have talked up bigger and better deals outside of the EU, but none have yet materialised. The Tories' Internal Market Bill is undermining a trade deal with the EU, and now with the US. Boris Johnson's argument that the Internal Market Bill is needed to allow Britain to defend the Good Friday Agreement would be laughable were it not so serious. As a result of the Tories' brinkmanship and prevarication, there has been an inadequate space for preparation for businesses on the implications of Brexit. As has previously been said, the concerns do not just relate to business and trade, because issues also arise about the erosion of human and environmental rights. Of particular concern is the non-diminution of rights commitments in the Irish protocol and the Good Friday Agreement.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We have very little confidence that the Tories will ensure their protection.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Kelly asked about the €175 threshold for the tax rebate. Deputy Ó Cuív raised this with me at a parliamentary party meeting some time ago and I know Deputy Howlin raised it in the House during the debate. The Government is responding to this and an amendment will be introduced to significantly reduce that threshold. We need a threshold from an administrative-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: It used to be zero.

The Taoiseach: There will be a threshold and it will be significantly reduced. The catalyst has been the UK's decision to leave the European Union. We will respond to that in the form of an amendment which will come before the House.

One of my big concerns generally is the preparedness of Irish businesses for Brexit - deal or no deal. It is important that all companies plan and avail of the Government supports to help

them to deal with issues relating to customs declarations and other forms. There is a grant for employing assistants and bringing people in. It has not been availed of to the degree that one would have wished. There is an issue there irrespective of whether a deal is done. Even if a deal is done and we have a trade agreement, there will still be issues on 1 January because the UK will be outside the customs union and the Single Market. It will be out of the European Union, which has implications for us.

I welcome that negotiations have resumed and have been ongoing. There are outstanding issues. It makes sense for an agreement to be reached. The UK needs access to the Single Market. Europe needs that access to be on a common basis with the EU states in terms of having a level playing field, state aid and so forth. That is obvious. Access to the Single Market is of great importance to the British economy and I believe that the UK understands that. There will obviously be challenges on that issue, on the dispute resolution mechanism and on fisheries. A no-deal is something that everybody should work against because it would be very damaging for all concerned in the United Kingdom, Ireland and other European Union member states. If a trade deal is done, it should neuter the offending clauses of the Internal Market Bill; they should not proceed on that basis.

Deputy Boyd Barrett asked about an all-island Covid-19 approach. I have had meetings with the Northern Ireland First Minister and deputy First Minister, and with other parties. The issue is of concern. The chief medical officers are meeting and engaging. The incidence is higher in Northern Ireland than in the Republic and there are continuing challenges there. We will continue to work. We hope to have a North-South Ministerial Council next month. Hopefully, that will provide an avenue for further engagement. Prior to that we will continue talking. Obviously, they have difficulties and challenges within the Executive and there have been disagreements within the Executive with different positions taken on the level of restrictions in the North.

The Deputy mentioned funding. The European Union has put €5 billion aside for a Brexit adjustment fund. Obviously, Ireland will apply to get a portion of that because Ireland is one of the countries most negatively impacted by the Brexit decision. This year the Government budgeted for a no-deal Brexit and we have provided our own contingency funding for the fall-out from a no-deal Brexit.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss suspending the requirement of special needs assistants to complete 72 hours of non-contact work; (2) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss Project Carlow 2040: A Vision for Regeneration; (3) Deputies Pat Buckley and Thomas Gould - to discuss the operation of South Doc services in Fermoy-Michelstown and Blackpool; (4) Deputies Thomas Pringle and Johnny Guirke - to discuss the bog slide in Meenbog, County Donegal caused by wind farm development; (5) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss the concerns regarding direct provision centres in Monaghan; (6) Deputy Martin Kenny - to discuss the selection of Supreme Court judges; (7) Deputy Marian Harkin -

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to discuss the relocation of sittings of Sligo High Court; (8) Deputy Mattie McGrath - to discuss the need to review levels of on-campus activity in third level institutions and levels of fees and accommodation charges for students; (9) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss the extension of the defective concrete block scheme to County Clare; (10) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss the lack of secondary school places in Bandon, County Cork; (11) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the suspension of the school vaccine programme in the midlands; (12) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss the urgent need to improve the customer service provided by telecommunications and utility companies; (13) Deputy Carol Nolan - to discuss the provision of permanent accommodation at Gaelscoil na Laochra, Birr, County Offaly; (14) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss timely assessments for treatment at the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dún Laoghaire; (15) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss delays with construction of the Coonagh-Knockalisheen Road; (16) Deputy James O'Connor - to review the progress of school development in the east Cork region in light of ongoing school capacity issues; (17) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss the need to develop alternative markets for Irish dairy products in light of Brexit; (18) Deputy Jim O'Callaghan - to discuss permitting teenagers and young people to play competitive sporting fixtures if level 3 restrictions are imposed; (19) Deputy Michael Creed - to discuss approval to proceed with design, planning, land acquisition and construction of the N22 from Macroom to Ballincollig; (20) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the response to the repeated flooding of Bantry, County Cork with the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works; (21) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - to discuss the taskforce report on the future of arts, music and live entertainment; (22) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss the provision of emergency financial assistance to zoos, wildlife parks and aquariums given their exceptional financial difficulties due to Covid-19 restrictions; (23) Deputy Paul Donnelly - to discuss the longer than projected timeframe for the building of new schools with identified sites; and (24) Deputy Emer Higgins - to discuss the development of a more effective Covid-19 advertising strategy.

The matters raised by Deputies Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Michael Creed, Brian Stanley, and Jackie Cahill have been selected for discussion.

Sitting suspended at 1.55 pm and resumed at 2.55 p.m.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

School Staff

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister for being here to discuss the issue of the bank of 72 hours which, should work be available, special needs assistants, SNAs, can be called upon to do from time to time. Constituents in my home town of Carlow have contacted me. They are members of a union which is in the process of pursuing a claim with the Department of Education to remove these hours on the basis of their widespread abuse. Issues have arisen with regard to the manner of scheduling their use and the tasks or duties that SNAs are requested to do by employers, which can include gardening, cleaning toilets, directing traffic, building maintenance, cleaning windows and floors, administration or clerical work that would normally be completed by a school secretary. The list of possible duties is non-exhaustive and there are many tasks set which SNAs simply should not be doing. The union has sought the pausing of these hours during Covid-19 on health and safety grounds, stating that

SNAs should not be required to be in the workplace for any longer than is absolutely necessary for the provision of education to the children in their care. The union recommends that SNAs should not be required to work the 72 hours now to reduce the risk of infection and to ensure their own safety, that of their families and that of the children in their care.

Are the 72 hours compulsory and must they be worked? The most recent circular in this regard does not state that the hours are compulsory. Instead, it sets out in very clear terms how they must be used and the duties appropriate to same. Are there any plans to pause these hours for health and safety reasons, given the current unique and difficult circumstances?

Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin: I raised this issue with the Minister yesterday at the meeting of the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. At the outset I must state that the Department's treatment of SNAs has been appalling over the most recent period in terms of the lack of respect shown to them. I refer to the redeployment debacle, the issues around face coverings and then, when there is an ongoing discussion between the Department and the Fórsa trade union over the issue of these 72 hours, with the subtlety of a bull in a china shop, a letter arrived last week detailing issues referred to in Circular 0071/2011. At the end of that letter, the Department says that disciplinary procedures are available to employers under the same circular in the event of the failure of an SNA to perform a contractual obligation.

I am blue in the face listening to political representatives saying every day of the week that teachers are heroes, SNAs are heroes and every front-line worker is a hero. At the same time the Department issues a threatening letter regarding the 72 hours that it feels SNAs should be doing outside of their ordinary working day. We are in the middle of a pandemic and the Department knows that these 72 hours are controversial. We know that it is a contractual requirement for SNAs to fulfil these 72 hours but it is understandable that the trade union would suggest that these 72 hours are not required in a level 4 or level 5 scenario because being in a school or workplace setting is not safe for those workers. Into that mix, the Department predictably makes a bags of its communication to patron bodies and individual school principals.

This letter needs to be withdrawn and the Department needs to apologise for it. The Minister must state quite categorically in this Chamber that no SNA is required to do any hours outside of contact work with vulnerable students during a restrictive lockdown such as level 4 or level 5.

3 o'clock

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): At the outset, I want to acknowledge the hugely significant and important role played by special needs assistants in the education sector. They are an invaluable resource within our schools.

In reference to the points made by the Deputies, I acknowledge that a letter issued from my Department. It was sent out in response to the confusion that had arisen as a result of a communication issued by Fórsa to schools stating that there was no liability for SNAs to complete the 72 hours of non-contact hours to which the Deputies referred. It was important that my Department issued a clarification because that was what was being requested on foot of the previous correspondence. The letter reminded schools of the provisions relating to the 72 hours requirement for SNAs. That requirement has been in place since 2005 and forms part of an SNA's contract of employment, which was agreed with unions. The letter did not, in any shape

or form, change the terms and conditions of SNAs or amend previous agreements.

Under the terms of the standard employment contract agreed in 2005, SNAs were required to be available for a number of days at the start and finish of each school term, not exceeding 12 days in total. Under the Croke Park agreement, it was agreed to convert the previous requirement of SNAs to be available for 12 days outside of the school year to a requirement of 72 hours, applying *pro rata* for part-time SNAs. It was agreed by all parties at the time that the 72 hours would be used by schools as an additional bank of hours to be utilised and delivered outside of normal school opening hours and-or the normal school year. These arrangements were notified to schools in 2011, in Department Circular 0071/2011. Both the original 2005 agreement and the Croke Park provisions were negotiated and agreed nationally between management and trade unions. No additional hours were required of SNAs under the 2011 agreement.

Some recent commentary has referred to the 72 hours as being “unpaid”. In fact, remuneration for the 12 days or 72 hours is included as part of the normal salary paid to an SNA under the terms of the 2005 agreed contract. As part of the 2011 agreement on reconfiguration, it was agreed that the scheduling of the hours is at the discretion of school management. Schools were informed that they should ensure that accurate records in this regard are kept. Fórsa, the trade union which represents SNAs, has formally sought abolition of the contractual requirement for the 72 hours through industrial relations channels. In addition, the union has formally sought that the 72 hours be frozen and that employers do not request their completion for the duration of the Covid pandemic. As I indicated, some confusion arose as a consequence of the communications issued by Fórsa to schools. This led schools and management bodies to ask the Department to clarify the position, which it did. During the course of discussions on the former claim, all parties were notified that the Department intended to issue a letter to school management bodies to remind schools of the provisions relating to the 72 hours.

The agreed uses of the 72 hours include for special educational needs pupil-centred activity such as assistance with care planning, learning resource administration such as preparing class rooms and materials, class and school planning and development, assistance with special examination centres for the State examinations, and training. The duties listed in Circular 0071/2011 form part of the normal range of SNA duties and are, therefore, liable to be performed at any time during normal working hours, including during the 72 hours. The 72 hours allow for very important support work, such as assistance with care planning, learning resource administration and training, to be carried out without reducing SNAs’ time with the pupils in their care. Accordingly, the suspension of the requirement to complete the 72 hours would have a direct negative impact on pupils with special educational needs as it would impede on normal class time.

Fórsa has claimed that SNAs are being asked to carry out duties inappropriate to the grade as part of the 72 hours, as referred to by the Deputies. The Department’s recent letter reminded schools of the agreed list of uses for the 72 hours under Circular 0071/2011 and stated that the grievance procedures should be used where allegations of inappropriate use arise. Neither I nor my Department would support uses outside of those listed in the circular.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor: I thank the Minister for her reply. We are living in unprecedented times. I know from her work in education how much the Minister values SNAs and teachers, as we all do. It is important to acknowledge that. However, it remains my view that the 72 hours should be frozen. Given the situation we are in and the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on particular families and children, who are among the most vulnerable in our society, we must do our best for those families. I again thank the Minister for her reply.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Minister made reference to agreements made in 2005 and a circular issued in 2011. We were not in the middle of a pandemic in 2005 or 2011. There is no recognition from her Department that things have radically changed and that schools would not be open if it were not for special needs assistants. There must be some accommodation by the Department of the need for flexibility at this time. I have said before that if one is not a teacher or a building, the Department does not know what to do with one. There is an incredible inability to be in any way flexible. I will put my question to the Minister again. Does she expect SNAs to go into their workplace outside of contact hours and complete the 72 hours? Any reasonable and rational person would suggest that during periods of level 4 and 5 restrictions, which are considered to be very at-risk scenarios for everyone, this is an unreasonable expectation of SNAs.

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that the 72 hours in question allow hugely important support work, such as assistance with care planning, learning resource administration and training, to be carried out without reducing SNAs' time with pupils in need of their care. It is vital that the maximum time is availed of by the students in needs of SNA assistance.

The recent letter issued by my Department came on foot of discussions between parties, as I outlined. I restate that the letter did not, in any shape or form, alter the terms and conditions of SNAs. It was simply a reminder to schools regarding the management, communication and recording of the 72 hours which are part of the SNA contract. It was an aid to ensure schools could plan effectively for the optimum use of those hours to support the care needs of pupils. Circular 0071/2011 is very clear as to the appropriate uses for the 72 hours. As I said, grievance procedures are available to SNAs to report cases of alleged misuse.

To reiterate, neither I nor my Department would support anything outside of the agreed format set out in Circular 0071/2011. I am aware that Fórsa has sought the abolition of the 72 hours requirement and is pursuing it through the normal industrial relations channels. I do not intend to comment further on that claim at this juncture as it would not be appropriate to do so.

Road Projects

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and his office for facilitating me in raising this matter. The N22, which travels from Cork city westwards through Macroom and onwards to Ballyvourney, Killarney and towards Tralee, is the major access artery for the economy of the south west. That economy is the quintessential mixed economy, being dependent on foreign direct investment but also the indigenous industries of tourism, agriculture, food processing, the fishing industry and forestry. In fact, along this stretch of road can be found very significant timber processing and food industry activity.

The case I am making is that it is good planning to make preparations now for the future. I really appreciate that the Minister for Transport is in the Chamber for this discussion. This stretch of the N22 may not be upgraded today or tomorrow but we need to do the planning for it today and tomorrow. This project represents the last clasp in the necklace of the N22. There is already significant investment being made in the road, including in the Macroom bypass. In fact, that project represents the single biggest investment in Cork by the State since its foundation, at a cost of more than €300 million if one takes into account the pre-construction costs. In addition, there was the previous investment in the Ballincollig bypass. The upgrade to which I refer today would link those two investments.

The project encompasses approximately 24 km of route. It includes 25 significant junctions, many of which have seen serious and sometimes fatal accidents. Along the route are several businesses, the village of Lissarda and the smaller settlements of Srelane and Farran. It is also adjacent to Farnanes. It is a very busy artery. With regard to traffic, the traffic data site of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has some interesting information. It says that, in 2019, there was an average of 13,614 vehicles on the stretch of road between Lissarda and Macroom every day. On the same route, the stretch between the Ballincollig bypass and Ovens, at the other extreme of the road, saw 22,016 vehicles per day. By comparison, over the same period in 2019, there was an average of 12,000 vehicles per day on the stretch of the M8 between junctions 3 and 4. There is less than half the level of traffic on an existing national motorway than on part of this route. All of those in the villages, businesses and individual residences on this roadway are living a nightmare. The level of traffic outside their doors daily is really challenging from the point of view of quality of life, not to mention the risk these people must take every day when entering and exiting their properties.

Given that the local authority, in conjunction with the National Roads Authority, ten years ago sterilised a preferred route corridor, which has now lain in splendid isolation for more than a decade, we should now begin more detailed preparatory work and invest in design, land acquisition and all other necessary preparatory works. As I have said, we will not build this today or tomorrow but, as inevitably as night follows day, when the Macroom bypass is finished, the €300 million investment in which is really welcome, there will be the same bottlenecks coming off it as we see coming off the Ballincollig bypass, which will continue. There are tailbacks of ten, 15 or 20 minutes most evenings of the week caused by traffic going home from the city. It is prudent to invest in preparatory work now so that when the lightbulb moment arrives and we decide we need to invest, we can press the go button and tender for construction.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): First, I would like to explain that once funding arrangements have been put in place through the Department of Transport, under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for TII in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Overall, TII is responsible for the delivery of the national roads programme in accordance with Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan, NDP. In that context, TII provides the Department with regular updates on its delivery of the national roads programme. Within the timeframe given in the lead-up to this debate, the following information was the most up-to-date information available to me.

Within the overall context of Project Ireland 2040, the NDP was developed to underpin the successful implementation of the national planning framework. This provides the strategic and financial framework for the national roads programme for the period from 2018 to 2027. The focus of TII's activities is, accordingly, being directed towards the development of the major national road improvement schemes that are included in the NDP, along with the maintenance of the existing national road network.

The section of national route to which the Deputy refers is approximately 20 km in length and goes from the completed Ballincollig bypass to the works currently under construction on the N22 Ballyvourney to Macroom project. Some works were completed on a proposed new or upgraded route design between Macroom and Ballincollig in 2002 and 2003 and a number of possible route options were considered until the scheme was suspended during the economic downturn due to lack of funding. This new scheme is not listed for delivery in the NDP and therefore remains suspended. As a result, there are no current plans to reactivate the planning,

design or appraisal of this project. However, it should be noted that the programme for Government commits to bringing forward the planned review of the NDP and to use the review to set out an updated NDP for the period out to 2030. The review of the NDP will be aligned with the national planning framework and Project Ireland 2040. Work is under way within my Department to contribute to this planned review.

I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the fact that all projects, including those listed in the NDP or any revision to it, require statutory approval and must be in compliance with the public spending code.

The Deputy will, of course, know about another national road project in the vicinity which is included in the NDP and on which there is good ongoing progress, namely the Ballyvourney to Macroom section of roadway, to which he has already referred. The previous Government approved the award of the contract in October 2019 and construction on the site commenced in December of last year. The estimated cost of the project is approximately €280 million. Good progress on construction is currently being made and it is expected that the dual carriageway will be operational in 2023. This new road development consists of the upgrade of 22 km of the N22 national primary route between Ballyvourney and Macroom to a dual carriageway standard. This will comprise a bypass of Macroom town and the villages of Ballyvourney and Ballymakeera in County Cork. This scheme is on the Trans-European Transport Network, TEN-T, comprehensive route and will strengthen the link between Cork and Kerry.

Through the provision of reliable transport infrastructure, this project will improve connectivity between Cork and Kerry ensuring enhanced regional accessibility, which is a national strategic objective under Project Ireland 2040. The project will significantly improve journey times and allow for safer and more reliable journeys for road users. In diverting daily traffic away from Macroom, the project will improve the urban environment of the town by reducing air and noise pollution. In addition to this, and with traffic redirected to the Macroom bypass, existing roads will be developed to facilitate safer cycling and walking routes. In addition, some pavement improvement works have been completed in Lissarda village, which is located on the N22 between Ballincollig and Macroom. These works were completed in 2017 at a cost of €1.67 million over a length of 1.3 km.

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Minister for his response. It is in the context of the review of the NDP that it is appropriate to consider this matter. A very significant commitment of funding for construction is not sought at this stage but it is critical that the preparatory work is done now. In the context of that review and the projects that will then find their way into planning, I ask the Minister to have an open mind in respect of this project. We are bedevilled by numerous examples of failing to plan and failing to see what is imminent and ahead of us. With the completion of the Ballincollig bypass on one end and the Macroom and Ballymakeera bypass on the other, this is the last link of the N22 requiring investment. The extraordinarily positive cost-benefit analysis carried out for the Macroom-Ballyvourney route would be replicated if an analysis of this route was carried out because it represents the completion of the investment on the N22. Its completion would enable more sustainable living and commuting patterns to develop. I anticipate, for example, that Macroom will grow substantially following the investment already made but it will not grow to its full extent without ultimate investment in this stretch of roadway. There are numerous calls on TII to invest significant funding in major junctions along the existing stretch of road but, to be honest, that approach would only be a sticking plaster. We need the new road and, above all else, we now need the preparatory work so that at a point in the not-too-distant future we will be ready to go to construction. I ask

that the Minister keep an open mind about that and enable us to move at the appropriate time by doing the preparatory work now. The route corridor has been identified. It is now merely a question of committing resources within TII. It has the expertise and it is very good at what it does. We must commit the resources now to plan for the construction of this road.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I always keep an open mind but I should also speak my mind, although I will do so in a very respectful way because this is a useful debate. Under the national planning framework, it is clear that we want to restore life to the centre of villages, towns and cities. I will be honest. If the section from Ballincollig to Macroom costs the same as the section from Macroom to Ballyvourney, and there is no reason to expect it would not, we would be talking about at least €250 million and up to €300 million, as the Deputy himself has said. Some €250 million could help us to build a really high-quality public transport infrastructure in Cork city, which is needed. This would start to bring life back into the centre of Cork and to ensure that it can be a counterweight to our over-reliance on the growth of Dublin. Deputy Aindrias Moynihan tabled a very interesting parliamentary question in recent weeks which pointed out that places like Macroom and Ballyvourney do not have proper bus connections to Cork city. If we were to invest in the public transport alternatives, we could potentially have lower volumes in the traffic jams coming out the EMC factory and Cork city in the evenings. We could start to provide sustainable transport to ensure the whole system works for everyone. We have to start moving away from roads-led development, which is leading to further sprawl and which is undermining the strength and development in the centre of our towns, villages and cities. We need to move towards investment in sustainable transport modes that bring life back into towns.

I agree with the Deputy that Macroom will grow. With the bypass, we have the potential to invest that €750 million in the centre of Macroom town. We should do the same thing that has been done in Clonakilty and improve the public realm by improving the walking and other facilities there so that it is a strong town in its own development and is not just a commuter town for Cork city. That is the way the national planning framework is set to work and that is where we should be investing our money, rather than constantly going back to building bigger and bigger roads. The Deputy is right about that section of the N8 that has about 12,000 vehicles per day. It has the capacity for about 80,000 vehicles per day. Therefore, we are massively overproviding. Similarly, on a lot of our national road network, we are providing capacity that will never be needed. The problem is that at the same time, we do not have the public transport capacity or infrastructure. We need that infrastructure to direct where our housing goes.

Vaccination Programme

Deputy Brian Stanley: The school vaccine programme is of huge concern. The 2021 programme has been suspended in community healthcare organisation, CHO, 8 and the midlands areas of Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath. It is not happening. It was fully suspended from 9 November and never really got started this year. It would normally kick off in this semester and carry through into next year for the 2021 programme. Children in both primary and secondary school have not been vaccinated as normal since then, even though the front-line community nurses are there and are available to proceed with the programme, which is puzzling. My information is that there is a plentiful supply of the vaccine for all the required immunisations for schoolgoing children, both in primary and secondary school. It is widely accepted that these vaccination programmes are essential to prevent measles, mumps and rubella

along with cervical cancer and other medical conditions that arise in later life.

We all understand that earlier in the year the health services had to do extraordinary things and it will have been necessary to suspend the immunisation programme for a period of time during that first lockdown in March, April and May, in particular. Public health nurses were redeployed to carry out other Covid-19 related work and were flexible, and we commend them on that. However, the situation is now different and has changed. My information from the ground is that there are dozens of community Covid-19 testers who are available and trained up to take Covid-19 swabs. There is no need, therefore, to hold back public health work that would normally carry on. The school vaccination programme is proceeding apace in other regions I have checked in, such as Carlow and Kilkenny, for example. Why is the same not happening in Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath, which are included in the HSE designated area of CHO 8? This is an essential front-line service that is preventative in nature. It can be operational and available very quickly.

I often stand up here and I will complain about shortcomings in the health services and we all want reforms in this area, but there are some good things about the health services. These school vaccination programmes have been one of those good things down through the decades. It is a huge body of work that is undertaken by the front-line staff, mainly by the community health nurses. A huge volume of vaccinations are carried out every year with the co-operation of the schools. It is one of the things that is done well and effectively in the health service. My understanding from schools is that they want to have it done. They sincerely wish to have the children available for that and parents who I have spoken to also say they are concerned about the suspension of the programme.

It is supposed to be recategorised by the HSE. The HSE gave a reply of sorts to a query of mine about it being recategorised from what it called priority 1 to priority 2. It needs to be priority 1. We need to keep essential health services going during this pandemic as we move out of level 5 and back to, it is hoped, level 3 or level 2. What can be done about this to get it moving again?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank Deputy Stanley for giving me the opportunity to update the House, on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, on the schools-based immunisation programme in the midlands. We know from international literature that the highest uptake is obtained if immunisations are delivered in schools. It is vital, therefore, that children have an opportunity to avail of their immunisations in this way.

We are all too aware of the disruption that has been caused globally and here in Ireland due to the pandemic and, unfortunately, the schools-based immunisation programme has not escaped interruption. Due to the closure of school buildings in mid-March as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the schools-based immunisation programme was suspended. At that time, approximately one-third of students in junior infants still had outstanding vaccines. The visits to second level schools had only just commenced for the second dose of the HPV and the meningococcal vaccines. Therefore, about 90% were outstanding.

To address this issue, all CHO areas provided clinics for the outstanding immunisations to school-aged children in catch-up clinics over the summer months. Children who were unable to attend the catch-up clinics were offered additional chances to receive the immunisations in the academic year 2020 to 2021. Regrettably, the schools-based immunisation programmes,

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which were scheduled to begin in September 2020, were deferred in the counties covered by the midlands, including Louth, Meath, Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath. This was due to staff being redeployed to support testing, contact tracing, and the public health departments.

I am pleased to advise that the HSE has reviewed the situation and a recovery plan has been prepared for school immunisation for 2020 and 2021. It is intended that the schools-based immunisation programme will resume in the coming weeks. In addition, it is important to note that those who are targeted for school immunisation in 2020 and 2021 will have their necessary vaccinations fully completed by summer 2021.

Deputy Brian Stanley: There is some positivity in that reply, which is welcome. Since I started raising this issue, there has been huge concern around it. Parents have been at the forefront of sharing their concerns with me on this. The Minister of State mentioned in his reply that it was necessary to suspend the programme. I accept that and anyone with common sense would say that back in the earlier part of the year, it was all hands to the pump in terms of dealing with Covid-19, and those working in the health services and the Department of Health in administering that deserve our credit for the heroic work they have carried out. They have saved people's lives and they have managed in very difficult circumstances.

I accept that while some clinics were provided in CHO 8, it is also widely accepted that schools are the best place to have this administered because there is a captive audience. The Minister of State will accept that where children are in school, there will be a better take-up of the programme because the children are present and because it is happening on the one site. There is no reason for this not to kick off in the midlands counties again. The Minister of State mentioned that it will resume in the coming weeks. He might give me an indication of when that will be and if it will happen before Christmas.

One particular concern I have is on the vaccine for cervical cancer that boys and girls get. That is the way it is administered according to my information. My concern is that there are two jabs for that and that they have to be given six months apart to first year pupils. It is important that the first jab of that HPV vaccine is administered as quickly as possible to allow the second jab to be given later on in the year. That is of primary concern. We must ensure that girls are not left exposed to cervical cancer later in life.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Deputies Cowen and Flanagan have raised this issue as well. Vaccination is recognised as one of the most cost-effective and successful public health interventions that exists. The World Health Organization, WHO, estimates that 2 to 3 million deaths a year are prevented by vaccination, and a further 1.5 million could be avoided if global coverage of vaccinations improved. I thank Deputy Stanley for his kind remarks. We are all supportive of the schools-based immunisation programmes and recognise that the uptake of these vaccines is higher when delivered in schools.

However, we must acknowledge the significant challenges that have been encountered in delivering the programme this year. The HSE has been striving to overcome these challenges and put in place alternative arrangements to ensure that the schools-based immunisation programme can continue to be delivered as soon as possible. The HSE is committed to continuing to offer the recommended immunisations to school-aged children, with as little disruption as possible. I will pass on the Deputy's concerns regarding the cervical vaccine to the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. We will be keeping abreast of developments regarding the recovery plan and the resumption of the schools-based immunisation programme in the coming

weeks.

Planning Issues

Deputy Jackie Cahill: In recent years, our dairy processors, with the support of Enterprise Ireland, have made investments to diversify into new cheese categories such as continental cheese from Glanbia, mozzarella from Glanbia and Carbery and Jarlsberg from Dairygold. I read with concern in recent weeks references to such investments being made by such processors facing, and continuing to face, significant planning hurdles, which impacts on when they can make a tangible contribution to diversifying the Irish cheese product mix. We have spoken at length in this House about the challenges which we face with Brexit. Here we have our processors meeting that challenge head on, but serious hurdles are being put in front of them. In recent days and weeks, I have received representations from dairy farmers in my constituency of Tipperary, and also from the south-east region more generally.

Those people are concerned that this key Brexit diversification cheese investment plan by Glanbia Ireland, which was announced nearly two years ago, has yet to have a sod turned due to planning objections by the environmental activist group, An Taisce. This €200 million investment in south Kilkenny has the potential to generate 400 construction jobs, 100 full-time jobs and deliver a new market for milk for 4,500 families across 16 counties. This plant will be able to process 40,000 tonnes of cheese for the continental market and reduce our utter dependency on the cheese market in the UK. This is a major and significant investment.

A potential lengthy court delay to the project will be a blow to these farm families and will impact on the company's ability to diversify its products. It has been more than 12 months since this project was granted planning permission by Kilkenny County Council on 14 November 2019. My understanding is that An Taisce appealed this decision to An Bord Pleanála in December 2019. According to the website of An Bord Pleanála, this project was granted permission on 30 June this year. I understand, however, that An Taisce lodged papers in the High Court in August seeking a judicial review of this decision. This matter is expected to come before the High Court next week, which will be 21 weeks after the An Bord Pleanála verdict. My understanding is that the window for seeking judicial review is meant to be eight weeks after An Bord Pleanála's decision.

I respect the rights of citizens and properly-constituted groups to take their objections to An Bord Pleanála. We must, however, be careful that we do not allow the planning and subsequent processes to make Ireland a country where it becomes impossible to do business. Based on the information from the Charities Regulator, An Taisce secured two thirds of its income in 2019 from central Government and local authorities. Can we tolerate a situation with delays such as these? We know what happened in Athenry with Apple. This is a hugely important project for the country, not only for farmers and Glanbia, but for the economy of rural Ireland. Can we allow this legal process to continue to undermine it?

An Bord Pleanála has made a decision. My understanding is that An Taisce is basing its objections on the fact that there will be extra production in the south east for this plant. The planning process should deal with the plant in question to ensure that it meets the highest possible environmental standards. I am quite certain that when this plan stood up to an inquiry in An Bord Pleanála that it is meeting these highest possible standards. It is absolutely essential that permission is granted quickly and that the legal process is not used to thwart a vital invest-

ment for our economy and for the farmers and people of rural Ireland.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this important issue. He will understand, however, that due to it being *sub judice* and before a judicial review that I do not want to get into the specifics of the matter. I do not want to prejudice any matter before the courts. In general, however, I understand the concern which the Deputy raises. It is an issue of which I was aware. The importance which the Deputy placed on developing alternative markets for Irish dairy produce is absolutely key. I refer to the title of this Topical Issue matter. The planning system has dealt with this issue, the courts will deal with the judicial review next week, hopefully, and the system will take care of this situation in that regard. We have a clear separation, and it is the right of those who wish to make submissions to do so along the way in respect of such planning matters.

In the broader view, though, I assure the Deputy and the House, as the Minister of State with special responsibility for new market development, of my ambition to develop new markets. That is even more important considering the challenges Brexit is bringing forward for us. We know that Ireland is probably accepted as the most exposed EU member state in respect of Brexit and negative outcomes. No sector is more vulnerable than the agrifood and fishery sector, which comes in under my Department. My responsibility for the area of new market development, therefore, is critically important for the dairy sector, as it is for so many others. That is why the continuance of the policy of market diversification within my Department, in conjunction with Bord Bia, is one on which we have put a big focus. The onset of Covid-19 has created challenges in that regard for us, but it has not stopped us from continuing to push on with virtual trade missions. I refer to the trade mission schedule.

The Minister, Deputy McConalogue, and I are leading dairy-focused virtual trade missions to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam over five dates in November and December. The objective of these trade missions is to advance market opportunities for Irish exporters by showcasing our industry to 250 buyers from markets with combined import demand of more than 2.6 million tonnes of dairy ingredients per annum. These markets serve a total population of 553 million people, many of whom are increasingly urbanised and middle class. This dairy-focused trade mission will see 13 of Ireland's processors and exporters engage in business-to-business meetings with local buyers and distributors, allowing them to market their products and capabilities to a commercial dairy audience.

These markets all feature in Bord Bia's marketing strategy 2019-2021 as a priority. It is forecast that the event will deliver up to 500 new leads for Irish client companies participating. High potential leads will be targeted for follow-up engagement as part of the 2021 Gathering Moments Bord Bia inward buyer event. Even though it is an online event, the ambition of the mission will serve as classical trade missions have in the past. I refer to building understanding, reputation and business. There will also be follow-up from my Department and Bord Bia. The ability of my Department and Bord Bia to do that detailed follow-up, from these new leads, is enhanced by the additional resources allocated for this activity in recent years, including the creation of new agricultural attaché posts in our embassy network and a new division in headquarters dedicated to international trade. Additional funding of €4 million was also secured in the recent budget for Bord Bia to help it in the important work being done to develop our dairy industry. I take on board the concerns raised by the Deputy on that specific point, which is before the courts. The Deputy can be assured of my determination and that of my Department to continue to drive new market development for the dairy sector.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I thank the Minister for his reply. Glanbia and other dairy processors are facing this significant difficulty at the moment. Feasibility studies have been done on routes to market and on acquiring suitable partners on the Continent for developing this product. A huge amount of money is invested. As I said in my original statement, eight weeks is usually the timeframe within which a judicial review should be heard after An Bord Pleanála's decision. We are now at 21 weeks. We cannot allow the legal process to delay a decision on this project. It has been cleared by An Bord Pleanála. It is absolutely urgent that a strict timeframe is adhered to for a decision to be reached. I fully respect the rights of citizens to make objections, but I object when the apparatus of the system is used to delay a decision unnecessarily and I believe that is what is happening here. We see clearly that it is nearly three times the permitted timeframe. This is causing huge concern for people in my constituency and in the south east. This opportunity is knocking on the doors now for these processors. I accept the Minister of State's bona fides, and those of Bord Bia, in what he is doing to establish markets and for the huge ongoing efforts to establish markets and to diversify from the British market, upon which we have depended for centuries. When we have an opportunity, we have to seize it.

Obviously, the proper environmental standards must be adhered to. I am absolutely sure that is the case with An Bord Pleanála's decision. At farm level, farmers recognise fully that sustainable food production is the way forward and that we have to meet the climate change challenges that are in front of us. Farmers will meet that, and our processing industry is also meeting that head on. This will be a modern plant, just diversifying product, which is exactly what the doctor ordered for the challenges we face with Brexit. Some 40,000 tonnes of cheese production is hugely significant. I urge the Government to make sure that the tightest possible timeframe is employed to ensure a decision is reached and that this investment can proceed.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for that point, which I take on board. I share the seriousness the Deputy places on this particular development and its overall impact in that part of the State and for the dairy sector in general. Given its importance I will not be drawn into speaking about it specifically because I do not want to prejudice any matter before the courts. Suffice to say, I believe that steps were taken - I say this wearing my hat of responsibility for research and development - and that funding was allocated in that regard to better place growth for the dairy sector and to meet the sustainability and climate challenges. I am very confident that agriculture and the dairy sector has a very positive story to tell in that regard and will stand up to any scrutiny, whether through a planning process or a judicial system. I am very confident it can do that and I would like that to be dealt with as quickly as possible. I understand the matter is before the courts next week.

I believe the dairy sector will meet head on any questions asked of it about its sustainability. Consider, for example, the increased innovation across the dairy sector. New market development is not so much about new market development in dairying, it is actually about growing existing potential within existing markets. Our dairy sector is in most markets already. We are in 140 countries on the dairy side. The beef and meat sector would be jealous of the access the dairy sector has. It is about growing the markets we have there. The sustainability piece that will be relevant to the case the Deputy has referred to is just as important for all of those new markets and for growing the markets we already have. Our dairy sector is telling a very robust story and we are continuously working with the sector to improve our output with regard to sustainability and to develop new technologies and innovation. Companies such as Glanbia and others are leading the way in that. I am very proud to be associated with that. I have no doubt that they and the dairy sector will stand up to any scrutiny put to it.

Rural and Community Development: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak today on the work being carried out by my Department. At the outset, I acknowledge the work of my predecessor, the former Minister, Deputy Ring. It is worth remembering that when the Department of Rural and Community Development was established back in 2017, it did not even have a building to call their own. What was achieved by the Minister, Deputy Ring, and his officials in the three years since means there is now a well-run Department in place delivering real and tangible benefits to rural communities throughout the State.

When I was appointed as the Minister in June, I was determined to build on that good work, and that is why I maintained the Department of Rural and Community Development as a stand-alone Department separate from my other brief with the Department of Social Protection. There are of course strong synergies between the two Departments, particularly when it comes to programmes like community employment, Tús and the rural social scheme, which do such fantastic work in local communities throughout the country. I, along with the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, will look to strengthen that work further by bringing a more joined-up and co-ordinated approach to the two Departments' work in that area.

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has changed every aspect of our lives, including how we socialise, how we work, how we study and how we interact with others. The crisis has also reminded us of the value of communities working together to support each other and helping the most vulnerable in our communities. The Covid-19 crisis has also shown us that we can adapt to difficult situations and be innovative in how we approach things. It has given us an opportunity to revalue the importance of rural economies to our overall national development and to reimagine the potential for what rural Ireland and its people can achieve.

There is no one size fits all when we talk about rural Ireland. Different places have different strengths and different needs. Some rural areas are close to large urban centres and others are very remote. The offshore islands have their own unique needs because of their peripheral nature, but they also have great strengths. Recognising and realising the different needs of our rural communities will be a key focus of the new rural policy I am currently developing. This policy will build on the progress achieved through the action plan for rural development, which concluded in 2019.

As we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis and look to the future, my message is simple. Rural Ireland must be a central part of our national economic and social recovery. When we talk about recovery, we need to ensure that it is a balanced recovery that reaches all parts of our country. The new rural policy will address the impact of Covid-19 on rural areas, but it will also be forward-looking and ambitious and seek to realise opportunities for rural areas.

It really is time to reframe the narrative around the rural-urban divide. Our national recovery requires a holistic approach, involving the contribution of both urban and rural areas. With

a country of our size and with our strong dependence on sectors such as agrifood and tourism, the separation of urban and rural in our language is no longer helpful. The two are interdependent and we need to recognise that. The process of developing the rural policy has included a wide range of consultation events with key stakeholders, including Departments, State agencies, rural stakeholder groups, young people and the wider public. The inputs from these consultations are being factored into the drafting of the policy.

I am also engaging in a series of bilateral discussions with other Ministers to ensure the new policy reflects the whole-of-government response needed to drive forward ambitious and positive change for rural Ireland in the years ahead. I hope to be in a position to bring the final policy to the Government for approval in the near future and I would welcome Deputies' views over the course of this debate on what they believe is needed in that policy.

One of the key areas of focus in the policy will be ensuring we can maximise the huge opportunities that remote working presents for rural development. Remote working, or connected working as I call it, will be a game changer for rural Ireland. Last year, remote working was just a concept or an aspiration. Now, because of Covid, it is an everyday working reality for thousands of workers. Major companies like Indeed and Microsoft telling their staff that they can work remotely for the long term highlights the potential for rural development.

This week marks one year since the national broadband plan contract was signed. Nobody is questioning now whether it was the right decision to sign that contract. The national broadband plan is the single biggest investment in rural Ireland since electrification and the Covid pandemic has proven beyond doubt that the decision to sign the contract last year was absolutely the right call.

There are benefits across the board from remote working. People can live and work in their own locality and access more affordable housing. Less time spent commuting means a better work-life balance and is also positive for the environment. As I have said before, the reality is that an office worker with good phone and broadband coverage can do the same job in Ballybay as in Ballsbridge. As a Government, we need to seize the momentum around remote working now. My Department is investing in the development of remote working hubs through schemes like the €1 billion rural regeneration and development fund and the town and village renewal scheme. Investment in co-working facilities is also important because not everybody wants to work from home permanently.

We will also have 200 broadband connection points up and running by the end of this year and that will increase to over 300 by next year. My Department is working with the Western Development Commission to build an integrated network of remote working hubs along the Atlantic economic corridor, from Kerry to Donegal. The Western Development Commission has identified and mapped more than 100 remote working hubs that will serve that region. I want to see that work spread countrywide in order that we can map out all of our remote working hubs across the country. We need to know which ones are working well, which ones are underutilised and most important, we need to raise awareness of what is available. My vision is that at the end of that work we will have a mobile phone app that people will be able to use to identify a remote working facility that is available for them to go and work at, no matter where they are in the country. An interdepartmental working group, chaired by the Secretary General of my Department, has been convened to progress that work as a matter of priority.

As many Deputies will be aware, there is a vast array of funding streams and supports avail-

able from my Department. A total of 139 projects have been approved for funding of €166 million under the rural regeneration and development fund to date. These are large scale, often multimillion euro, projects which will deliver significant impacts across rural Ireland, supporting sustainable communities, economic development and job creation. The closing date for the third call for category 1 large projects under the rural regeneration and development fund is 1 December 2020 and I look forward to announcing the successful projects in 2021.

The town and village renewal scheme has proven to be an extremely effective and popular support since it was established in 2016, with almost 1,200 projects approved to date for funding of over €78 million. Funding of up to €200,000 is available for projects under this scheme and successful projects can range from the development of digital hubs, which I mentioned earlier, to works to improve the public realm.

The outdoor recreation scheme provides funding for the development of greenways, cycleways, walking trails, blueways and other important recreational amenities. This scheme has an annual budget of €10 million per annum, with a further contribution made by Fáilte Ireland. The pandemic has awoken an interest in people in getting out and exploring our great outdoors. That is something on which I want to build further and I was pleased to secure an additional €2 million for the outdoor recreation scheme in budget 2021.

CLÁR is an investment programme for small-scale projects in rural areas that have suffered from depopulation. It is a hugely popular scheme and since 2016, funding of over €36 million has been allocated for over 1,500 projects in CLÁR areas. The CLÁR budget has been increased to €5.5 million in budget 2021.

The community enhancement programme provides small capital grants to community groups to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas. That scheme is administered by local community development committees with support from the local authorities.

The local improvement scheme, LIS, provides funding for improvements to private and non publicly maintained roads. The scheme was reintroduced in 2017 and since then €58 million has been allocated to over 2,300 projects, which have benefited over 10,000 landowners and residents. The LIS allocation for 2020 was €10 million, but I have secured an extra €500,000 for the scheme next year.

Under the LEADER programme, €250 million has been provided since 2016 to rural projects focused on economic and enterprise development, job creation, social inclusion and supporting the rural environment. As of 1 November, 3,530 projects with a value of over €139 million had been approved for LEADER funding. As Deputies are aware, the current LEADER programme comes to an end this year and the programme for Government includes a commitment to prioritise a State-led programme to bridge the gap between the current LEADER programme and the next EU programme. An extra €4 million has been provided for LEADER in budget 2021 to bring the total allocation for next year to €44 million. This allocation will be used to fund a combination of existing projects as they come to completion, as well as for new projects to be approved under the transitional programme. The funding will also support the administration costs of local action groups, which deliver the programme locally, in closing out the existing programme and delivering the transitional programme. The details of the transitional programme are currently being finalised and I hope to be in a position shortly to announce the full details of project and administration allocations under the programme.

That is a brief overview of some of the main funding streams available from my Department. The grants available can range from a few hundred euro under the community enhancement scheme right up to several million euro under the rural regeneration and development fund. One thing I would like to hear from Deputies during this debate is whether they feel there are any gaps in our supports. If, for example, they are hearing about good projects in their local areas that just cannot find a suitable funding avenue, I ask them to let me know because I want to ensure our schemes meet the needs of communities on the ground.

4 o'clock

My Department is responsible for the public library service which has over 330 branches. Public libraries have provided a brilliant service since the onset of the pandemic in March. My Department funds a libraries capital programme that will invest €29 million in 18 projects, as well as the My Open Library service between 2016 and 2022.

Building on the success of the existing libraries capital programme, my Department approved €3 million in funding in September for a small-scale capital works programme to support local authorities to adapt their public libraries to comply with the Covid-19 public health guidelines. I have recently approved €713,000 for specific library supports for marginalised, socially excluded and disadvantaged communities. My Department has provided €400,000 in funding to purchase additional e-books and e-audiobooks to meet the rising demand for online services. Usage is now at unprecedented levels with e-book loans having increased by 122% and e-audiobook loans increasing by 111%. While these services are highly valued by library members, naturally, they are looking forward to when they can return to their local library again when restrictions allow.

My Department was centrally involved in the Government's community call initiative. This was an unprecedented mobilisation of national and local government, along with the community and voluntary sector, to support vulnerable people in our communities. Community call has brought in a new way of working, a renewed shared purpose and collaboration between volunteers, local and national government, as well as the community and local development sector.

The past few months have been a difficult time financially for community and voluntary groups. In response to this, the community and voluntary sector Covid-19 stability fund was a targeted cash injection for organisations and groups delivering front-line services to the most at need in our society, as well as those in danger of imminent closure due to lost fundraising or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of Covid-19.

Four tranches of successful applications have been announced, allocating funding of over €30 million to 568 organisations. This funding is now supporting the delivery of many critical front-line services in every part of the country. A decision will be finalised shortly on the distribution of an additional €10 million allocation. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, will speak later on all the good work taking place in the Department on the community side.

Many initiatives are being undertaken by my Department to support rural Ireland and our community and voluntary sector across the country. I am glad to have had the opportunity to outline some of our work today. Rather than just having statements for the sake of it today, I would like to use this as an opportunity to hear the feedback from Deputies on what they feel is working well but also what areas on which we can improve. Are there any gaps in our funding

supports? Do we need to change the areas of focus for some of the schemes? I am happy to hear any constructive ideas that Deputies might have around the new rural policy. I look forward to hearing constructive and positive feedback from Deputies. I want to work with Deputies on this because I certainly do not have a monopoly on good ideas. The time in this House can be used for the benefit of the people of rural Ireland. I would like to hear about issues and ideas around remote working. Can we improve on the schemes? What should be the priority? What ideas do Members want to see progressed in the new rural policy, such as town centres? There are many areas on which we can have a good discussion.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister. You have been busy.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is a welcome opportunity for this debate at this time in the context of Covid and Brexit. I acknowledge the work the Minister, as well as the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, have done since they took over. I also acknowledge the work of her predecessors, my constituency colleague, Deputy Ring, Deputy Ó Cuív and Pat Carey who served in Departments which laid the foundation for much of the work the Minister is now doing. I acknowledge the work of her civil servants, predominantly based in Ballina, my home town, who have worked extraordinarily hard with the Minister and her predecessor, Deputy Ring, to respond to the various crises over the past several months and who have put in place a Department responding to many of the challenges we face.

One of the best things the Minister could do for rural development is to reinstate the policy of decentralisation and to get more people to work outside of the capital in rural communities where they, particularly those in the Department of Transport, could experience the day-to-day challenges of life in rural areas.

The new rural policy will be welcome. It will take in the lessons we have learned from Covid but also from Brexit. The Copenhagen Economics report on Brexit stated there could be between 17,000 and 30,000 fewer jobs in our food industry depending on the severity of Brexit. An IBEC report from 2017, which still holds, stated rural areas are more than five times more reliant on Brexit-exposed jobs than urban areas. While considerable advantages have been shown during Covid, there are considerable challenges. The sectors which face the biggest post-Covid challenges in tourism and retail are predominantly based in rural areas. For many people, tourism is the anchor of their rural economy. We will have to respond quickly and comprehensively to rebuild that.

As well as the new rural policy, there is the national plan review. All the initiatives in her Department outlined by the Minister are welcome. We have to make big ticket investments in terms of infrastructure across rural Ireland, however. This would send a signal. Those big ticket investments would include further support for regional airports, including Ireland West Airport Knock, which I know got support last week. This time last year before Covid, we were talking about building a strategic development zone around the airport and exploiting the industrial and employment advantages for an area that suffered significant employment damage for many years.

The western rail corridor would result in putting freight and passengers back on track, while making public transport an attractive and feasible option. There are various regional and national roads with the Atlantic economic corridor. The Minister referred to it in the context of broadband connection points. However, the Department needs to lead a strategy for developing the Atlantic economic corridor as a counterweight. This would take the pressure off accommo-

dition, infrastructure and public services that were so apparent until Covid began. That is an area the Department can re-energise as we redevelop the Atlantic economic corridor.

The new action plan for rural development needs to look at the benefits of homeworking. NUI Galway, with the Western Development Commission, did an interesting survey which showed that 94% of respondents want to continue to work remotely some, or all, of the time after the Covid crisis. The Minister made the important point that not everybody wants to continue to work at home. Instead, they want to go to a place of work with collegiality, as well as the separation of work from home. The connection of innovation centres, broadband connection points and a support for communities to develop that kind of location is absolutely essential. Those who participated in the survey had not previously considered homeworking. More importantly, when we see employers giving homeworking as a choice because they had no option and realised that it works, then there are significant opportunities there for the west coast.

The broadband issue continues to be a major bone of contention. The Minister does not need to be told that, coming from a rural constituency. The urgent roll-out of the national broadband plan is crucial. There cannot be any delays. We must also look at the existing providers, particularly Eir. I know the Ceann Comhairle is fed up with Topical Issue matters related to Eir, but the roll-out of broadband is causing huge aggravation in rural communities. There must be far more co-ordination with Eir on the roll-out of the national broadband plan. Neighbour is literally pitted against neighbour in the roll-out of broadband. That is not the way to do business. It cannot be allowed to continue. Home working and homeschooling have shown the deficiencies of broadband, but the opportunities are there. We need better co-ordination and greater ambition in the roll-out of broadband facilities.

The Minister mentioned several schemes. I welcome last week's announcement of 100% funding for greenways. A lot of the Minister's schemes depend on funding from local authorities. Local authorities have just come through a very difficult financial period. I compliment the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on responding to this with a 100% rates remission. Any local authority that is considering reducing services should reconsider in light of the Government's investment in local authority finances. However, cash resources will be scarce for the foreseeable future. I ask the Minister to have regard to local authorities' ability to invest in Government funding programmes and consider a model of 100% Government funding for some key projects.

All rural communities throughout the European Union are suffering in similar ways. All of the difficulties and challenges that we face, including those related to depopulation, services and infrastructure, could be addressed on a pan-European basis. State aid rules must be revised to allow Governments to help rural communities to repopulate, invest in infrastructure and support businesses without contravening them. I refer in particular to small local businesses. There will be an appetite for such a revision throughout Europe.

Tá a lán de na ceantair Ghaeilge i gceantair thuaithe agus tá sé tábhachtach go ndéanaimid gach iarracht cabhrú leis an nGaeilge ag an am seo. Most of our Gaeltacht communities are in rural areas and are facing particular population challenges. I welcome the fact that the Minister is involving other Ministers in this. The former Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, and I used to spar at question time in the previous Dáil. One thing we agreed on was the siloed approach in so many areas of the Government's work. For want of a better phrase, too many Departments dump all of their rural and community work on the Minister's Department. That is simply not on. Every Department has a role to play in rejuvenating

our rural communities. It should not all be left to the Minister present and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

In the area of education, we have to look at the rules around schools and the pupil-teacher ratio. That must once again favour and protect rural schools. A school is the heart of a community. Rural communities can build out from there. I have already referred to local government issues. In the area of transport, Local Link services need more support and better co-ordination. The physical investment we are now seeing must be reflected in our local and regional roads. The local improvement scheme, LIS, is excellent but it is choked by bureaucracy. It should be freed up and the power to decide where the funding goes should be returned to local councillors rather than staying with the Department of Rural and Community Development. The Minister is busy enough without having to decide what bóithrín in what county should get funding. I call on the Minister to give local government the authority to spend the money. It will spend it well, as it always has.

The Minister mentioned town and village renewal, which is crucial. We are all seeing the death of towns and villages. We need to examine the planning laws with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to see why towns and villages have so many empty buildings that could be used as accommodation to address our housing crisis. The upstairs spaces in many business premises could be rejuvenated as community facilities. If combined with proper public transport and proper investment in schools, that would have a serious effect.

We could speak about this issue for many hours, but the Minister will be bringing the plan forward. I ask her to engage with us all on it. Equally, these issues challenge us to engage with her Department. I wish the Minister continued success. She will have our support. The ideas we can bring to this debate are crucial. I thank the Minister's Department officials for their extraordinary work during an extraordinary year. Let us hope we can build on the lessons we have learned in 2020 to lay good foundations for the years ahead.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak during these statements. The primary objective of those of us who grew up and live in rural areas is to see those communities thrive. We must protect and sustain the rural life that so many people enjoy so they can live, work and raise their families there. We must ensure that future generations can live and work in our rural towns and villages. The schoolgoing children of today should not be forced to emigrate after school or college, as many of my generation were. Workers should not be forced into their cars to commute for hours on end or forced to move to urban areas to pay huge rents and work just to live.

For many years the options for young people and families have been to emigrate or to move to Dublin. In the end it comes down to investment. There must be equal investment east and west, North and South. In many cases that is what has been missing for decades. The Minister spoke earlier about balanced recovery after Covid-19. That is so important. We have to recognise that there was no such balanced recovery in many towns and villages after the 2008 recession. Post offices, schools, Garda stations and businesses have closed, services have been stripped and moved to bigger towns and main streets have become derelict. Many of the jobs lost at that time were never replaced and the investment needed to reboot our towns and villages was not forthcoming.

That fact is proven by the European Commission's downgrading of the northern and western region from a developed region to a transition region. This region is regressing. It is fall-

ing behind the other regions. That is because when it comes to investment, the west and north west of Ireland have been at the bottom of the table. This region has been at the bottom of the table when it comes to infrastructure, health, third level education and commercial activity. Disposable incomes in this region are far below the national average and those in other regions. These are the enablers that will improve people's standards of living. That must be addressed. The Minister has outlined the many available funding streams, which do make a difference. However, we need far more investment to bring the west and north west back to the status of a developed region. We have a regions problem. The European Commission has told the Government as much. Furthermore, a recent study on the EU's lagging regions, commissioned by the European Parliament, has found that the west and Border region should be reclassified as a lagging region because of its extremely low growth, which diverges from the rest of the State. That is quite alarming and it must be addressed.

I have said this to the Minister before and I will say it again. Sustained positive discrimination is needed to address the inequality that is growing year after year and leaving the western region behind. I commend the Northern and Western Regional Assembly which has brought forward a comprehensive plan to take advantage of the fact that the northern and western region will now qualify for European co-financing rates of 60% for the period from 2021 to 2027. That means the EU will contribute €60 for every €100 invested by the Government in that period. We must grasp that opportunity to tackle this widening inequality.

We have yet to see the new rural development action plan. This was due to run from 2020 after the last one finished in 2019. This year, 2020, is nearly over. I really do not like the phrase "near future" because it really does not narrow things down. We need to see that plan. I have spoken to the Minister about one of the main objectives of the previous plan, namely, to support enterprise growth and job creation in rural areas. The key target of that action plan was to increase the number of people in employment. I know from a recent reply to a parliamentary question that, between 2015 and 2019, employment in the regions increased by 222,400 outside of Dublin. As I said, that is welcome. Job creation is always welcome but the Minister could not provide a regional breakdown in that regard. This needs to be rectified in the next action plan. We need to see targeted job creation and to see the results of it because "outside of Dublin" leaves 25 counties in the South in respect of which we do not know where job creation is happening. I ask that in the new action plan we see far better targeted job creation and the results to show us where we are at come the end of that plan. If we are to develop and sustain our rural communities, we need jobs. One positive that we can take from Covid is the increased number of people who have been able to work remotely over the last few months. That is really positive. It is another opportunity for rural towns and villages that we have to grasp. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity to re-imagine how we work and it will be of huge benefit to workers, their families and their local economies. The regional assemblies of Ireland recently published a report which shows that one in four private sector workers could be targeted for remote working. In the west and north-west alone, there are 40,000 such workers. This means 40,000 fewer people commuting and at home in their communities spending in their local economies. This number is much higher when the public sector personnel that are working remotely are added. Remote working hubs and co-working spaces can transform rural Ireland. The Minister referenced the interdepartmental group that has been established. I hope there is a speedy timeline for it to report to the Minister. I welcome that work is under way. It will be extremely positive for us, for our generation and generations to come.

I also want to make reference to broadband and the commitment in the programme for

Government to accelerate the roll-out of broadband in rural areas. How is that going to be achieved? It would be helpful to see a plan on how that acceleration will happen. We all know that there are many homes and businesses that continue to have major difficulties when it comes to broadband. We have seen these difficulties most recently in the context of marts having to operate online because of Covid restrictions. This has created problems for marts and for buyers. This is really worrying at a time when farmers' income is already on the floor for many. We also saw it back in March in the context of the only option for children being to go online to learn. I would welcome more clarity in regard to the acceleration of broadband provision and how that is going to come about.

There are two other issues I want to mention briefly. These are issues that affect people living in rural Ireland that are constant and have not been addressed but can be addressed. The first issue is school transport. I appreciate this does not come directly within the remit of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, but in the context of the whole-of-government approach about which she spoke earlier we need to look at this annual problem. The problem has been further increased this year because of Covid but it exists year-on-year. The Department of Education needs to work with the Department of Transport to reform school transport for children. I am still being contacted by parents in my constituency who have not been able to secure places on buses for their children. In areas where LocalLink operates consideration should be given to it being allowed to transport children to school to and from housing states in the morning and the evening. This proposal was raised with me at my local family resource centre. This would be of benefit to children when it comes to their attendance at school. In areas where a LocalLink service is operating this idea should be examined.

The other issue is illegal dumping, which is an issue all of us here hear about all of the time. It is a blight on our rural towns and villages. Again, this is an issue that has not been resolved. The issues arising in the different areas vary greatly but the fines are not working. I think the current fine is €150. Addressing this issue requires a whole-of-government approach with various Departments. We also need to engage with local litter wardens on how we can resolve this problem. It is a real shame. It causes a great deal of frustration for people living in rural areas when they see it constantly.

It is disappointing that "the Islands" has been dropped from the Department's title. We have an awful lot of work to do. As somebody who does not come from an island off the coast of Ireland I am mindful of the serious engagement we need to have with people who call the islands home. I hope that we can do much of that work through the line committee. It is important when speaking about balanced recovery and east and west that we remember the people on the islands and the need to sustain their livelihoods there as well. I know that is something the Minister will appreciate.

We should remember that there are many positives even though we are in the midst of Covid. I read in an article in *The Irish Times* at the weekend that in my home town of Bal-laghaderreen five new businesses have opened or are about to open. That is positive. As we approach Christmas, it is important that we remember businesses across the country in our rural towns and villages. We need to support them through Covid to make sure that we can rebuild after Covid and going forward. We need to make sure that the mistakes of the 2008 recession are not repeated. This means taking full advantage of the EU regional funding for the west and the north, taking full advantage of remote working opportunities, tackling those issues that are ongoing around school transport and illegal dumping. There are other issues. So many people want to live in rural communities. Many of our emigrants are coming home to live and work in

rural communities. We need to do everything possible to make sure there are opportunities in our rural towns and villages to allow that to happen.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The community and regional development of rural Ireland must be prioritised and well-funded if we are serious about protecting and sustaining our rural communities. The recent closure of post offices, rural Garda stations and the decline in funding in recent years, combined with villages losing their parishioners to emigration, sadly, has taken its toll on rural Ireland.

The Government's funding commitment to the new rural regeneration fund is a step in the right direction. However, some of these grants apply to a population of 10,000 or under. This means slightly bigger rural market towns, although they contain areas of disadvantage and deprivation, are over the threshold. This anomaly must be addressed. LEADER funding is a vital cog in the development of our rural communities. There is need for re-examination of the cluttered bureaucratic system which favours those who are well-equipped to handle the paperwork over those who are not. This applies in particular to community volunteers involved in the social inclusion projects. They are often overwhelmed with the amount of complex hoops they must jump through to get a small project off the ground.

Community employment, CE, schemes offer vital support to local communities. This should be an area of most concern to the current Government. Insurance and ever-increasing heating and lighting costs have put a tremendous strain on community centres, community services, community enterprises and, in the main, community managers, some of whom after 20 to 25 years service are not entitled to a pension. The cost of the recent increase in the minimum wage was also passed on to community centres, which resulted in reduced hours for CE employees, or worse still, some being let go, which is the direct opposite of the purpose of the scheme in the first instance.

It will come as no surprise that I am also raising the impact of Covid-19 on rural Ireland. This pandemic has changed the way many people work on this island. People had to adapt quickly to create home offices and new routines of childcare, among many other balancing acts. However, the experience of working from home is more difficult for many people in rural Ireland, in particular in Wexford, due to inadequate broadband provision. I was concerned to read in a reply to a parliamentary question to my colleague, Deputy Ó Murchú, that of the 68 public broadband points connected none is in Wexford. I know there are some connection points planned for the county but can we expect any of them to be operational before the end of 2020? I note the Minister's recent announcement of remote working hubs for rural areas. This is, of course, a welcome idea but there are many areas in Wexford that will not be served by these hubs and where people cannot get basic broadband services into their homes. This needs to be dealt with as a matter of priority.

I have no doubt that other Deputies will agree with me that the major issue is the daunting threat of Brexit. Last week, I spoke in this Chamber on the issue of Brexit and in particular Rosslare Port. It is a very important issue that I fear is being overlooked. In preparation for Brexit and a subsequent increase in customs control, staff and traffic at ports, a traffic management plan has been devised for Dublin Port and its surrounding areas but as far as I am aware a similar plan has not been made for Rosslare Port and the surrounding areas. I know this issue is not within the realm of the Minister's Department *per se*, but it is an example of rural Ireland being overlooked and I urge her to follow up on the issue with her Government colleagues to get it addressed. It cannot be accepted that the community of Rosslare is subject to massive

traffic disruption because it was not given the same thought and planning as urban Dublin.

Finally, it is part of the remit of the Minister to support sustainable communities across Ireland and to protect rural communities from climate change. One area that is certainly not sustainable is the continued flooding in my town of Enniscorthy. The people of Enniscorthy have endured extreme hardship. Floods have occurred there in 1924, 1947, 1965, 2000, 2015 and in June of this year. The flooding is further crippling businesses and homeowners already under severe pressure from the prospect of another bad winter. There have been long-promised flood defence schemes but, unfortunately, there has been delay after delay. A scheme is currently awaiting sign-off by the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath. I urge the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to follow up on that with him as a matter of extreme urgency.

The life experiences of communities in rural areas such as my county of Wexford must be listened to by the Government as the experience of living and working in these areas is often very different from that in urban cities and towns. Smaller towns and villages offer so much by way of growing businesses, exceptional tourism and hospitality opportunities and contributions to the community through sports and the arts sector. We must continue to support them. We must address the inequalities they face compared with bigger cities and ensure they can continue to contribute to our economic and social lives and the culture of the nation.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Covid-19 has affected every single walk of life since last March. When society practically shut down eight months ago, we entered the land of the unknown. Natural human interaction that we took for granted was no longer possible. We needed to try to find a new way of interacting. It was no longer possible to attend workplaces or school settings. At some stages, we could no longer fly, drive or even walk to meet our families. The possibility of attending sporting or music events was removed. This was all due to the threat of the virus.

Technology stepped into the breach, and thankfully so. I doubt many or any of us just those few months ago had ever heard of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts or other similar virtual forums. What I am getting to is that whenever our basis of humanity was removed or threatened by this global pandemic, the only mechanism that allowed us to continue our lives with some sense of normality was technology. However, the issue is that if ever the technological divide in Ireland manifested itself and showed how wrong and problematic this divide is, it was during this Covid-19 crisis.

A year ago almost to the day, on 19 November 2019 my constituency colleague and then Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh, announced a €128 million broadband investment that would connect 32,000 homes and businesses in Donegal to a high-speed fibre optic broadband network. Many people would have loved to have had such a connection in recent months.

I wish to touch on my county's experience with the Eir contract under which the company was contracted to reach out to another 300,000 homes. Lines were drawn in rural communities outside of towns. These were cruel lines. I have lost count of the number of families my office has dealt with that were just outside the lines. They were looking at their neighbours who gained this absolutely essential access to broadband. It is almost comparable to the electrification of the country back in the day it is so vital in the modern age. Those families were looking at other houses not too far away from them that had gained access, but they had not. That was

so cruel. We must deliver this plan.

The House is only too well aware of the problems successive Governments have had in rolling out a national broadband plan. Indeed, we in Sinn Féin had our concerns about the current national broadband plan and we put them forward at the time. That said, we are where we are. The irony of Covid-19 is that although technology went some way to eradicating some of the problems the virus threw at us, the virus also inhibited and affected the roll-out of the current broadband plan. It is now behind schedule. We are at a point where it must be taken as a matter of the utmost seriousness and a priority for the Government. Rural Ireland can no longer operate without a connected broadband infrastructure. For far too long, rural Ireland has been operating with one hand held behind its back when it comes to broadband and, dare I say, there has been no spark from far too many Governments when it came to levelling the pitch. I can tell the Minister that it is unacceptable and will not be accepted for any considerable period into the future.

It is my belief that the success or failure of the roll-out of the national broadband plan will be a litmus test for the Government. Life has changed as a result of Covid-19. Patients are accessing medical appointments through a laptop or mobile phone screen. Students in school or college are doing their lessons online. Increased numbers of people are doing their shopping online and banking is carried out almost exclusively online. None of these necessary life actions can happen without quick, secure and affordable access to broadband.

I ask the Minister to convene an implementation team within her Department, if such a team is not already in place, to work directly with National Broadband Ireland to get the roll-out of broadband back on track, to speed it up if possible and to allow my constituency of Donegal and all other parts of rural Ireland at least to have an even hand when we are fighting for jobs, investment and tourism. To finish as I started, rural and community development is impossible into the future without access to broadband. I urge the Minister to let this be her legacy in the Department for which she has responsibility.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I am thankful for the opportunity to speak on this issue. The impact of Covid-19 has been extreme and immediate, especially among the most vulnerable in society.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Minister of State sharing time?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I am sharing time. My Fine Gael colleague is not here at the moment.

Those are the people who the Department supports. Charities, social enterprises, community organisations and the volunteers who assist with these supports are an integral part of the fight against the pandemic. A key priority for me now and into the future will be the continued implementation of the community and voluntary sector strategy, Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities, which will be key to strengthening the community and voluntary sector which has shown its valuable contribution to all aspects of society throughout the pandemic.

As a result of the partnership approach adopted and the increased funding provided by the Department through the past three years to the community and voluntary sector, we were well placed to respond quickly and effectively to the challenges presented to our vulnerable and older citizens during Covid-19. For the past eight months, community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises have played a significant role in delivering vital services to those most in need. I wish to mention some of the ways in which we, as a Department, were

able to support them to do this.

First, there is volunteering. There is a fantastic record of volunteer work in Ireland and the Department has continued to invest in volunteering support infrastructure in recent years. This investment really paid dividends in our response efforts as volunteers have been very much to the forefront of the community response to the pandemic. In order to meet the significant extra demand on resources, my Department provided additional funding support to volunteer centres through Volunteer Ireland. Our investment in volunteering infrastructure continues. We are in the process of upgrading several volunteer information services to full volunteer centres which will be operational next year. The areas involved are Leitrim, Laois, Offaly, Roscommon, Waterford and Wexford. Some 17,000 volunteers have registered with volunteer centres since the outbreak of Covid-19. Drawing on this significant response, a permanent volunteer reserve in each local authority area is under consideration, aimed at managing and co-ordinating our volunteer response in an impactful and targeted manner. I am pleased that after extensive stakeholder consultations, my Department has prepared a draft national strategy on volunteering which will shortly go to the Cabinet for consideration. This strategy will provide a roadmap for the way forward for volunteering and how the Government supports volunteering.

I wish to acknowledge the work of public participation networks, PPNs. They have played, and continue to play, a key role in the Community Call initiative. PPNs are working together with local authorities in carrying out initiatives on their own to help vulnerable people in their localities during the pandemic. The Department has overall responsibility for oversight and development of the national PPNs. PPNs are the main link between local authorities and the three pillars of the community and voluntary, social inclusion and environmental sectors in their areas. The Department will continue to support and develop PPNs in order that they can continue to facilitate participation and representation of communities on local decision-making bodies in a fair, equitable and transparent manner. The PPNs are launching their annual report tomorrow, which will include lists of the activities they undertook in 2019. I urge all Deputies to look up their local authority areas and see the level of activity that has been ongoing by the PPNs. Some 15,600 voluntary groups registered with the networks in 2019. They are the GAA of the community and voluntary sector, reaching into every community in the country. These figures are a great indicator of the vibrancy and energy of the community and voluntary sector in Ireland, especially at local level, and the role played by PPNs in local policymaking and networking.

Members will be pleased that the seniors alert scheme has continued to grow from strength to strength. There are now over 73,000 people availing of a personal monitored alarm, enabling them to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind. The seniors alert scheme is a great example of how we used an existing scheme in a proactive and innovative way. We reached out to all participants in the scheme through the monitoring services for their personal alarms to see if they were all right and if they needed any supports or help, and to arrange for additional supports to be provided through a partnership with ALONE.

I wish to flag that the Department is drafting a Bill to amend the Charities Act 2009. This legislation is designed to strengthen existing supports and to increase public confidence in the charities sector.

I will briefly discuss my social inclusion remit, which reaches into the Department of Social Protection in the area of inclusion. There has been enhanced co-operation between Departments regarding the social inclusion roadmap, which helps to provide a structure for the various social inclusion and poverty reduction approaches in each Department's strategy. I will press

ahead with the implementation of this roadmap and do all in my power to help to bring about a more equal society. We plan to initiate some work in 2021 on tackling food poverty. I chaired the first meeting of the interdepartmental monitoring group on the social inclusion roadmap this day last week. All Departments attended and the engagement level was particularly encouraging.

I pay tribute to the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, which is the Government's main social inclusion programme. During the pandemic we have had to be as flexible as possible to enable the local development companies, which are funded under this programme, to continue and strengthen their work with the most disadvantaged in society. In 2019, SICAP supported 2,636 community groups and 30,000 people. I acknowledge the work of all the local development companies in looking out for the most vulnerable during the pandemic. I am glad to announce that we will be piloting a set of new community development projects in 2021, with a view to growing the space and capacity for community-led development. It is hoped that some of these projects will have a climate action character based on the principles of social justice.

In terms of supporting social innovations through our social enterprise policy, our partnership with Rethink Ireland is key to addressing emerging social, economic and environmental needs in a sustainable manner. Rethink Ireland, formerly known as Social Innovation Fund Ireland, has overseen a fund of over €60 million in social innovation support, in combination with philanthropic donations on a matched-funding basis.

I wish to refer to the work of the community services programme, CSP. The Department currently supports more than 420 community organisations under the CSP to provide local services through a social enterprise model. In response to Covid-19, the Department put in place a €1.2 million CSP support fund for 2020 which provided additional funding to many of these organisations, ensuring that they could pay their full-time CSP-supported employees a maximum of €350 net per week, with a proportionate amount for part-time CSP-supported employees. To date, funding of approximately €1 million has issued to 365 CSP-supported organisations that are most in need, supporting over 1,400 full-time equivalent positions. Pobal, which manages the programme on behalf of the Department, has undertaken a detailed review of the financial position of all the CSP-supported organisations, as their ability to generate income has been greatly hampered by the pandemic. The outcome of this review will inform decisions regarding any additional supports that might be required by these organisations. The Department should be in a position to make an announcement on the matter in the coming days. In addition, the Department engaged Indecon Economic Consultants to carry out a review of the CSP. The report was published with a high-level action plan in September. The Department and Pobal have now commenced work on restructuring the programme, which is expected to be complete at the end of 2021.

I am delighted that the Department is a key partner in the PEACE programme and is currently co-designing, with Northern Ireland Departments and the Special EU Programmes Body, the new PEACE PLUS programme. It is expected to provide over €650 million to Northern Ireland and the Border counties. This funding is vital if we are to build strong, resilient communities in a post-Brexit environment and it offers great opportunities for the region.

I refer to the announcement last week of the 2021 action plan for the Dormant Accounts Fund. The fund's objective is to address economic, social or educational disadvantage and to support people with a disability. The 2021 action plan allocates funding of €51 million to 46

measures to be delivered across ten Departments, which indicates the need to ensure that tackling issues of social inclusion is a cross-departmental task. I will be examining ways to enhance the impact of the fund in 2021.

The Department will continue to work with our various community and voluntary sector partners to prioritise marginalised groups and those most impacted by Covid-19. We look forward to supporting new initiatives in 2021 that will ensure further community-led development at local level across the country. We also look forward to working co-operatively to tackle disadvantage and inequality.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, for facilitating this debate on rural and community development. Revitalising our communities will be more important than ever in the months ahead, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise some important issues in this regard.

First, I welcome the appointment of the new board to the Western Development Commission last week. The commission does excellent work in economic and social development in the western region. I wish the incoming board every success in progressing its objectives. I was particularly impressed by its "More to Life" campaign in recent months, which highlighted the benefits of living in the west of Ireland, including the high quality of life and the lower costs of living compared to other parts of the country. Part of the campaign included some incredibly emotive videos demonstrating the best the west of Ireland has to offer and how it excels as a place in which to live and work. At a more strategic level, it is important that the commission is fully supported in progressing the vital Atlantic economic corridor initiative. It might also be useful to consider an expansion of the DigiWest Hub Project to provide local work spaces with high-speed telecommunications. The courthouse in Swinford is one project in receipt of funding for development as a hub. It might be useful to provide an update on the project and whether it can seek further funding.

With €341 million allocated in budget 2021 to community and rural development, it is clear that the Government is serious about its commitment to rural towns, villages and communities. In terms of local community development committees in Mayo, there are a number of implementing partners such as the South West Mayo Development Company located in Newport and Balla and the Mayo North East Partnership Company in Foxford. There is also the work by Moy Valley Resources IRD in Kiltimagh. I raised this issue with the Minister recently during Oral Questions, and I welcome her commitment to ensuring there is a transitional LEADER programme when the current 2014 to 2020 programme concludes. It is important to recognise her work today, while we ensure continued funding in the years ahead.

Another Member of the House invited the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to Ballina to meet her departmental officials who are based there and administer the programme. I, too, extend the same invitation when it is practical to do so, and invite her to visit Castlebar and other areas of the constituency where funding from her Department is being put to good use.

One example I wish to highlight, as construction of the extension nears conclusion, is the Castlebar voluntary social services. It was a recent recipient of more than €41,000 in Covid stability funding and has been doing phenomenal work in recent months, especially on the meals on wheels programme. Once completed, its new and improved facility will be state of the art. The then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, visited the service in 2016. I hope a Minister can visit the new building once it is complete to see the results of what I consider to be a regional

centre of excellence and a leader in this area.

I also wish to raise the issue of the 2020 town and village renewal scheme and the accelerated measures in response to Covid-19. It is welcome that local authorities can seek up to 90% grant aid on projected costs up to a maximum level of €25,000 per project, with the possibility to increase that to €40,000 per funding round for high-impact projects. This has enormous potential to deliver public funding to the real economy in communities where even some basic works to widen footpaths or erect new street lighting can make an incredible difference to local residents. I note that at least 15 projects in Mayo have benefited so far this year, with funding of more than €460,000 under these supports. I hope to see many more such projects, as the funding also benefits smaller communities with projects, for example, in Killala, Crossboyne, Knockmore, Lahardane, Bofeenau, Islandeady and Parke, as well as tranches of funding for large communities and towns.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am pleased to be here to speak on rural development and rural Ireland in general. People often talk about rural Ireland being left behind and yet we are conscious that people who live in rural communities enjoy and treasure the communities in which they live because they feel supported and they have achieved so much, often in spite of investment rather than because of it and, likewise, often in spite of the way the Government has left them as an afterthought rather than because of what the Government has done for them. There is an opportunity as we move forward.

The Covid situation has emphasised the point for many of us that people can work outside of the big cities and people do not need to travel to the centre of the universe to do everything. If we can have sufficient broadband in place, efficient telecommunications infrastructure, good roads, good places to live and a healthy community, then people do not need to go to urban centres to survive and to function. The answer to all of this is for the Government to invest in rural broadband. We have been crying out for it for years. Unfortunately, many people are disillusioned about the possibility of the Government delivering on its promises. That is the case in the area I come from, Leitrim, and in north Roscommon or other very rural areas. People have very little faith in the Government delivering broadband in a timely manner that will make a difference to their lives now. That is what they need to see happen.

We also need to look at a number of other issues. I refer to the support for small business and small enterprise. Some great work is done by the Department, such as the LEADER fund that has been trying to get small business going in rural areas. However, it does not do enough of it. There is not enough support in place. I spoke to a person in business recently who told me that they tried to be successful and to promote a project, but they were told not to go to the body concerned with half-baked projects. The difficulty is that there is nowhere to go to develop and to grow projects into something that will work, in particular when they are in a rural area where the infrastructure is not in place.

The quality of life is excellent. People who live in rural areas are very grateful for their lifestyle, yet so much of the trend seems to be to push people into urban settings and more congregated settings. For someone like me or many others who live in rural areas, we see that there is an awful lot of backward thinking in that respect. Ireland is unique in Europe in that so many people live in dispersed rural communities. They work and live very well together. They have a great lifestyle and we need to do everything to make sure that they can continue to do that. In so many rural areas people cannot get planning permission to build a house. It is totally ridiculous, yet we are forcing people into urban centres where there is congestion and there are

many social problems and other issues that arise from being so congested.

We must also focus on rural tourism in particular and put adequate infrastructure in place in areas where we do not have other industries. Tourism is an industry that can be made grow and can develop jobs for people in local, rural economies. We must be very conscious of rural towns and villages. Probably half the buildings are boarded up in numerous towns throughout my constituency. The buildings are in ruins. The people who own them do not have the money to do anything with them. In fact, rather than being an asset, they are a liability. In spite of that, the Government refuses time and again to do anything with respect to putting a grant scheme or other measure in place to incentivise people to bring those buildings back into use as homes. Houses are one of the things we are also missing in many parts of rural Ireland where there is also a significant housing crisis. The advantages of living in rural Ireland can be explained to people. The possibilities are there, but the Government must put the emphasis in place to ensure it delivers for people.

Another issue that has been overlooked for a long time by successive Governments is probably a reflection of the permanent government's attitude to rural Ireland. I refer to the treatment of children going to school. Such children cannot get a school bus. In my view, it should simply be part of free education that one can get a bus to school, yet children have to pay for the bus, to go a certain pick-up point to get it, and if there is not a certain number on the route then a bus will not be provided and, if a child is not going to the nearest school, he or she cannot get a bus. There are all these obstacles and rules put in place to ensure that people cannot get access to school transport. In the view of most who can stand back and look at it, there are a whole set of circumstances to push people out of rural Ireland and to get them all to live in towns and not to live in rural areas anymore. It is just a reflection of that mindset and that needs to change. The Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, who in fairness is also a person who comes from and lives in rural Ireland, need to look at this. They need to challenge seriously the mindset that says urban is better and rural is worse. The way to do that is to put the infrastructure and funding in place to deliver for people in rural Ireland.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is so important that the approach to community and rural development is done with accessibility and climate action at the heart of it. Rural communities need to be consulted to best establish how this can be done. I will start with climate action and move on to disability.

The only way we can get public support for real climate action is by communities wanting it and feeling a part of it. Therefore, the only way we can succeed in the face of climate change is if climate action helps communities. To find out how we do this, needless to say, we must speak to those communities. The Government narrative for too long has suggested that climate action will negatively reshape rural areas. In particular, we hear that in regard to it negatively reshaping agriculture. The result is that the very communities that will be the most severely impacted by climate change are the ones that are most scared of climate action. Coastal communities are even more at risk. We talk about climate change like it is something in the distant future, but in areas like west Cork we are already seeing and feeling the devastation caused by climate change. Since the summer, so many areas of west Cork have been flooded after repeated extreme weather events, and that was before we even got into the winter storm period.

Sustainable development needs to be central to rural and community development. This has to happen across a range of areas. Ireland needs to fulfil its international emissions targets and we need an overhaul of the proposed climate action Bill, which has been deemed too vague

and lacking accountability by climate scientists and legal experts. As An Taisce has argued, any serious climate legislation needs to have clear-cut obligations on the Government to meet our international climate commitments annually as well as consequent accountability for failure to do so. We need a whole-of-government approach. The Department of Rural and Community Development should play a key role. Departments and local authorities have to engage more with communities to develop viable solutions for each area. A one-size-fits-all approach simply will not work. Building on schemes such as CLÁR and the walks scheme, the Department, in conjunction with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, should initiate a climate action programme to enable each community to decide how it can best mitigate against climate change. Transition towns, such as Kinsale, have established models that can help direct these types of initiatives. Too often, policies are punitive rather than empowering. Funding from the Department must be based on sustainability that can future-proof rural areas and encourage practices that enhance the natural environment. All schemes and programmes, including the transitional LEADER arrangements, should emphasise providing sustainable development and job creation.

I am a member of the new Joint Committee on Disability Matters. One of the main aims of the committee is to ratify the optional protocol of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

5 o'clock

This will mean the State can be held accountable for denying people their right to exercise their rights under this convention. For too long people with disabilities in Ireland have been excluded from being able to exercise their rights. Any future community development must be done in a way that does not exclude people. Every town plan, and every village and urban development needs to ensure accessibility from the outset.

The absence of audible pedestrian crossings is impacting people with visual impairments. People from Bandon, Clonakilty and other areas in west Cork have contacted me. The recent urban regeneration in Clonakilty created new access issues. I recently spoke to a constituent in Ballydehob who cannot bring her mother, who is in a wheelchair, around the village because the footpaths are unsuitable. There are many more examples like these. These are all issues that can be easily resolved with proper consultation and proper planning. Planners, architects, and engineers should be required to engage with expert groups, such as the Irish Wheelchair Association, the National Council for the Blind, the Disabled Drivers Association and community-based access groups to ensure priority areas of need are addressed promptly and effectively.

The expertise of the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority needs to be utilised more in the planning, modification and building of our cities, towns and villages. It has the tools and policies to help ensure we build environments that are accessible and used to the greatest extent possible by people regardless of age, size or ability. The Minister needs to ensure that all funding from her Department for town and village developments has built-in mechanisms to guarantee accessibility and involvement of expert and local groups for people with disabilities.

Community involvement and empowerment are key to ensuring both climate action and disability matters are at the heart of rural and community development. There is a lot of reimagining of our communities and public spaces as a result of the pandemic. There is an opportunity to employ artists and creators to act as facilitators in towns and villages to help imagine new

solutions and to liaise with the groups I mentioned to address accessibility and climate action. Many of these practitioners, who have been severely impacted by Covid, have the skills to consult and help different groups in communities to set out a new vision for their areas. We should use their expertise and give them work while also empowering local populations to create communities that are accessible and environmentally sustainable.

I will not go into broadband because most other Deputies have. During the pandemic it is so important that people in rural areas have the opportunity to work from home.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am sharing my time. We need a vibrant rural life where families can live and work locally in sustainable communities. I take the opportunity of a debate on rural development to welcome US insurance company, Unum's, expansion of its technology centre of excellence in Carlow. Unum has been a big success for Carlow since it set up here in 2008. It currently employs 150 people and today it announced an additional 50 jobs for Carlow. This is a great boost for the south east. Unum is the largest tech employer in Carlow and it has developed strong ties with IT Carlow, from which it employs many graduates.

This expansion has been supported by the Government through IDA Ireland for many years. I have been calling for IDA Ireland to deliver foreign direct investment for rural areas like Carlow. I hope we will see further investment secured in the future. Carlow is situated close to Dublin with a fantastic road network and has so much to offer. I welcome the additional €23 million for rural and community development which I know places particular focus on supporting rural communities impacted by Covid-19. I particularly welcome the investment of €20 million in town and village renewal in 2021. Villages in my area, such as Newtown, Bennekerry, Rathvilly, Bagenalstown, Fenagh, St. Mullins, Myshall, Tullow, Duckett's Grove and Borris, all form an essential part of rural Ireland and need funding. I know funding is available and I hope it will be accessed.

The funding announced for CLÁR a few days ago was a bit disappointing. I can only speak of my own local authority. My understanding was that CLÁR had €5.5 million. Carlow County Council had applied for ten projects, of which only two were approved, which is very disappointing. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, spoke about the population criteria for CLÁR, which need to be changed because many of the projects were refused because of population size.

I raised the issue of investment in digital hubs and broadband connection points last week. I welcome National Broadband Ireland's investment of €32 million for a new high-speed fibre network in Carlow. It will access the hubs and connection points to become a focus for communities to enable workers and students to work remotely.

The current pandemic crisis has brought to the fore our core values, the essence of our community, and what services the State provides when all life is stripped back to the very basics. The post office network has proven to be essential to our very existence. During the lockdown, the post office network provided essential services. It was one of the few State-owned assets that kept money circulating in our local communities. We can no longer ignore or pay lip service to the realities of the financial gravity in which post offices find themselves. In the next eight months approximately 600 local offices will face significant downward revision in income that will make them unviable. Owing to their community and social value, post offices, so visible during the pandemic, must be recognised and protected. Many people have contacted me on this. The post office is the life and soul of a community.

I welcome the €5.1 million to increase the level of volunteering in the country and to match volunteers to organisations needing assistance. This is the best way to show our appreciation for all those volunteering during the Covid pandemic, especially in County Carlow. This reflects all the great work that has been done. Volunteers represent the best part of us, and this is exactly the kind of investment we needed. We need to be very practical here. Rural areas need to survive. At the best of times before the pandemic we were facing challenges, but Covid has brought extra challenges for which we need to get funding.

I return to the post offices. We need to play a role in keeping our post offices open. That is the biggest challenge we have, and we need to ensure we do that.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for giving us an opportunity to speak about the important issues facing rural and community development. As somebody who was born and raised in a community in a rural area in east Cork in Killeagh in the Youghal area as a child, I am very passionate about ensuring we make our rural communities more sustainable. We need to focus on rural development in rapidly changing times, particularly given some of the very significant issues facing so many families in rural areas.

Earlier today the Joint Committee on Transport and Communication Networks heard about the broadband connection problems facing families with adult children who lost their jobs and decided to move back to their rural homes rather than attend physical lectures because of Covid-19. Many people are struggling with broadband connections. The problem is multifaceted, and we need to approach it in a cross-departmental fashion. The Department of Rural and Community Development has specific oversight for issues facing rural communities and the welfare issues of people in rural areas. We need to improve how we communicate the roll-out of rural broadband and the Minister of State should place special focus on that.

The important thing is to give people clarity. Many people approach me under the impression that their local Deputy can intervene in the roll-out of broadband connections to individual homes, which is simply wrong. None of us has that ability. However, we should be able to give an accurate answer to our constituents who want to know for certain when they will be connected to the national broadband network, which is critical.

I will use the latter half of my contribution to outline my very strong feelings about the opportunities our smaller towns have, including Midleton, Youghal, Mallow, Fermoy, Mitchelstown and Cobh. They have public libraries in most cases, but the services being offered by their libraries could be greatly expanded. Universities and colleges across the country provide students with the opportunity to sit down and study in an appropriate space with others who are trying to achieve the same goal in terms of furthering their education. A direct support mechanism for local authorities, through the Department of Rural and Community Development, would be greatly beneficial and would facilitate the upgrading of libraries all over the country, including in Cork East which I am very honoured to represent. Such support would allow for an increase in the amount of space available to those who are studying, including adults engaged in further education. A home is not always a suitable place to study, particularly if it is small or occupied by numerous people. It is very important for people to have some peace and quiet when they are trying to study and we must be conscious of the fact that not every family has that luxury. We must be balanced and fair in our approach and try to ensure that all citizens have equal access to facilities that will enable them to further their education. We must support them as a State.

I am very passionate about a particular project in Midleton. The library in Midleton is in a beautiful old building on the main street. We have been trying for a very long time to get funding for Cork County Council which has put wonderful plans in place, through its librarians and staff on the ground, for the library. There is an abundance of space available in that library which could provide community facilities and study spaces for students from Midleton and the surrounding region. In Youghal we also have an almost shovel-ready project for which we are trying to secure funding for the local authority. The Department of Rural and Community Development is better suited than any to step in and work alongside other Departments to come up with a comprehensive plan to improve education in rural communities and in that context, one very readily available asset is the public library. We must make sure that our public libraries and other public and community spaces have access to high-speed broadband.

Deputy Joe Carey: Having strong, progressive policies that have been developed with a ground-up approach, backed up with resources and appropriate schemes are key ingredients in addressing the issues of rural depopulation and decline, bringing us to a place of positivity and growth in rural Ireland. The rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, offers the opportunity to rural towns and villages to realise their potential and dreams. This week the Burren Ecotourism Network in north Clare was recognised as a global leader in sustainable tourism by Lonely Planet. This is a serious achievement and I congratulate all involved in this innovative initiative. Work-life balance is a key consideration for the 21st century workforce. The RRDF has facilitated the development of a cutting edge digital hub in north Clare in the town of Ennistymon. This flagship project taps into work-life balance requirements, enabling people to live and work in a spectacular location, as recognised by Lonely Planet. This particular project was jointly funded by Clare County Council and has transformed an unused 9,000 sq. ft building to provide opportunities for private enterprise, public services and tourism information while also providing businesses with access to hot desk facilities and high-speed broadband connectivity.

The town and village renewal scheme has provided a serious injection to small towns and villages throughout the country since it was reintroduced by the former Minister, Deputy Michael Ring, in 2016. Our towns and villages are the heartbeat of rural communities but many are still recovering from the last recession and have now been hit by the fallout from Covid-19. The Minister's establishment of the accelerated measures strand of the town and village renewal scheme has made a real difference and given towns and villages a much needed lift in these extraordinary times. The outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme is another wonderful funding opportunity for the development of new and existing outdoor infrastructure in rural areas such as cycleways, walking trails and blueways. Last year €500,000 was allocated by the Department to further develop the Lough Derg blueway in east Clare to provide a pathway along the verges of the R465 from Bealkelly just outside Ogonnelloe to Tuamgraney, joining the pathway already developed from the town of Killaloe. This vital funding will help to unlock the tourism potential of this beautiful part of County Clare, attracting walkers, hikers, day visitors and overnight tourists and giving a boost to the local economy.

The LEADER programme is another flagship funding stream for rural Ireland. The Clare Local Development Company is responsible for the roll out of the programme in County Clare, helping to deliver vital projects such as the Tradaree Food Hub. This landmark project is the brainchild of Obair in Newmarket on Fergus and it has been an absolute pleasure for me to work with Obair over the past number of years on it. LEADER funding of €500,000 helped to make this development possible, bringing a vacant building in the heart of the village back into

use, providing an expanded meals on wheels kitchen and service, a training centre for chefs, incubation units for start-up indigenous food producers and a drop-in centre for the youth of the village. The LEADER programme supports thousands of jobs in rural Ireland. One particular commitment in the programme for Government needs to be honoured. It is important there is engagement and clarity is provided by the Department on the delivery of an interim national rural development plan and on the shape of the new LEADER programme for 2023 and beyond.

Many villages throughout rural Ireland are being held back because they do not have basic wastewater treatment systems. There are numerous villages in County Clare where this is the case, one of which is Broadford. A new wastewater treatment system is fully designed for Broadford, land has been acquired and the project is fully supported by the local authority but there is no funding mechanism to advance the scheme. Irish Water does not want to know and neither does the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage or the Department of Rural and Community Development. I ask that both Departments come together to devise a scheme, in tandem with Irish Water and local authorities, to provide proper wastewater treatment facilities in rural towns and villages.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have already spoken to the Minister of State about supports for community centres. Obviously, I welcome the stabilisation fund for those that received a significant amount of funding from Pobal but we need to look at many of these facilities from the point of view of the money that will be lost in the context of the social economy. I know that work-arounds and solutions have been sought through the likes of the Louth Local Community Development Committee but we need to ensure that all these things happen. We are all aware of the fabulous work that was done through community centres and community groups before this period, much of which has continued during this period.

In terms of community development, we need to take a more holistic look at the entire situation. We need to determine what is needed by way of youth services and how they interact with the Department of Justice, An Garda Síochána and so on. We often talk about issues within silos and later we talk about community policing. I presume that debate will veer into a discussion of the particular difficulties in urban settings but community development needs to be wedded to the work being done by the Department of Justice and gardaí around things like family intervention, for example. Basically, we need a whole-of-government response.

I agree with others who have spoken about the need for broadband in rural areas. We all wanted and needed high-speed broadband before the pandemic but obviously since then it has become an absolute requirement for individuals and companies. We realise that in some cases, areas will not be reached. We will exert as much pressure as possible on National Broadband Ireland, NBI, to accelerate the roll out. A number of Deputies spoke earlier today at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications Networks and welcomed the fact that NBI will be sharing information and updates as it carries out its work.

At this point in time, National Broadband Ireland has 200 broadband connection points in place. However, a reply I received to a parliamentary question on 30 October indicated that only 59 of the then 187 publicly accessible BCPs were live. When I queried this with National Broadband Ireland, the reply was that it relies on third-party vendors and, to a degree, the Department to ensure the BCPs are rolled out. The company also told me that it was willing to look at further locations, including schools, which would be suitable for the roll-out of remote working hubs. Those hubs are an absolutely fabulous idea but they need to be put in place. There is an opportunity to achieve the best of both worlds out of this initiative.

One of the few wins from the Covid pandemic is the fact that not as many people needed to commute. That is brilliant for people who have access to broadband at a particular level and where it suits them to work from home. However, people still need a social outlet and the wins one only gets from a workplace situation. Remote working hubs can fulfil that purpose by having people from a number of companies, possibly including public service staff, provided with a decent working location and a set-up that includes a broadband connection, suitable workstations and whatever else is necessary. This would allow people to work in Dundalk, for example, instead of having to travel to Dublin. There are huge savings in such an arrangement from a climate change point of view and in terms of work-life balance. Combined with that, people would also have the social outlet of interacting with real people as opposed to occasionally seeing them on Zoom. As we have all discovered in recent times, there are sometimes problems with the audio in online meetings and one cannot hear what is being said.

The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, need to consider how hubs can be established in areas that are accessible and suitable, particularly in locations where there may be a delay in the roll-out of broadband. There are multiple locations that would meet those criteria. I gave the example of Dundalk, where hubs could be set up in suitable industrial units located near the town. In some instances, we may need to look at locations in town centres. The nature of towns has changed in recent times, with the closure of many businesses. If we could introduce a greater amount of footfall, it would be utterly beneficial for the towns in question. We need to see how this can be done as soon as possible.

As I said, there must be a more holistic approach to the whole area of community development. We need to look at how funding is accessed, whether under the LEADER programme or in terms of the funding for which local authorities apply to different Departments. At this point in time, we need a streamlining of the process. A huge amount of time and many resources are being wasted when public servants have to apply to have applications determined by other public servants. There is a loss of efficiency in the system that needs to be sorted out.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want to focus in my contribution on the community sector and how it has impacted on working-class communities in my constituency and throughout Dublin and other cities. If we look back to the recession in 2008 and the cuts that followed, we can see and track how the dismantling of community development, anti-poverty and equality sector funding was very disproportionate. The severe cuts that were made by the then Fianna Fáil-Green Party coalition were estimated to be 35% for the community sector as against 7% in most other sectors. In a 2013 report, Dr. John Bamber estimated that the decrease in funding for community development was as high as 41%. Community development projects and other local development programmes were ordered to desist from campaigning and advocacy.

One of the core principles of community development work is collective action. As working-class communities began to find their voices, come together against poverty, marginalisation, exclusion and injustice, and become more politicised, successive Governments involving Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Labour Party and the Green Party, under the cloak of austerity and realigning the community sector, saw the opportunity to decimate the sector and completely disable it in its brief of facilitating the participation of disadvantaged communities in decision-making on issues that affected them the most. In 2009, without warning, 19 community development projects were closed down. Local project structures were taken over and colonised and local project workers were removed. The language of community development was still used but it now referred to what was primarily, and still is, a market-driven work activation and training programme that has, in effect, destroyed grassroots and local community development

projects.

The rhetoric of value for money and accountability are key narratives of the Government. The systemic destruction of the sector was politically centralised and aimed at disempowering working-class communities and the anti-poverty and equality sector. I cannot emphasise enough how this systemic destruction of the vision of solidarity and equality sent a strong signal that the voices of poor, working-class communities no longer mattered. It likely put paid to a real opportunity to contribute to working-class politicisation in a very meaningful and organic way. Lots of people became politicised through their engagement with community development projects, and those projects provided opportunities for many people locally. Senator Eileen Flynn is a fantastic example of somebody who came from huge disadvantage, succeeded in getting an education and, through her work within the Traveller community, went on to involvement in national politics.

We need to rethink the whole idea that community development is just about delivering cost-effectiveness, training and giving employment in the sector. It is about much more than that. If community development does not relate to the grassroots, does not engage with the community and is not community-led, then it is really failing. Many of us in this House can offer testament to that in respect of the more disadvantaged communities in our cities and towns. In conclusion, while I acknowledge the very serious issues facing rural Ireland at this time, there are also very serious issues in our urban towns and cities.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am sharing time with Deputies Christopher O’Sullivan and Cahill.

It is just over a week since Joe Biden was declared President-elect of the United States. The *Clare Echo*, a free sheet newspaper in my home county of Clare, ran a very witty headline regarding the election which trended nationally. The headline read: “West Clare hotelier loses out in US Presidential election.” Truth be told, while we certainly appreciate everything the President, Donald Trump, has done for Doonbeg from a business point of view, we look forward at a political level to some of the positive changes that will happen in Irish-US relations and international relations over the coming months.

The reason I mention Donald Trump is that, for a long time, his suggestion of building a wall along the Mexican border meant it became a sort of joke back home that he wanted to build a coastal defence around the sand dunes in Doonbeg. The world and its mother ridiculed that project even though it is, in fact, absolutely essential. There were people from newspapers and radio stations in the US telephoning residents in Doonbeg asking for comments. They wrote humorous, jovial and sometimes insulting articles about the famous, or infamous, coastal defence system in Doonbeg. As I said, that defence is absolutely essential. President Trump or no President Trump, the Atlantic Ocean is eating away the sand dunes of Doonbeg. Something similar is happening just a few miles up the road in Milltown Malbay, where a shale cliff face is also being eroded by coastal waters. Regardless of who is in the Oval Office, the State has an obligation to protect its coastline from being eaten away. Erosion is decimating farmers’ livelihoods and it is encroaching closer and closer to people’s homes. I ask that the Government prioritise those vital coastal defences in the coming months.

I will now raise the issue of unsewered villages, of which there are quite a few in County Clare. I recently explained this to a Dublin Deputy who is familiar with the state-of-the-art mains sewers that operate here in the capital. In many villages in County Clare, and throughout rural Ireland, there are still unsewered villages where, when one flushes a toilet, it flows out into

a gravel pit or drain and ultimately ends up in the lake or stream that provides drinking water to that same population. Such villages in Clare include Broadford, Carrigaholt, Doolin, Cooraclare and O'Brien's Bridge, right down by the River Shannon which has no sewer and where flushed matter goes straight into the Shannon. Broadford has been mentioned in the Chamber quite a number of times. I ask that a mechanism be devised to fund such sewerage schemes. Right now, Clare County Council is preparing a brand new county development plan and there is every risk that lands zoned in villages such as Broadford, Doolin and Carrigaholt will be stripped of that zoning because they are unserved, that is, they do not have mains water or sewerage. If those zonings are removed, they will have no chance of survival. It is absolutely crucial that this essential sanitary infrastructure is delivered in those villages.

The very last point I will raise relates to transport in County Clare. We rely very heavily on the Local Link service, which was provided by Clare Bus for many years. There has now been a dispute regarding a contract this company had with the National Transport Authority, which has had to go to mediation. I have tabled various parliamentary questions on the matter. It is still not fully resolved but it is progressing. Meanwhile, there is a deficiency in public transport in the county. I have long campaigned for a bus service to operate in and around Ennis town. There are certain commitments in that regard. We need to see them delivered. Money was also laid out in this Government's July stimulus package to provide for an enhanced bus service from Scariff town to Limerick city. I would very much like to see that essential rural link provided for the people of that town.

It is great to come up to Dublin and to see the DART, the Luas and every form of fancy modern public transport operating in and around the city. We do not enjoy those luxuries in Clare but we depend on the Local Link service, which must be enhanced.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I have very little time, approximately four minutes, while there is a wide range of issues I could talk about in respect of community development. I very much welcome the announcement of the massive allocation of funding for community development in the recent budget. I will, however, focus on funding for communities in particular. What I mean by this is that this significant allocation of funding must now filter down into the local communities and to the community and voluntary organisations. That is absolutely vital.

I will provide an example. The stability fund is very welcome. These community groups have been starved of funding because they relied on events taking place in their halls or on fundraisers, which cannot now happen. As a result, the stability fund has become an important way to protect their incomes. Many community groups, however, have been disappointed and have not yet availed of funding. I urge the Minister of State to announce another tranche of funding under the stability fund so that we will not have as many disappointed groups. I am thinking of great community groups such as those which run Lehanmore Community Centre on the Beara Peninsula and its close neighbour, the Allihies Community Centre, which have been unsuccessful so far in applying to the stability fund. I would love to see another allocation of funding under this fund.

I will go from one end, the stability fund which provides smaller amounts of funding, to the other, the rural generation fund which provides larger amounts. This is a vital source of funding for community groups and large-scale projects in regional areas. I am not asking the Minister of State to assess any projects but there are two about which I want to talk to him and on which I seek clarification. There is a brilliant project in west Cork in my constituency, the development of Schull Harbour. Cork County Council has submitted applications for funding

for this project two years in a row but it was turned down both times. The sad and concerning thing is that, because of the multiple unsuccessful applications, Cork County Council may not submit another application. One of the reasons it is giving is that the planning permission in place for this project runs out in October 2022. That is two years from now. If funding was granted, although I am not assuming it would be, the work could begin. Cork County Council, however, is concerned that the planning permission might run out midway through the works.

Will the Minister of State provide clarification in that regard? I am not asking him to approve an application; there is not even one on his desk. Instead, I am asking him to clarify whether the project would be considered a qualifying application. Planning permission is in place for this incredible development which would absolutely change Schull and the surrounding region. As the Minister of State may well know, we have an unbelievable coastline which features beaches, headlands and islands. The one criticism we get is that we do not have the right infrastructure in place. This is a shovel-ready project which has planning permission and foreshore licences in place. It just needs to get the nod. Again, I am not asking the Minister of State to approve funding. There is not even an application on his desk. I am just asking him to clarify to Cork County Council that it would be a qualifying applicant.

While I am on the topic of the rural regeneration scheme, we need to see successful projects in the region. It is not the Minister of State's fault - he is only new in this position and I have been in mine only since February - but applications made to the rural regeneration scheme in respect of Cork South-West have been unsuccessful year after year. So far, there has been only one successful application in the constituency. That is not a very good return. We need to look at that again. There are some very valuable and important projects out there. For example, there is an incredible ongoing project in Bandon to establish a playground. Bandon is a great town. I am not sure if the Minister of State is familiar with it. It has a lot going for it. It has a big population but it needs amenities. A playground for Bandon would be a game-changer. That is an application which will be coming across the Minister of State's desk. I just wanted to make those points. We need to see that community funding filter down to the communities.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I will address rural and community development. I represent a rural constituency and, in the short time available to me, I will raise a few major issues regarding the need for investment in Tipperary. The first issue I will talk about is the urgent need for a link road for Tipperary town. The chamber of commerce has spearheaded a coalition of other local groups which has highlighted the great issues facing Tipperary. Jobs4Tipp, the recently formed task force, March4Tipp and other such organisations have come together. The town is on the N24. Post Brexit, it will be even more severely choked with traffic. This road will be the major route from western Ireland and the mid-west to the ports of Waterford and Rosslare. It is often stagnant because of the traffic congestion in the town. The town urgently needs a relief road. I urge the Minister of State to consider this. There are plans for major infrastructure between Oola, Limerick Junction and Cahir. Unfortunately, this is still in pipeline, although it will come in time. If Tipperary town is to survive commercially, however, it needs a relief road immediately. The town speaks with one voice in this regard, as do all the public representatives in the area. The town has to get this if its economic life is not to be strangled.

I will speak on a number of other issues in my county. I proposed a greenway between Nenagh and Dromineer a number of months ago. I have been working with locals for some time in respect of this proposed greenway which would link the town of Nenagh to the lakeside village of Dromineer. There is an enormous appetite in the area for this project to be developed. Dromineer is on the shores of Lough Derg and is a popular tourist destination. Nenagh is one

of the largest urban centres in Tipperary. There is major potential to link the two. It is only an eight-mile route, but it would have a great infrastructural benefit both for tourism on the lake and for the town of Nenagh. There is already a recognised walk in the area which covers 80% of the proposed greenway. I urge the Minister of State to take this on board as the project would be of great benefit for tourism and for the town of Nenagh.

The Ballybrophy rail line also needs to be utilised. There is serious untapped tourism potential in the Nenagh area. This line links Nenagh to Limerick, Cork and Dublin. There is major potential to attract tourists to Nenagh, who could spend a number of days in the area and avail of the greenway and other holiday amenities. I have already contacted the Minister for Rural and Community Development about funding for this. This is again a project which would have great benefits for the rural constituency I represent.

There is also great potential for a greenway from my own town of Thurles to Holycross. As it would run across a lot of public land, it would be easily achieved. It could go through the Cabragh wetlands, which has unique features that people come from all over the country to see. A walkway from Thurles to Holycross would be roughly four to five miles long. There is huge potential there.

Community allotments have a huge part to play in communities as well, both from a physical aspect and from the point of view of people's mental health. Retired people and people with a bit of time on their hands find these most therapeutic. I have been involved with the Nenagh Community Allotments group in recent months and it has had to relocate from one location to another. It finds it hard to get any funding to help it along the way. It has to get a new water connection and it also faces other relocation expenses. A small bit of funding for these allotments in all parts of the country would have huge community benefit. It is a growing phenomenon. It had been in the large urban centres before but it has spread countrywide. I urge the Minister of State to provide funding for these allotments. We have it for other community groups and initiatives but allotments, unfortunately, do not have any sources of funding available to them. I ask the Minister of State to consider those organisations for funding as these are real community developments at the heart of our communities. I urge the Minister of State to consider these proposals.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Sometimes people forget just how diverse Dublin is. It is not all city, although that is a significant part of the county. North County Dublin covers a huge area and it has some significant towns in Swords, Balbriggan, Skerries, where I live, Rush and Lusk to name a few. These towns are different. They have their own characteristics and charms and they are all unique in their differences and needs. Around many of these towns are the coast and farming lands. In many ways, north County Dublin is the same as most of the regional counties and areas that Members are elected from.

In Swords, for example, one of the greatest problems we have with development is a lack of school places at primary and secondary levels. School planning is one of the most straightforward and easy things to get right, but across north County Dublin it has been a disaster. I have often said in the Chamber and to local people that as sure as night follows day, if houses are built and young families move in, one can bet that children will follow and they will need to go to school. I do not know why the Department of Education continually gets surprised that the kids who are in primary school will find themselves needing to go to secondary school. As I said, as sure as night follows day, that will happen and yet, year after year, I find myself engaging with the Department and the Minister for Education to advise that yet again we have a prob-

lem. We have children who go to feeder schools and they are denied access to the secondary schools of their choice because of the lack of places. Those who cannot get into those feeder schools are on the back foot from the beginning. The damage and difficulty this is causing to children and their families is untold.

Other issues that need to be addressed across Swords are broadband, connectivity and better transport infrastructure. Many people in Swords, when we are not in a pandemic, travel to Dublin city centre for work. These workers can end up sitting on buses for more than an hour to get into the city due to congestion on our roads and the lack of a rail link. In some instances, we see there are not even enough buses for them. The problem many of these workers are facing, as they work from home, is a lack of broadband infrastructure. Despite being a huge town, there are many areas of Swords that do not have decent broadband. If we want to see community and regional development, this matter has to be addressed.

Balbriggan also has many of the Internet connectivity and transport issues mentioned above. We have a train into Dublin city centre but the town should be connected by the DART. Bringing the DART out to Balbriggan would open up the town and provide so many opportunities and benefits for workers and those living there. The bridges were raised more than ten years ago to facilitate the DART and yet we are still waiting. Balbriggan also needs a lot of investment in community and sports facilities. There is a huge young and diverse population in Balbriggan. It is what makes the town great. However, these young people need resources to keep them engaged and occupied. Whenever I speak to people in Balbriggan, they often point across Dublin Bay and they say that people want for little in other parts of County Dublin. In many ways, this is true and the town needs investment. We need more floodlit AstroTurf football, GAA and rugby pitches. We need funding for boxing and mixed martial arts. We need investment for our great football, GAA, rugby and cricket teams.

Doubtless the growth in north County Dublin brings the difficulties that I am sure are present in all of our big towns across the State. Towns clearly need more gardaí and these resources have long been needed. We need to see gardaí on the streets and we also need to see a different form of policing, not the old traditional type. Balbriggan is a diverse town and the police force there needs to reflect that diversity. In my town of Skerries we badly need an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit for a secondary school, and again this is something that is very predictable but for some reason is not addressed. In Rush, Lusk, Donabate, Malahide, Portmarnock and other areas, the needs are broadly similar. Investment in broadband connectivity and increased public transport investment, particularly in rail, would be transformative. There are places such as parts of Balrothery, Seaview Park, Tower View Heights and the Burrow area around Portrane that are almost broadband black spots. If we want community and regional development, these areas need that connectivity.

As with other areas, school places and additional investment in sports and community facilities would be of huge benefit to towns such as Rush, Lusk, Donabate, Malahide and Portmarnock, but it is about matching investment and resources to population growth. It is not rocket science. If large housing estates are built and young families are moved in, as sure as night follows day crèches, schools and pitches will be needed. For some reason, we seem always to be playing catch-up in north County Dublin and that is not good enough. People deserve to have that level of respect and investment.

Deputy Denis Naughten: We read in today's newspapers that there is a huge question mark over the future viability of Dublin Zoo. The Minister of State might be a bit surprised that I am

talking about Dublin Zoo when we are talking about community and rural development, but it is hard to believe that something as iconic as Dublin Zoo is under threat. It has a phenomenal number of visitors every year. I bring my family there every year or maybe twice a year and a lot of us would bring our families there on the run-in to Christmas for the lighting display it would have.

This is typical of many tourism operations throughout this country and of many businesses in the hospitality sector, which are on their knees. There is an opportunity for us to give a real injection to those sectors. I know the VAT rate has been altered and we had the stay and spend scheme that was announced during the summer. These measures are all welcome but the difficulty is that because of the lockdown, the stay and spend scheme is pointless. Some €140 million has been set aside for that for next year, with another €130 million being set aside for it for the year after. While the money for the year after might be drawn down, it will not be drawn down next year because we will not see the spend from October until Christmas.

I want to propose to the Minister of State that we would use that €140 million that will not be spent this year and that will not be drawn down next year in tax refunds to establish a gift voucher guarantee scheme for the tourism and hospitality sectors in particular. This would allow people, between now and Christmas, to purchase a gift card for Dublin Zoo. No one is going to buy a gift voucher for Dublin Zoo now if we do not know if it will be open in six months. The same goes for many tourism and recreation facilities which have a question mark hanging over them. The Government should use that €140 million as seed capital to guarantee that the Government will refund any voucher for a business that happens to close in the next 12 months. That would bring a huge injection of funds into the tourism and hospitality sectors this side of Christmas. It would help to maintain those businesses until they have the opportunity to reopen, we hope in the new year. It would also ensure that Irish people would holiday at home next year. The key thing we must do to ensure we can recover from the impact of Covid-19 is to actively encourage people to holiday at home next year. In my constituency and my county, we are in the process of developing the Hidden Heartlands tourism brand. We will have the Shannon master plan, which will be published in the next couple of weeks and the Beara-Breifne Way master plan, looking to be Ireland's answer to the Camino, and running from west Cork, right up through the middle of the country, through east Galway and Roscommon, to Blacklion in County Cavan, and hopefully continuing on to the Glens of Antrim. We also have a master plan for Rathcroghan, the home of the festival of Hallowe'en.

If we do not have a comprehensive tourism offering and local facilities, however, such as Strokestown Park House, King House and the Arigna Mining Experience, people will not come and stay in our region. It is vitally important that we give people the opportunity to support those businesses between now and Christmas by being able to purchase a gift voucher, and be sure that gift voucher can be redeemed or refunded should there be a threat to a business. I hope the Minister of State will be able to look at this proposal seriously. If an iconic facility such as Dublin Zoo is under threat, then many businesses around the country are in a similar situation.

The other issue I will raise with the Minister of State, with his Green Party hat on, concerns the fact that when I was the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, with responsibility for energy policy, I signed up to a commitment at EU level, under the EU renewable energy directive, that would allow people who generate their own electricity to get paid when they bring that electricity onto the grid. I did that against the advice at the time from my officials because I believe this is the way we need to go to encourage people to produce renewable energy in their own homes and communities and export it onto the grid.

I believe we should establish a pilot scheme given the huge amount of roof space we have available in the agricultural sector in farmyards across the country. I refer to stress-testing that microgeneration scheme, seeing how it can work and ensuring that it is robust. The farming community is the ideal community in which to pilot that initiative. The State and taxpayers have already funded the upgrading of the electricity infrastructure into farmyards across this country, including the provision of three-phase electricity. We should sweat that asset and maximise it to its full potential.

Deputy Seán Canney: When we talk about regional development, the programme for Government is laced with the issue of regional development. I want to bring that closer to home and comment on what is actually happening. If we take the north and west region, which consists of eight counties, namely, Galway, Roscommon, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, it has the highest level of regional inequality in Europe. That information is coming from the European Commission. The EU Commission has also noted that Brexit will worsen that situation. This inequality is most stark when we consider that the per capita GDP contribution in the west and Border region is €28,000, while in the east and south it is €70,000. The west and Border region has been redesignated and downgraded from a developed region to a region in transition by the European Union. We have been notified that the west of Ireland has been downgraded.

This reclassification offers us an opportunity, however, because the co-financing rate goes from 40% to 60% for the north and west from 2021. For every €100 in co-financing for which we apply in respect of structural funding, therefore, we will get €60 back from the European Union. On top of that, the European Parliament recently published a review of industrial policy across the EU, highlighting the north and western region in Ireland as a lagging region. What are we going to do about this situation and where are the problems? First, the towns and villages across the west and north west are devoid of sewerage schemes and proper water. We cannot grow these towns and bring young families in to live in them because there are no incentives to do that. We are all hell-bent on building new houses all over the place while we have many houses vacant. We must do something at Government level to sort out that.

I am disappointed the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, states that it is not his problem but one for the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, to sort out. In that regard, will the Minister of State here find out for me where is the report that was done on six towns in a pilot scheme to see how we could regenerate them? That pilot plan was put in place by the then Minister, Deputy Michael Ring, and me when we were in Government. The findings of that report were with the departmental officials and I would like to know where that is at now.

I also note that the Minister of State's colleague, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has made strong and positive remarks concerning the western rail corridor and rail industry in Ireland. He is passionate about the fact that we need to develop the regions by having a proper rail network. I support him in that, and I support the Government in its actions to get that sorted out. We must create connectivity between the north west, including Ballina and Westport, down through Claremorris and Tuam, up to Sligo, down into Limerick, out to Shannon Foynes Port and then down to Waterford Port. We also need to improve our commuter services. If we are to create a region which can compete with and be as attractive as the east, we must do these things.

This is the concept of the Atlantic economic corridor. Has the Atlantic economic corridor

task force group met since the Government was formed? We have potential in the region to highlight offshore energy and the benefits of the sea which we have at our backs. I refer to technology. For example, we have one of the global leaders in the development of the autonomous car based in Tuam, where more than 1,000 people are working. We must, however, ensure we create more of that type of industry in the regions. We also have the potential to grow agri-tech businesses in the regions. As Deputy Naughten said, we also have the Wild Atlantic way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, but what we need to do right now is to support that industry. The national broadband plan is also being rolled out, despite the best efforts of many politicians in the last Dáil to stop that.

Regional Ireland is with us and it is part of us. It is an area in transition. We have the potential to gain a great deal of funding from Europe. We must have the vision and the concepts that ensure we create a region which people will see as attractive to work in, live in and to raise their families in. We have it, and we must ensure we are courageous in our decisions. If we are to do a cost-benefit analysis in respect of every little thing which we do, we will do nothing. We must have vision, strength of mind and we must look at examples of things such as Ireland West Airport Knock, which would not exist without courage, without vision and without the guidance of many people locally. There is a great onus on the Government now to ensure this region does not further lag behind, as has been stated and notified officially by the European Commission to the Irish Government. We must ensure, post Covid-19, as well as during our Covid-19 period, that we invest and not just talk about it or produce plans. At this stage, we must have action and implementation of the plans which exist. We will then have a better balanced economy right across the country.

Deputy Patrick Costello: A few jokes were made to me from one or two other Deputies about how there is probably not much rural development happening in Dublin South Central. This is, however, a session on rural and community development, and at the heart of that are the same fundamental principles. Community development is about the empowerment of local communities, be they geographic or based on identity or interests. This concerns strengthening the capacity of people as active agents and active citizens through their networks and the institutions which are available to them.

6 o'clock

During the early 1990s we in this country had what was described as the flagship of Europe in terms of community development and anti-poverty work. Two strands were working in co-operation. There was a locally focused, community-driven process that was grassroots and bottom up, and there was a centralised, Government-led approach. Over the years we have created a major imbalance and have moved away from the local grassroots focus to an overly centralised, overly prescriptive and overly prescribed system that provides community supports for people, not working with them. This shift has been to the detriment of the definition of community development I spoke of earlier. This move happened long before the recession. We cannot simply blame the recession for cutting local services. The move away from the local to the central was already happening.

Yes, the amount of money we put into services is important, and we need to spend on community development services, but how we spend that money and how it is given is just as important. We need to be putting it into the grassroots and allow communities to spend the money themselves on the problems they identify, instead of an overly centralised, overly prescriptive and top-down approach. We need to be doing things with communities instead of for

communities.

Essentially, the system we now have is the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, model. Recent studies by the ESRI on SICAP have highlighted the top-down approach and this overly restrictive and overly bureaucratic approach. We look at quantitative outputs instead of qualitative outputs. We measure numbers and tick boxes instead of looking at the empowerment of the communities and the strengthening of the capacity of local groups to address their own problems themselves, which has a transformative effect beyond what we initially put the money into. It builds that capacity to look at problems that come next, and the next problem and the next problem. We need to move away from that system and get the balance right. We need to look at ways we can empower communities more. I welcome the Minister of State's comments earlier when he spoke of moving to the community-led community development model. That is how it was previously when community development worked best in the State and when it was a leader across the European Union. We need to get back there again. I am hopeful and I have great faith in the Minister of State, Deputy O'Brien, to deliver the change we need.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Bhí an-spéis agam sa mhéid a bhí le rá ag an Teachta romhaim. Tá cuid mhaith den cheart aige. Mar, ar ndóigh, tá ollfhadhbanna sna cathracha, go mór mhór i a Dháilcheantar féin. Before the Deputy leaves, I would just like to say that I listened very carefully to what he said, and he is absolutely right that there are mega-problems in our cities based in the communities.

The Oliver Bond flats were prominent in the news recently. I know that complex quite well. I have a very good friend down there, a lady called Liz O'Connor, who I got to know when she was on the area implementation team, AIT, when we had the RAPID programme. The idea of RAPID was to put the people who live in the local authority estates at the centre of development. When I was Minister, twice a year we used to have a convention in Pearse Street in Dublin of all community representatives from the AITs around the country. These were the people who lived the experience, not all the professors and all those who lived in much more affluent areas. These were the people who lived in the communities, dealt with the drug problems, lived with the antisocial behaviours, and tried to raise their children and progress them on to better things against the odds.

I fully agree with the Deputy that one of the greatest mistakes that was made in 2011 and 2012, was to abolish the RAPID programme because it was not costing anything. I have a suspicion that the programme was not too well liked for the reason that we had set very defined boundaries, based on Trutz Haase's analysis of the most deprived areas in the country, every one of which were urban areas, and we made sure the money was spent within them. Of course, when they got rid of the boundaries and the AITs it was easier to spread the money around outside of those areas, even though everybody who knows anything about these areas realises they are the areas with the most severe problems in the country.

I have always believed that urban deprivation, where we push more and more people unnecessarily into cities, many of whom do not really want to be there, is the flip side of the issue of rural depopulation. When I walk the houses of rural Ireland I find there are some exceptions. Where there is relatively good housing and good conditions there is relatively little antisocial behaviour and there is good community life, but the only problem is that all the young people are gone. When one does an age analysis of these communities, one finds a very narrow number of people living there full time who are between 18 and 30 years of age, and it widens, go-

ing up instead of narrowing. We need to tackle this unnecessary movement of people whereby we have under-utilised facilities in one part of the country while in other parts we are pushing people in and cannot keep up with demand for schools, social services and medical services.

In the few minutes left to me I want to address what is our vision of rural Ireland. I have noticed that for the past ten years every time we talk about rural Ireland it seems to only consist of towns and villages. Every reference to the rest of the people, 30% of the national population, is to those who live in the periphery or in the hinterland, as if they did not live in real places and as if they were not part of a real community. Any of us who have experience of living in rural areas know that sometimes those communities are far stronger. I have lived in both. I spent my formative years in Dublin and I have lived my adult life in the country. Years ago I was a Minister in the Department with responsibility for community and rural affairs. The Department is a very fine thing but it only touches the tip of the iceberg of the problems of rural Ireland. We were told of a budget today of some €190 million. Rural Ireland needs the exact same services as the rest of the country. It needs health, education, roads, sewerage and all the rest. In reality, the shots are really called by the other Departments.

We first need to decide on what our vision is. Do we want a peopled countryside with a balanced population or are we happy with a dying countryside with only old people left and all the young people gone away? Covid has shown us two things, one of which is to give people the opportunity and the basic facilities, and the right to build a house. They will flock back in good numbers. We need to get that basic, philosophical point established. Do we want a purely gentrified countryside with no businesses in it? Do we ban all of those businesses by saying they have to be in the towns and that a few craft businesses will be allowed as a little concession, but just small little things and not any serious businesses? The businesses in my community employ hundreds of people, and why not? If one tried to put the businesses near me in the city or in the town people would be giving out and would oppose the plans. Where we live, in some of the most scenic parts of the country and with the hidden gem of the Joyce country, there is also major industry. We need facilities. I will mention something that is not in the lexicon at the moment. I built a number of greenways. I started the greenway thing when I was Minister but in rural Ireland a greenway is for recreation. I walk more than most. So far this year I have averaged 10 km every day. That includes good days and bad days, so some days I am doing up to 20 km and some days I might only do 4 km or 5 km. Is anyone really suggesting to me that, since I live 32 miles from Galway city, when I go to Galway I should hump my overnight bag and my two or three briefcases, put them on my back and hike it to Galway? I need roads. The first thing one finds in rural Ireland is the LIS road. We use local roads, tertiary roads, the county regional roads, then the national secondary routes and eventually the primary routes. We need safe ways of getting from place to place.

We need water in the remaining houses that are dependent on private supplies, which are variable and are not as well tested or as good as a public supply. A small number of these remain to be done. We had a great scheme under the CLÁR programme and were tackling them rapidly. That problem could be eliminated in the country but the scheme was pulled. We need sewerage facilities in the unsewered villages. We are always talking about people settling in villages but how can they settle in an unsewered village?

It is ironic that building in cities, maintaining buildings, knocking them down, rebuilding and regenerating is much more expensive per head of population than in rural Ireland. Usually, when people build in urban Ireland they are using the existing road and electricity is pervasive so it costs half as much to connect through the local supply passing one's house. In rural

Ireland, one pays to connect the water and if a person does the bit of his own land himself, he still has to pay €300 per metre for the bit of the road if he cannot get it outside his gate and so on. When people build, there is no huge infrastructural cost to the State. However, massive amounts of money are being given, necessarily, in cities to provide the basic infrastructure to allow houses to be built. We need a real debate, not one with the leprechaun view of rural Ireland that sees it as a pretty place for people to go on their holidays and to look at some of the remaining natives and say how quaint they are. We are living, vibrant communities with young people who are as smart as in anywhere in the country. People should have a choice about where they live. It should not be dictated by Europe or the Dáil but should be something people have a basic right to decide.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I thank the Minister of State for his report earlier and for the open way we have engaged with each other since his appointment. I look forward to community-focused feedback. There will be times when challenges need to be addressed. While listening to the debate over the past few hours I was interested in and impressed with some of the comments about community development because they fit into my view of it. It is something at which I have worked for more than 20 years, both as a community representative and in my work with the HSE and Tusla.

Two things have been focused on today. One is community development, where it is going and where we want it to go. We have to look back before we go forward. The strongest time for community development was when we had people working in the community who were rooted in their communities and working from them. Unfortunately, there is now a retrenchment into bigger projects. I will give an example. In Dublin 15 we had community workers who worked directly in offices in the community centre. Some of them lived in the area and they all either drove or walked to the community centre, worked out of it and engaged with people every single day. That was an important piece of that community development and that has been lost in the past ten years or so. We also had local management committees of local people who directed the work of the community development workers and those have been lost as well.

I will give another example. I was a community representative for many years on the local drugs task force and we also had a community development worker on that task force. At the beginning, way back in the late 1990s when we established the local drugs task forces, we had huge amounts of energy and co-operation with both voluntary and statutory services. However, three of us resigned from the task forces in the past few years on the basis that the community is not being listened to. Sadly, Fergus McCabe recently passed away. He was an incredible advocate for community development but even he, and the CityWide project he was involved in with Anna Quigley, was utterly frustrated with the lack of community engagement from the statutory organisations, particularly the HSE. That is something that needs to be addressed. We need to get back to the community, to engaging with the community on the ground and working from the bottom up. That is the essence of community development. If we do not have that, we will have development but we will have no community. That needs to be addressed. If we can focus all our energies on that in the next number of years we can make significant changes to our communities.

I will mention this very quickly because time is pressing on. There has been an announcement regarding multi-annual funding, which will be very welcome. As I have said previously, the community, charity and voluntary sectors need time and certainty to plan into the future.

The full cost of the delivery of services is another important aspect. Many community ser-

vices are delivering a quality service but they are not getting paid the cost of the delivery of that service through their funding. Staff members are taken on at the same pay scale as that of the public service, yet when the cuts came during the recession, they were the first people to be cut, by up to 30% or more. They still have not gotten their money back, while the public service is getting full restoration of pay. That absolutely needs to be worked on.

On the community services programme, it is wrong that people are getting paid less than the minimum wage. We need to pay people. We need to give them money and enough funding to ensure the minimum wage. If there is an excess or a profit from a project, it should be used to get them up to the living wage or it can be put directly back into the community because these are all non-profit organisations.

If the Ceann Comhairle will indulge me, I will finish with a few statistics. They are important in terms of the amount of money we are talking about versus what is being delivered. There are 29,000 non-profit organisations and 60,000 volunteer board members, with a turnover of more than €14 billion. The sector employs 189,000 people and the direct and indirect value of the work of community and voluntary groups is valued at €24.5 billion. Next time we are doing budgets, can we please take those statistics into consideration?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Donnelly. That was informative. I call Deputy McGrath, who is sharing with some of his colleagues.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Deputy Michael Healy-Rae was unable to make it so we have four speakers. I am delighted to be able to speak on this issue tonight. I welcome the Minister of State and wish him well. We need to go back to the communities and get boots on the ground. The dismantling of the LEADER programme was an abject failure and a deliberate attack by the Fine Gael Government of that time. The former Minister of State, Tom Hayes, and the former Minister, Phil Hogan, once told me that communities were getting too big for their boots. Now we have a mess. The Government threw everything at the top and nothing at the bottom.

I want to raise an issue about Newcastle Muintir na Tíre, a wonderful community group led by Marian O'Dwyer, with some great applications for funding. It was successful in getting €190,000 to extend its community hall and make it more usable. Before Covid, it was quite busy, used daily and nightly, and the community wanted to put in more meeting rooms. It was approved for €139,000 under the 2019 town and village renewal programme. However, it had to make up 20% of that funding, €35,000. In the 2020 renewal programme, the local community has to make up 10% of the funding. It is finding it extremely difficult, however. It simply cannot make up the €35,000 as it cannot fundraise with the present crisis.

The group is now in danger of losing this funding. Will somebody in the Department do a Zoom meeting with the group? There are many more communities in the same situation. Surely a bit of flexibility with this year's guidelines can be shown because of Covid. The group in question was ready, willing and able to do it. It had contractors, planning and everything else in place. The whole project could fall, however, because of the inability to fundraise.

The 2040 national development plan must be changed because it involves herding all of the people into the cities. We are now doing our new county development plan in Tipperary. I compliment Marian O'Dwyer and Councillor Máirín McGrath for putting in a detailed submission to our county development plan. The 2040 national development plan is overarching and

will be the ruination of rural Ireland. It has to be dismantled and derailed. We have very few railways left but this train must be taken off the track, whether it is through hijacking it. It has to be hijacked because we need to get back to basics to allow communities and people live, work and see their families grow up in rural Ireland. There are problems with homelessness in the cities because houses cannot be built. In the country, people want to build, are able to build and will build. We have to change the 2040 plan because it is overarching and crippling all county development plans. It is a monster.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: What is rural community development? It is vision, which the Government seems to lack. It is infrastructure, which the Government has never invested in outside of the cities. It is water and sewerage services, broadband and ESB connections for industry in rural areas. It is compulsory purchase orders for vacant and derelict properties which are included in the results that we have for infrastructure. It is connectivity in the rural areas for working, for school, for commuting and for basic shopping. It is the right to build a house in the area from where one comes.

If one builds a house now in a rural area, one pays huge fees. What is on the list from the county council planning permission? It is a charge for infrastructure. That money does not go back into our areas, however. It goes back into areas where the Government wants more population.

If Covid has shown the Government anything, it has shown that it forgot to invest in rural areas. It has shown that it has put all investment into the likes of Dublin while making people in rural areas travel to Dublin, which in turn has poisoned the air there. The Government must invest in infrastructure in rural Ireland and change the 2040 plan which the previous Government voted to implement which will stop people building in their own areas. We must change the 2040 plan. The Government must wake up, get vision and listen to all the Independents who have been shouting it from the rooftops.

Deputy Michael Collins: I came from the community sector myself. With no disrespect to the Minister, the Government relegated the Ministry for rural affairs when it put it on top of social protection. It has got lost. No one could argue that point when it was a stand-alone Ministry. It had a stronger clout with regard to delivering for the people of rural Ireland. No matter how good she is - we have many debates down through the years in committees - she cannot be good enough to run two portfolios.

That is the way Fianna Fáil has looked at the rural portfolio. This is not the first time it kicked rural affairs or rural development down the Swanee. Deputy Mattie McGrath is correct about how LEADER funding was lost. In 2016, when there were discussions about forming a Government, Deputy Micheál Martin was looking for our support. I certainly felt he was supportive of putting LEADER funding back to the way it was, namely, community driven. Now it is politically driven and it is a disaster. It does not deliver to local rural communities when it used to be a programme with the best delivery.

On the rural regeneration fund, I have to speak on behalf of the people of the Cork South-West constituency. Over the past several years, only one project in Kinsale has received funding from this. That is scandalous. We had a shovel-ready project, the Schull harbour development project, about which I spoke with the Taoiseach yesterday. There could not be a better project. It fitted the bill perfectly. What happened? Nothing. There needs to be an independent inquiry as to why that did not happen if there is any bit of honesty in this new Government. Someone

along the way pulled the plug when there were aspirational projects around the place that were nowhere near shovel-ready that got millions of euro. Why was the Cork South-West constituency left behind? That is why I am looking for a task force for the constituency.

The stability fund for community voluntary groups is not enough. Groups either get nothing out of it or just €1,000. While €1,000 is nothing to be snuffed at, in these times more is needed. I spoke recently to the leaders of the Red Cross in Clonakilty. It has lost its training centre and ambulance store in Clogheen, Clonakilty, because it does not have funding. Funding is not getting to those on the ground and the people who need it. This is why we need a stand-alone and strong Minister for rural affairs.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Since I came up here five years ago, I have listened to how broadband is being rolled out. We have another new broadband plan but it has not hit Kerry yet. They must be rolling it out around the Curragh now because we seem to be as far away as ever from getting broadband in Kerry.

Mobile phone coverage is a disaster in many parts of County Kerry. If one got off the plane in Farranfore, when the planes were running, there was no coverage on any of the three roads out of the airport. Places like Mastergeehy and Kilcummin have no broadband.

The Minister referred to the local improvement scheme, LIS, earlier in her speech. I must remind her that it is not for private roads as such. It is for public roads that were never taken in charge by the county council. In Kerry, we have 750 applications for the LIS but we got €700,000 this year which did only ten roads. There is a savage number of roads on the list. With that funding, it will be 40 or 50 years before the LIS list is wiped out in Kerry. Will the Minister give enough for 100 roads? The people in rural Kerry are entitled to a good road to their doors, the very same as the people in Dublin 4.

We are only going to build 13 rural cottages in Kerry from 2016 to 2021. That is a crying shame. When I raised it with the Minister of State, Deputy English, and Kerry County Council, one blamed the other. The fact remains that 13 rural cottages in five years is not fair play.

I call for more rural transport and for Bus Éireann to put in place new early and late services from Kenmare to Killarney. The Government talks about people using public transport. Now is the time. The Green Party is in power and this is what it is spelling out. We want two more bus runs from Kenmare to Killarney early in the morning and late at night. The Government should put its money where its mouth is. These buses will not run without money.

Group water schemes are in serious trouble. They are not getting funding. The grant for the treatment of wells was reduced by more than half, from €2,200 to €1,000. How is that fair play? I have the utmost respect for the Minister and I wish her well. I want to thank the former Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Michael Ring, for bringing back the local improvement scheme. I call on the Minister to give proper funding to it. As I said, people in Kerry are as entitled to good roads as everyone else.

An Ceann Comhairle: Perhaps Deputy Healy-Rae could bring the Minister down to Kerry and take her on a tour of some of those roads. I am sure she would love to go.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. We could have a wide-ranging discussion about rural Ireland and communities outside the large urban centres. We have to look at the possibilities and the achievements that are found within

those communities. We must ensure that our agriculture industry thrives and continues to be one of the major driving forces in rural Ireland. We want to make sure that this industry, which is heavily regulated, is encouraged. Whatever the outcome of negotiations across the water or in Europe, our agriculture industry must remain one of the major stakeholders in rural communities.

Yesterday there was a debate at the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine on the shambles that is the forestry industry. It is a challenge to get any licence application through the Department. Urgency is needed there because that industry accounts for a great deal of employment. Many ambitious ideas concerning afforestation and neighbourwood schemes are coming from rural communities.

Broadband will be one of the great enablers of rural Ireland. I spoke to many people from across my constituency today, people who live in close proximity to large towns and people who live in rural communities. Questions about broadband invariably arose - what type of connection a constituent has, who their service provider is and what is happening with it. In the past few days the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Robert Troy, exposed Eir's customer care, which is an absolute shambles. We hope something will be done about it. Over the years many Ministers have promised that broadband would be rolled out. It is the great enabler and the great leveller. In the past eight or nine months, Covid-19 has shown what generations of politicians have been trying to impress on a State that is unwilling to listen. There are huge possibilities within rural communities. People in various industries, not just the State bodies, are working from home. People in the remotest parts of my constituency are able to communicate with others throughout the globe. I take pride in hearing people say they can conduct their business just as effectively from their own kitchen table. We have to accept that and build on it. That is the how we can build up rural Ireland.

In recent years many people have lived in cities for a time and returned to rural communities to raise families. They do this because they know the positivity and community spirit there. They know the quality of the educational services. That is vitally important. It has been put to the test and shown by Covid-19. Small communities have been very good at looking out for one another. It is vitally important that we build on that.

I wish to raise the plight of stand-alone community centres, as well as those attached to GAA clubs. They have developed in small communities over the years. They offer activities every year to raise funds for insurance, to keep the lights on and to keep the community going. They cannot run them this year. It is vitally important that a scheme is designed to assist organisations that are trying to keep community halls going. The Government must make funding available in 2020 or early 2021 to fill this gap. I have worked with many of these small communities to build up their halls and draw down various funding streams. No activities are taking place now and they therefore have no income. I refer particularly to smaller clubs, groups and voluntary organisations not attached to the main GAA clubs. In normal times they might hold a table quiz to raise €2,000 or €3,000 to meet their running costs. They must be protected.

There has been much discussion of sewerage and water. The group water schemes and group sewerage schemes that operated ten or 15 years ago were great schemes. Grants were available to communities designated under the CLÁR programme. With the advent of Irish Water, those group schemes are no longer available. They would be great enablers of towns and villages. People could come together and draw down funding to extend group sewerage schemes and CLÁR infrastructure. This has been done in many towns and villages in my own

area in recent times. This approach should be considered again as a way to tie areas to the main sewers and enable communities to build again. This is vitally important.

Many of the local community development committees, LCDCs, will come to the end of their programme on 31 December. Some of them have committed money to certain projects which will not be completed by the end of the year because of various challenges connected to planning or the construction industry ceasing work for several months because of Covid-19. I ask the Minister to make sure that any funding committed to LCDCs is rolled over into 2021. Perhaps the Minister can clarify that if she contributes again at the end of the debate.

I have spoken to the Minister previously about rural post offices. There is scope to re-examine their role and site digital hubs alongside them. This would be an innovative move. I have submitted a proposal to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and to other Ministers to try to build consensus around it. It is vitally important that the post office is seen as a vital component of the community. We should install digital hubs with desks where people can work. Many people in rural communities would like to separate their work from their homes. They would like an alternative to travelling into cities. This is the opportunity. It should not be missed. The State should back this effort in a very meaningful way.

I would also like to discuss planning, from the national level to the local authority level. We need an incentive to get people into rural communities. Many rural communities are building. People see them as attractive places to rear families. We must not urbanise everything. That is not the way forward. There is scope for rural planning in any of the ideologies we may hold. It is compatible with environmental concerns. It is vitally important that we look at rural planning and encourage as many people as possible to live in rural communities. In the clear, cold light of day, Covid-19 is prompting people to look for the best way to protect themselves and their families. They are looking away from large urban centres towards the real options offered by rural Ireland. Not only in Ireland but across the globe there is a real and imaginative look at this. The Government and this Parliament should do all they can to make sure that we embrace and diversify into it.

I am Chairman of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters. It is important that rural communities are engaged in making sure they are as disability-friendly as possible. Over the decades, various governments, Ministers and organisations have built the great Tidy Towns competition which has led to fantastic achievements. The Government should consider incentivising a competition to bring about an inclusive society programme through which people can embrace disability and communities can be the best they possibly can in regard to disabilities. There is a real opportunity to incentivise stakeholders of all types to come together to develop and support an inclusive society programme led by the Government.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I welcome the opportunity to speak on rural and community affairs. We are less than two weeks away from, we hope, exiting level 5 lockdown restrictions. There are 11 hours scheduled for statements in the Dáil this week, all of which statements are on important issues. I will speak on all of the issues, but when I do, I will be speaking about Covid. We cannot discuss the issues that are facing and challenging our citizens today without talking about Covid into the future. It is disappointing that time was not scheduled this week in the Dáil to debate what may happen on 1 December for the remainder of December and for the 12 months after that. Deputies want to discuss this issue and so a debate should be scheduled.

I understand if bodies such as NPHET fear that a debate like that might undermine the pub-

lic health advice. I understand that they have a responsibility to the public health, but so do we. We also have a responsibility to have a public debate on the issue. We cannot be held hostage to the fears of other groups when we should be debating what should be happening in terms of the direction for this country into the future. This is not just about Christmas, although that is important. It is about the next 12 months and maybe longer, but I hope not, in respect of which we might be facing into some form of Covid restrictions in this country. I hope we can have that debate scheduled for early next week so that Deputies can put on the record what they believe should be happening in terms of how we manage Covid into the future and the appropriateness now, given what we know of the pandemic and the virus since the first phase in regard to levels 4 or 5 of the strategy, of national lockdowns versus living with the virus rather than being defeated backwards into lockdown by it every few months.

When it comes to community development, there are huge opportunities here. I know that the Minister is aware of how small amounts of money to local communities can go a very long way. People are spending more time in local communities throughout the country and, as a result, they are noticing more about their local communities and they are getting involved. People are getting active and we should be taking advantage of that to make sure we get better outcomes for every community. For example, for some people the only option they may feel they have in a Covid world is either working at home or travelling long distances into the office in Dublin. We have an opportunity now for local and regional office hub spaces where people can go and work instead of having to travel all the way to the city centre.

We have a chance now for great village improvement schemes to be done with the consent and involvement of more people in those communities, if they get the funding. There are opportunities for enhancing the public realm and public spaces. In this city, we have private parks that are not public but they are in very public locations, both in the city centre and in our suburbs. Should those parks really remain as private parks? Should we be looking to use our community spaces to the best advantage of as many people as possible? We should be funding arts activities, local activities, local theatre and all other activities that can happen in outdoor space and structural environments where people should be able to enjoy their local area in a safe way. This is the type of area that I believe funding should be going into and I support the Minister in doing that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The next slot is being shared by Deputies McNamara, Fitzmaurice and Harkin.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I concur with what Deputy Eoghan Murphy said with regard to Covid and the necessity to discuss it. We do live in a parliamentary democracy and we do have to have debate. I appreciate that people do not like to be held accountable and that people sometimes think that undermines a message, but nothing undermines a message as much as lack of debate because people cotton onto that very quickly. That is what we have had in this House. Even in the context of rural development we need to discuss Covid. We cannot pretend that Covid poses the same risk in rural communities as it does in Dublin, just as we cannot pretend that it poses the same risk in Dublin as it does in greater London. Any pandemic, particularly a respiratory virus, is clearly going to pose a greater risk in areas where there is a greater density of population.

Covid and people working from home poses a huge opportunity for a change of mindset. There are many towns and villages that were once thriving commercial centres that are now dying. We can blame successive Governments, globalisation or whatever we like for this, but

I think we need to move away from that to see what people want. There are a number of office blocks around here that are now empty as people are working from home. People are better equipped now to work from home once broadband is provided. I hope that the broadband plan will be rolled out as scheduled.

There are three particular villages in Clare that I want to mention that have been already mentioned by previous speakers, namely, Broadford, Carrigaholt and Doolin. These are very different villages but the one thing they have in common is they do not have a sewerage scheme. For this reason, Irish Water is not interested in dealing with them. Irish Water is upgrading existing sewerage schemes but it is not taking on new schemes. Broadford is ten miles from Limerick, so it is in a perfect position to grow. Carrigaholt is working to grow its tourism industry and Doolin has a very advanced tourism industry, but none of these areas have sewerage schemes. There needs to be a system put in place so that they can grow and have a sewerage scheme.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Some counties have spent a lot of their money on LEADER projects. A roll-over is needed and money is required for next year and the year after because the next Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, will be in 2023. I ask the Minister to prioritise that issue. I know from my engagement with people in Roscommon earlier in the week that that is a problem.

Broadband is welcome but we need to see it rolled out. The Minister comes from a rural area, as do I. If one is making cocks of hay in a field, the more people in the field, the quicker they will be made. We need to roll out extra people, as it were, although I know there are problems in that regard at the moment.

On mobile phone coverage, the current providers are basically giving the two fingers to a lot of people in rural Ireland. I welcome the town and village renewal scheme. It has helped. We can give out about measures but we also need to recognise initiatives such as rural regeneration. The more of that, the better for us all. There is a particular matter that I would ask the Minister to raise at Cabinet. I know from my engagement with different councils that there are issues with regard to the assessment of roads. The Minister and every other Deputy here knows that new roads are very important because we do not have adequate public transport. Some of the people in the Green Party might wish to live in a dream world. We will never have sufficient public transport such that we have only to put out a hand at our houses and a bus will stop and pick us up. In terms of the road analysis that is being done, they are making it harder to build roads. I ask the Minister to raise that issue at Cabinet.

I want to raise the issue of sewerage schemes under the previous Government, which was not the remit of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. In the counties where Irish Water does not provide services in a town there are group water schemes, especially in the west. If Irish Water does not supply the water to a county, it will not support a sewerage scheme. This needs to be addressed. I spoke to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, about this a week ago and I spoke to one of his officials. They are aware of the situation. I hope they will come back with a solution. Previously a grant of €6,000 per house was available and people in the area would put in place the scheme and run it, probably more efficiently than anybody else.

Ballinasloe has water, broadband and sewerage services. It has everything going for it, including a motorway. There is a need for a task force in towns like that to bring them on. I

would live nowhere else than rural Ireland. It is the best place to live and bring up a family. For all its faults and all of the criticisms of this, that and the other, I would not give it up for the world, in particular the tranquility. The old houses that were closed up in rural areas are being snapped up at the moment. We need greater positivity, to put in place the infrastructure, to get the meitheal going and to address the problems in the line of sewerage and so on and we will make it better yet.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I listened to the Minister's remarks about the various moneys that have been spent. They are all very welcome, but we must also look at regional spend. I have repeatedly quoted the report of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly which looked at regional imbalances. The report was produced on foot of the downgrading by the European Commission of the region's categorisation from a developed region to a region in transition. There are many statistics in the report. I do not have time to go through them now but they show the lesser spend per capita, whether in terms of health infrastructure or education infrastructure or per kilometre of local, regional and national roads. When we talk about spending, I believe we have to look at a balanced regional spend.

One way in which the Minister might help to deliver that balance of regional development is to involve the Northern and Western Regional Assembly as the lead agency in allocating the approximately €350 million which is allocated to the region under cohesion funds. It has launched the Let's Be More campaign to ensure more localised investment and more action to facilitate local entrepreneurship, research and development, etc. The Minister and I know that the centralised mindset has not delivered balanced regional development. I think we have an opportunity to change that now. The Government has committed to so doing.

I refer to the issue of the LEADER programme. The Minister stated that €44 million will be available next year to fund existing projects and develop a transition programme. That is good, but I am seeking clarity because, six weeks out from the end of the programme, the individual local action groups, LAGs, cannot plan individually from the point of view of administration, etc., because they do not know what their specific allocation will be. Has the Department done any indicative calculation or estimate for project payout in 2021 or for administration and animation in 2021? I am sure it has done so. When one adds those two figures together, what is left for the new transition programme that is planned? Of course, that is also a commitment in the programme for Government, which states:

We will support a LEADER Programme and deliver a Rural Development Programme which is led by independent Local Action Groups and supported by Local Community Development Committees.

I know from long experience in the European Parliament that it took the intervention of senior officials in the European Commission to ensure the tendering scheme for the current LEADER programme was open, transparent and equitable. The Government has committed to a LEADER programme led by LAGs. That must be delivered. Any review that is being considered must start from that principle and must not be used as a mechanism to dilute that commitment.

Deputy Mattie McGrath put it much more colourfully than I could when he stated that certain Ministers felt communities were getting too big for their boots. I certainly know that was true. Ireland's LEADER programme was assessed by the European Court of Auditors as being one of the best. What did we do? We largely got rid of community involvement. I hope the

Minister will deliver on the commitment in the programme for Government and restore that community involvement.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank all Deputies who contributed. Although we do not always agree on everything in this Chamber, the interest in this debate shows that there is a strong passion on all sides of the House for rural and community development. As Minister, I have had the opportunity to witness at first hand the vision, commitment and energy which is present in communities across the country. Those communities, led by hard-working volunteers, deliver a significant amount for society. With the right supports and opportunities, I believe they can do even more. I am determined that all of the policies of my Department now and into the future will support that work.

I point out to Deputy Michael Collins that we have more schemes for rural Ireland than ever before. There is unprecedented investment going into rural communities through schemes such as the €1 billion rural regeneration and development fund, the town and village renewal scheme, the outdoor recreation scheme, CLÁR, LEADER, the community enhancement scheme and local improvement schemes. I increased the budget for the latter to €10.5 million. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae mentioned that as well. The Department of Transport and local authorities also have a role to play in local improvement schemes. The community services programme and many other funds are available.

What I want to see in respect of all of our funding streams is a ground-up approach. A top-down approach will not work. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to rural development. Every community is different and has its own unique needs. Our funding schemes need to be responsive and reflect that. I welcome the feedback from Deputies as part of this debate.

I will try to address as many of the specific points raised as I can. Deputy Calleary raised the issue of matched funding. This year, in recognition of the pressure on local authorities, we increased the grant rate under several of our rural programmes to 90% and, as such, there is only a 10% matched funding requirement.

Deputy Kerrane raised the issue of young people moving away from their communities to cities. The reality is that this trend is evident not just here in Ireland but across the globe, where young people tend to drift towards cities. There is a unique opportunity now to reverse that trend through remote working. I believe the investment the Government is making in the national broadband plan will be a game changer for rural businesses and communities and will mean Ireland is well placed to maximise the potential that remote working presents for regional development.

The issue of the accelerated roll-out of the national broadband plan was raised by many Deputies. I welcome the recent comments of David McCourt of National Broadband Ireland that the plan could be rolled out in five years. That is a very welcome signal because as far as I am concerned it cannot happen soon enough. It is one year since the broadband contract was signed. It is the biggest investment in rural Ireland since electrification. Nobody is questioning now whether it was the right decision to sign the contract. All anybody wants to know is when they are going to get the broadband.

In the meantime, my Department is rolling out broadband connection points, BCPs, across the country, 200 of which will be operational by the end of the year. Deputy Mythen asked specifically about Wexford. We plan to have ten BCPs operational in Wexford by the end of

the year.

Deputy Mac Lochlainn referred to e-health initiatives. That is something I am looking at very closely. Under the BCP programme, we will trial several initiatives, including e-health, as well as education and training trials, art and culture trials and, of course, remote and connected working investments. The BCPs cannot simply be stopgap measures. We have an opportunity to establish long-term community assets that leverage connectivity for the public benefit. Working together, central and local government, communities and all Members of the House can make something special of the BCPs.

I welcome the positive feedback from Deputies with regard to BCPs. If Deputies are aware of good locations in their constituencies that may be suitable for BCPs, they can contact the broadband officer of their local authority, who will feed into my Department and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications because there may be scope to add further BCP locations next year.

Several Deputies mentioned the service provided by Eir. I hear about it daily in my constituency. It is not good enough and the company is going to have to up its game big time because at the moment it is letting its customers down. It is as simple as that. I know the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has made his view on that issue clearly known.

Deputy Dillon raised several local projects in County Mayo under the town and village renewal scheme. I hope to be able to announce the applications successful under this year's town and village scheme in December.

7 o'clock

I assure Deputy Dillon that I would be delighted to visit my Department's offices in Ballina as soon as the restrictions allow it.

A number of Deputies raised the issue of job creation in rural Ireland. It is my intention that the new rural policy will contain a commitment to building on recent successes and will set ambitious targets in Enterprise Ireland's, IDA Ireland's and Údarás na Gaeltachta's enterprise strategies for job creation in the regions. I am engaging with the Tánaiste on that, and he is committed to job creation in the regions.

Deputy Cairns spoke about the challenge of climate change and the need for sustainable development. While these are challenges, it is important to point out that there are massive opportunities for rural Ireland in the green economy. For example, there are major job creation opportunities in retrofitting.

Deputy Cahill raised the issue of community allotments. That is another good idea. I support it, because that is how we will get ground-up, community-led projects that benefit the environment.

Deputy Carey spoke about the outdoor recreation scheme and the benefits it has brought to the Lough Derg blueway in his constituency. The outdoor recreation scheme is one of the best schemes we have. Funding has been provided for greenways, cycleways and trails throughout the country. There is a big interest in outdoor activity now because of Covid-19 and I am glad we have increased the budget for outdoor recreation to €12 million next year. Deputy Naughten

mentioned the Beara-Breifne Way, and there are opportunities for that project to secure funding through the outdoor recreation scheme. I hope the local authority involved will examine that.

Deputy Murnane O'Connor raised CLÁR. The number of projects approved in each county varies, depending on the size of the CLÁR areas in each county. That varies a great deal. For example, Deputy Martin Kenny will know that all of Leitrim is designated a CLÁR area. On the other hand, Carlow has one of the smallest CLÁR areas in the country, with just over 20% of the county designated as such an area. My Department has commissioned an external review of how CLÁR areas are designated and this will be completed next year.

Deputies Canney and Carey raised water and wastewater services, as did Deputy Fitzmaurice. I will look into that and raise it with my colleagues in government. It is continually raised with me as an issue. However, we are talking about substantial investment in this regard, but I will discuss it with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. Deputy Canney also raised the town centre living report. The report was published on 22 June and is available on the Department's website. I have established an interdepartmental group to examine how we can progress the report's recommendations. I also secured an extra €2 million in the budget so we can expand the project to a further 50 towns.

A number of Deputies spoke about the importance of our front-line community development workers. I fully agree that they do fantastic work in local communities, but they have been impacted by the pandemic. We have sought to support them through the €35 million Covid stability fund, and I am pleased that we secured an extra €10 million for that fund in the budget.

Deputies Michael Moynihan and Mattie McGrath raised the issue of more funding for community centres. There is a €5 million fund that was introduced for community centres earlier this year, so perhaps they should check with their local community development committees, LCDCs. It is a matter of which I am very aware.

The compulsory purchase of vacant properties was raised by Deputy O'Donoghue. On this occasion, I agree with him. I have no wish to see properties becoming eyesores in our towns and villages. I will also raise the issue with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, as part of the new rural policy.

Deputies Michael Moynihan and Fitzmaurice spoke about the LEADER programme, as did Deputy Harkin. The Government is committed to a transitional LEADER programme and I am considering extending the closing date because a number of LEADER companies have requested it. They will not be ready for the closing date this year, when they cannot announce new projects. They want me to extend it for a couple of months, so I am considering it. I will announce the transitional programme and the moneys we have for it shortly. The LEADER companies need not worry. There is funding available. They have much work to do because there are still projects to be announced. They also have many projects that have been announced but the money has not been drawn down. There will be a great deal of work over the next year and a half in the LEADER companies to ensure that these communities are able to deliver the programmes for which they have received funding.

I believe I have covered many of the points raised by Deputies. I listened to what every Member had to say, lest any Member doubt it. I thank the Deputies for their constructive feedback which we will take into account when finalising the new rural policy. As we look beyond

Covid-19, any recovery must be inclusive and benefit all communities. I am proud to lead the important work of my Department, along with the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien. I am determined to maintain the momentum and to ensure we continue to deliver benefits for all communities. I had limited time to respond tonight, but I am happy to talk to Deputies at any time if they have ideas or proposals that could make a difference. I thank them for their contributions.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes what has been a stimulating and worthwhile debate on rural and community development.

Community Safety and Preventing Crime: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee. She has 30 minutes for her opening statement.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am sharing time with the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a statement on community safety and preventing crime. I am also looking forward to hearing the contributions from Deputies and to working with them on this issue. Members of the House will be aware that the mission of An Garda Síochána is “Keeping People Safe”. This is a simple, but clear, message. Community safety is a much broader concept than crime or fear of crime. It is about people being safe and feeling safe in their communities. It can include the responsiveness of emergency services, mental health issues, education, drug abuse prevention, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, youth crime, anti-social behaviour, hate crime and the built environment. This is reflected in the key principle in the programme for Government, Our Shared Future, to build stronger and safer communities. The well-being of communities is among our highest priorities and we want members of the public to feel confident and secure in going about their lives.

As the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland recognised, community safety in this broad sense is not just the responsibility of An Garda Síochána. Responses must be community-specific and require a range of services, ranging from strengthening youth services to increasing street lighting. This requires a multisectoral approach, stronger interagency collaboration and community engagement, with a key role for health and social services as well as other sectors of society. A Policing Service for our Future, the Government’s implementation plan for the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, is strongly based on meeting the public’s needs in this way through increased visibility of gardaí on the street and increased engagement with all local communities to ensure their particular needs are being met.

Community engagement, of course, has been a defining feature of An Garda Síochána since its establishment 100 years ago. This perhaps has never been more evident than during the Covid-19 pandemic, with local gardaí nationwide going above and beyond the call of duty to support vulnerable groups in their communities. These efforts on the part of individual gardaí include visiting elderly and vulnerable members of the community, dropping off food, medicine and other necessities, liaising with representatives of community groups and many other focused efforts to serve their communities. There are too many to list. I thank An Garda Síochána again for its extraordinary commitment to policing during this unprecedented year. As

the Policing Authority has noted, the rich relationships built during this period should create a strong foundation for the future of policing in this country.

It is important that we now build the structures which can ensure community safety is embedded in the work of the State in all communities in the country. In line with the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, my Department has been developing a new national community safety policy which will feed into the development of a new policing and community safety Bill. The Bill, which will provide the backbone to policing reform, will redefine the functions of An Garda Síochána to include the prevention of harm to those who are vulnerable. However, the problems communities face are not just limited to policing issues. Bringing the right services together and working with each other to tackle the underlying issues which impact on a community and the sense of safety within the community are key. The legislation, therefore, will place an obligation on Departments, State agencies and local authorities to co-operate with An Garda Síochána on the broader issue of community safety and refine local structures to better support local accountability for policing.

As part of this work, last week I announced three new local community safety partnerships which will be established on a pilot basis in the Dublin north inner-city electoral area, Waterford and Longford. The locations of the pilots, which will run for 24 months, were chosen based on a number of factors, including population density, crime rates and deprivation. The partnerships, which will be independently chaired, will replace the local joint policing committees, build on the existing structures and bring together residents, community representatives, including youth, new communities and the voluntary sector, business interests, councillors, local authorities and State services such as An Garda Síochána, Tusla and the HSE. The agenda and objectives of each partnership will be driven by the community itself, and each partnership will devise and implement a local community safety plan, reflecting community priorities and local safety issues. The model is built on the principle that every community needs to be central in identifying what it needs and helping to shape solutions, and State services will be held to account by each partnership.

The active engagement of community representatives and residents will be critical in ensuring the work is community driven. Training will be provided to support the capacity of each partnership to work together, with individual training for residents to develop their understanding of their role and confidence in representing their community. As the pilots progress, they will be carefully evaluated and any changes that are necessary will be made to ensure the partnerships work as effectively as possible for the communities concerned. The pilots will inform a national roll-out in all local authority areas.

The Commission on the Future of Policing recognises that while preventing and investigating crime is a top priority for An Garda Síochána, in practice the majority of police time in Ireland and elsewhere is spent on harm prevention. Often, particularly out of hours, it is members of An Garda Síochána who are at the front line when dealing with persons with mental health or addiction issues, homeless persons and others at risk. As well as taking a multi-agency approach to planning for and responding to day-to-day community safety, it is also necessary to ensure that a co-operative approach is taken to handling what can be an emergency situation involving an individual who, for instance, as a result of a mental health or addiction issue, may be at risk him or herself or pose a risk to others. This approach would see multi-agency crisis intervention teams put in place with round-the-clock-response capabilities and ultimately, where possible, these teams would be co-located. The teams would involve police working with health, including mental health and substance abuse interventions, as well as social and

youth workers with a capacity to respond to emergencies and to intervene with people at risk in their communities.

Local community safety partnerships could identify areas of need within the community that would benefit from the support of crisis intervention teams. They could also foster and develop relationships and communication between the services at local level. My Department will continue to explore how these teams can be established and supported, including through engagement with An Garda Síochána, other Departments and relevant service providers. I accept it is an extremely ambitious target but it is something that will be very useful and helpful if we can bring it together with all the agencies.

In hand with this work, crucial day-to-day policing has continued throughout the pandemic, with a particular emphasis on those vulnerable groups most at risk. While there has been a general and welcome decrease in many categories of crime during the Covid period, some categories have increased, unfortunately, such as domestic abuse, drugs offences and cyber-crime. Sustained action by An Garda Síochána has continued unabated throughout the pandemic, bringing significant convictions and ongoing seizures of drugs, firearms and ammunition. An Garda Síochána remains 100% committed to tackling the supply of drugs by supporting local communities through various preventative and detection initiatives and engagement with local and regional drug and alcohol task forces; the Garda youth diversion programme and projects; the Garda schools programme; and the existing joint policing committees and community policing forums. The Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, will speak further about the youth justice side of things.

Operation Faoiseamh has meanwhile provided enhanced, proactive support to victims of domestic abuse, including proactively reaching out and making contact with previous victims to provide reassurance and support, offer the assistance of local and specialised resources, as well as renewing the focus on the enforcement of court orders and the prosecution of offenders. I once again remind the public that travel restrictions do not apply in the case of domestic abuse or when escaping a risk of harm and I strongly encourage anyone who finds themselves or members of their family in this position to contact An Garda Síochána or visit the website *stillhere.ie*.

This work is being supported with unprecedented resources, which is necessary. An Garda Síochána has been allocated €1.952 billion in budget 2021. There are now some 14,600 gardaí nationwide, supported by more than 3,000 Garda staff. Furthermore, the roll-out of the new Garda operating model will support the redeployment of gardaí from non-core duties to front-line policing throughout the country. There have also been provisions for additional members of An Garda Síochána, and by next year, taking into account Covid-19, that should bring the force to more than 15,000. A total of €15 million has been allocated this year for new vehicles, which is extremely important, in particular in rural areas. The sum of €9 million has already been allocated and an additional €6 million will be provided later in the year. A total of 524 new vehicles will be provided.

I would like to note the work of the former director of the Probation Service, Vivian Geiran, whom I have appointed to carry out a scoping exercise to assess the impact that criminal activity in Drogheda is having on the community and to make recommendations for action going forward. Mr. Geiran is expected to complete this work in the coming weeks. Likewise, the Dublin City Council north central area committee recently engaged with former Assistant Garda Commissioner Jack Nolan to develop a socioeconomic and community plan for the Darndale

area. My Department will engage with the findings and recommendations arising from the report to ensure its implementation.

I acknowledge that our vision for community safety is ambitious. It will require sustained commitment and perseverance on the part of Departments, State agencies and community and voluntary organisations. However, I believe the realisation of this vision will provide a truly holistic support framework for all communities, recognising their unique strengths and responding to their greatest needs. As Minister, I am fully committed to the work of building stronger and safer communities and I look forward to working with all Deputies to progress this vital work.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I wish to share time with Deputies Bruton and Ó Cathasaigh.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy James Browne: I echo my ministerial colleague, Deputy McEntee, in thanking the House for the opportunity to discuss this important topic today. The Minister has spoken of her understanding of the full meaning of community safety. While we can all agree that crime prevention measures are critical to improving the quality of life for all communities, crime prevention is just one facet of community safety. Community safety in the most complete sense requires the proactive and ongoing input of a range of public and community services and cannot be met by any single State agency or voluntary organisation alone.

When we think about successful communities, meaning communities where people are content, supported and provided with opportunities to thrive, they have at their heart a committed team of community organisations, residents and the support of An Garda Síochána and other State bodies. A collaborative approach is the key to creating a community that people enjoy living in. That is why the Government is seeking to foster a multi-agency, cross-collaborative approach. By harnessing those community and State services that focus on mental health issues, educational work, drug prevention and other key issues to work together, we can make meaningful contributions to local communities throughout this country.

I accept that responses must be community-specific. For that reason, public engagement is also an integral part of making communities safer and more resilient. Deputies may be aware that a public consultation was launched by my Department earlier this year on the development of a new youth justice strategy. We intend to bring the final strategy, taking account of the input we received as part of this consultation process, to the Government before the end of this year. Issues such as the need for early intervention and family support, coupled with collaborative working by agencies and community partners, are central to the approach contained within the youth justice strategy. The importance of the strategy is endorsed by and prioritised in the programme for Government.

A key priority for the new strategy will be to strengthen and expand the role of the Garda youth diversion projects and other community-based initiatives, including those working with the Probation Service. Bringing the full range of relevant interventions together in a coherent and holistic response to youth crime will support the objective of diverting young people from crime and anti-social behaviour.

The strategy has been developed in light of the experience of State agencies and community partners who work with a comparatively small number of children and young people who come

into contact with the criminal justice system. This work is built on the 2008 youth justice strategy and the subsequent Youth Justice Action Plan 2014-2018. It tries to deal with many of the gaps that remain as well as new challenges which have emerged. The strategy will align with the new community safety policy as well as with successor frameworks to the current National Policy Framework for Children and Young Adults 2014-2020, which is overseen by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

In terms of supports and programmes currently available, there are some 105 Garda youth diversion projects across the State. The intention is to develop this service further so that it is available to every child in the State who could benefit from it through an ongoing expansion of existing services and, where necessary, the foundation of new projects. Further, the projects are being developed to provide family support to the parents of young people participating in the projects and who are undertaking early intervention and preventative work. The role of the projects regarding harder to engage young people is being enhanced and extended as part of the evolving youth justice system.

My Department is supporting ongoing development of practice in Garda youth diversion programmes through the action research project led by the University of Limerick. The action research project works directly with front-line youth justice workers from local projects to develop interventions and best practice. Based on initial outcomes from the action research project and evaluations of a number of pilot projects, it is intended to develop proposals to expand existing services to ensure national coverage and a stronger focus on difficult issues such as the hard-to-reach cohort.

The programme for Government also contains a commitment to convene an expert forum on anti-social behaviour to consider the effectiveness of existing legislation and propose new ways forward, including new powers for An Garda Síochána and additional interventions to support parenting of offenders. As Minister of State, I convened an initial meeting of the new forum on anti-social behaviour on 27 October.

Turning to the critical role of An Garda Síochána in making our communities safer, the Government is prioritising the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland through the four-year implementation plan, A Policing Service for our Future. As the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has already noted, the policing and community safety Bill being drafted to give legislative effect to the recommendations of the commission's report is a key element of this implementation plan, redefining, as it will, policing to include prevention of harm to those who are vulnerable, and placing a statutory obligation on relevant State agencies to co-operate with An Garda Síochána on the broader issue of community safety.

The provision of record resources in budget 2021 will further support An Garda Síochána in carrying out its vital crime-prevention role in our local communities. We all acknowledge the extraordinary policing challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. I pay tribute to gardaí throughout the country for the exceptional contribution they have made to making our communities safer. In particular, I mention the critical importance of Operation Faoiseamh which continues to provide support and outreach to victims of domestic abuse as well as the crucial work of all gardaí working on Operation Fanacht and Operation Navigation to ensure public compliance with the public health guidelines through the four Es approach of engaging, educating, encouraging and, only as a last resort, enforcing.

The positive community-centred tone of this approach, in line with our tradition of policing

by consent, has been recognised by the Policing Authority. I also thank the public at large for their individual and collective efforts in combating this virus. I recognise the hardship this has brought on many people and businesses throughout the country, especially in the service and retail sectors, at a time of great stress and worry. Without the buy-in from the public in general along with our own and our neighbours' determination to protect each other, our communities would be less safe today and into the future.

In tandem with this suite of Covid-19 Garda operations and other policing initiatives, An Garda Síochána is continuing to prioritise its annual crime-prevention operations. Operation Thor continues to focus on the anticipated increase in the number of burglaries and associated criminal activity that usually occur in the winter months by undertaking targeted enforcement and preventative activity. The uninterrupted policing of organised crime during the policing of the pandemic has undoubtedly contributed to recent successes in seizing controlled drugs and in the apprehension of those involved in the sale and supply of the substances involved. In the first six months of 2020, Garda operations to counter organised crime resulted in the seizure of €13.6 million in illicit drugs as well as 13 firearms and 2,000 rounds of ammunition. An Garda Síochána has also continued to raise public awareness of online fraud, recognising that this category of crime has, to an extent, benefited from Covid-19 public health restrictions by targeting vulnerable members of our communities. In a bid to tackle the constantly evolving avenues for cybercrime, €1.8 million has been allocated in budget 2021 for the expansion of the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau.

My Department also continues to provide a number of financial supports to local communities to support community safety. Supports include administering a grant aid scheme supporting community groups wishing to establish community-based CCTV systems in their area. To date 29 applications have been approved under the scheme involving approved grants awarded totalling more than €752,000. Eligible groups, including community groups and local authorities nationwide, can apply for grant aid of up to 60% of the total capital cost of a proposed CCTV system up to a maximum of €40,000. Last year the grant aid scheme was extended beyond new CCTV systems to allow funding applications for an extension or upgrade of existing community CCTV systems which are incomplete or obsolete. Applicants can now also seek a once-off grant of up to €5,000 for minor maintenance costs. The significance of these schemes in helping to detect crime in local communities is well recognised and funding has been provided for the continuation of the scheme in budget 2021.

The programme for Government includes a commitment to continue to support and prioritise community crime prevention, including the Garda text alert scheme. I am grateful for the opportunity to outline the measures being taken to improve community safety and prevent crime nationwide. I assure the House that the Government will continue actively to support collaborative progress towards achieving a safer society for all.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I welcome the debate and in particular the emphasis on the centrality of community safety at the heart of a new community policing strategy. The Commission on the Future of Policing established that human rights are at the heart of what the Garda does. The right to feel safe in one's own community is a fundamental right that we need to promote. The sad reality is that this right is not equally distributed across our community.

The Minister, Deputy McEntee, rightly drew attention to the work done by Jack Nolan in the community of Darndale, Moatview and Belcamp, showing that this is a community where community safety is not the prevailing mood of what people experience on the ground. The reality

is that there is too much impact of gangs. Their influence is too wide. The abuse of drugs is too widespread. Its impact in diverting young people away from other opportunities is clear. The intimidation and fear that is felt by families is a real problem undermining the attempts not to only police but to transform this community. We know that this is one of the communities with very low rates of education and progression to further education compared with the rest of the country and with neighbouring areas. We need to see a really strong response to this.

While I welcome the pilot partnerships the Minister has announced, I am disappointed that they do not include this community where such excellent work has been done. I also believe that the partnerships as they are now framed fall short of what we will need if we are to respond in communities like the one in Darndale, Moatview and Belcamp which has deeply embedded problems. The commitment and the range of engagement of outside agencies is too narrow. We need to seek genuine cross-Government commitment if this is to realise the sort of shift that is envisaged in Jack Nolan's work.

The history of community policing does not instil full confidence in communities that this will be followed through in the way in which the Commission on the Future of Policing envisaged. It pointed to the central role of the entire Garda district and not just some gardaí, described as community gardaí, in keeping communities safe and using the very best modern techniques to deliver that within that community. Our past experience is that when the pressure has come on, the needs of central units to respond to other needs had seen community policing put to one side. This must represent a very dramatic shift if we are to see a new approach genuinely becoming embedded in our future policing.

From my experience, delivering change on the scale that the Minister and the Commission on the Future of Policing envisage needs four things. We need a vision that is very ambitious. It needs to be spelt out. This can be seen in Jack Nolan's work in his community. It is about disrupting, dismantling and diverting people from what is now a very widespread impact of the drugs trade and a gang culture that is there. That will take resources and sustained effort. We need wrap-around youth services. We need bespoke education programmes. We need physical demonstration of a change in approach. That will not happen from the scale of the partnerships that are now envisaged.

We also need inspired leadership. The very best of Garda resources need to be deployed in these partnership areas with the time, commitment and consistency of service to deliver a project on this scale in those areas. Gardaí should get recognition and be considered for promotion if they do complete that work. We do not want to see quality people promoted out to some other task that comes along. We need to see authority for such an initiative and by that I mean that we need to be able to change the conventional approach in other services in order to deliver the vision that has been spelled out.

Finally, a budget will be required. This means that we must commit additional resources and be creative in the use of those resources in areas where community safety is simply not being delivered. I am sure my colleague from Drogheda, Deputy O'Dowd, will have similar comments to make on some of the strains in his area. We need to respond to this in a different way. While I welcome the first step on the road that the Department of Justice is taking here, a higher level of commitment is required from within that Department and An Garda Síochána. There is also a need for a great deal more resources from other Departments and across Government.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the proposed lo-

cal community safety partnership pilot project which the Minister for Justice announced last week and which will operate in Dublin's north inner city, Longford and my constituency of Waterford. The project represents the implementation of some of the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland and is a welcome signal of intent on the part of this Government. I refer specifically to recommendation No. 5 of the commission, which states that "policing partnerships should include the business community, voluntary organisations, faith-based groups, schools and others who can contribute to community safety", and recommendation No. 22, which states that the "building of genuine community partnerships should be a requirement for all Garda districts". These recommendations are important in that they acknowledge the deeply integrated role that gardaí play within local communities. Our policing model has long been based on consent and consensus and it is a matter of pride to me that in Ireland we have one of the very few unarmed police forces in the world. Cuts made to community policing in the past have at times threatened to sever that connection, particularly in disadvantaged communities and I hope this pilot represents a step change in how we do things, placing community safety at the core of our policing model.

I welcome Waterford's inclusion in this pilot. In many ways, the Waterford constituency is the country in microcosm. Waterford is Ireland's oldest city, with many vibrant urban communities but it is also a rural constituency, from towns and villages to people living in very isolated settings. Waterford is also a Gaeltacht constituency and we know that there are specific challenges and deficiencies within our police force in terms of providing a service *trí mheán na Gaeilge sna ceantair sin*. As such, our community safety concerns span the full range from anti-social behaviour in disadvantaged communities to the issues of rural crime and the anxiety experienced by many living in isolated rural settings. This also presents a challenge and I worry slightly when I see references in the Department's briefing notes to a local community - singular - safety plan. I do not know how well the Minister knows Waterford but there is a world of difference between Ballybricken and Ballymacarbry or between Tramore and Tallow. We may be one county and one constituency, but we are many and diverse communities so I hope that any safety plan drawn up by the proposed new partnership will be flexible enough to reflect that. Also, we like our joint policing committees, JPCs. I was honoured to serve on the JPC in Waterford for the short time that I served as a councillor. It has its flaws as a system but we know it and trust it. I hope that this pilot model can be as inclusive as our JPCs and allow for a plurality of voices at the table.

This brings me to the composition of the local community safety partnerships. I welcome the fact that community representatives will have a working majority, as it were, and that this will include, among others, representatives of new and minority communities as well as youth voices. However, as I alluded to previously, there is a need to strike a balance between urban and rural concerns. In that context, I would welcome the opportunity to examine the exact mechanism by which we hope to ensure an appropriate mix. I am also concerned that there may be a diminution of the role of elected representatives in this reconfiguration. As I said, I served on my JPC in Waterford. I was one of 15 councillors to do so and the door was always open to Oireachtas Members to attend as well. If councillors are to be counted on the agency side of the equation in these proposed partnerships, that may well reduce the number participating to four or five. It would be a challenge in that context to ensure a broad base of representation in terms of geography and political outlook.

As with any such initiative, funding is crucial. This pilot has the potential to bring about positive changes in our communities but it will have to be adequately resourced in order to do

so. These concerns notwithstanding, I welcome the pilot scheme, as do all of the officials and elected representatives in Waterford to whom I have spoken. As already stated, Waterford is the ideal testing ground because it has urban, suburban, rural and Gaeltacht contexts within the constituency. I look forward to working with the Minister, community representatives and elected representatives in Waterford to make a success of this project and to improve community safety outcomes across our county.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am glad to speak on behalf of Sinn Féin on the issues of community safety and crime prevention. However, I will divert my attention for a moment to the issue of the week with which the Minister needs to deal. Members of the Dáil from almost all parties have asked the Minister to come into the Chamber to outline the process she used to make judicial appointments. Yesterday she clarified that she did consider the four names before her and then selected one candidate. Each time we ask about this the Minister, and indeed the Taoiseach, gives us a lecture on the Judicial Appointments Advisory Board, JAAB, process. We are all aware that the JAAB selects people who are eligible for consideration but what we need to know is the process the Minister used to make her selection. What process did she use? Which of her colleagues joined or assisted her in that process? We need to know that because without knowing it, the charge is that the Fine Gael credentials of the former Attorney General outweighed or scored higher than the clear judicial experience of the other candidates seeking the nomination. The Minister should come into the Chamber to deal with this matter. It is not enough to reply to me at the end of these statements. She should come to the Chamber at the earliest opportunity, hopefully next week, and deal with the matter. I will leave it at that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): We are not here to discuss the Judiciary.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I understand that and I am sorry. I will move on now to speak about the issues of community policing and community safety. I spoke to someone today who works with many of the community drugs initiatives in the city of Dublin who said that at the core of all of this is having a police service that is rooted in the community. In order for that to happen, we need to see a greater effort to ensure that community police are visible on the streets and that they build up a relationship with local communities. I acknowledge the work to which the Minister refers here and the local community safety partnerships are exactly the direction in which we need to go. There is much to be commended about this initiative but there is also so much to be done. We are coming from a place whereby so many communities are very far behind.

As others have said, there are clear and difficult issues in communities that do not trust the police force because they have not had good experience with policing. Communities which had community liaison officers in place and had work going on with community projects have seen those projects stripped of their funding. They have lost so much ground in recent years and that needs to be restored as quickly as possible. In many of these areas drug seizures are a feature. Indeed, there have been many very large seizures this year and that is to be welcomed. However, when seizures happen and arrests follow, we all consider that to be a great success but many of the communities involved see no change in the weeks that follow. They see no difference. Someone else comes in and just fills that void. This tells us that there is much work to be done in order to ensure that there is an holistic community response. That is why we need to get to the stage where it is not just about dealing with the issue of crime but all of the other problematic issues at play in communities that are under stress and pressure. In order to do that, we must work not just from a policing perspective but also from a societal perspective in terms of ensuring that there are adequate resources available in these communities. In so many of

them, that is absent. They have faced huge problems in trying to run community services over the years with restricted budgets and are so far behind as a result.

The work the Minister is doing here and the suggestion she is making that the Garda cooperate and work with other agencies is exactly what needs to happen. However, many of those agencies do not have the resources or capacity to ensure that they can deliver. One of the suggestions put to me today by the person I mentioned, who works at the coalface, was for the appointment of a type of liaison officer who is not a garda and who would work in the community and be trusted by it. He or she would be almost a type of social worker who would be able to gather information, understand what is happening and ascertain the pressures on people. The Minister acknowledged that, very often, the work gardaí do is not tackling crime as such, but is more about managing difficult situations and problems such as antisocial behaviour in a particular area. Much of that problem behaviour stems from addiction but also from poverty, mental health problems and other issues which arise out of the absence of resources in communities.

We must have a joined-up approach to tackling these issues. I absolutely appreciate that the Minister's proposals are going in that direction but there is much more to be done. Sometimes, there is an absence of understanding of just how far behind some communities are. Those communities, if they got a little bit of help and if some level of resources were put into them, would step up to the mark and really move forward. As I said, the proposals the Minister outlined are a step in the right direction but there is a huge distance to go. The sooner more resources can be put in place, the better. They must deliver for communities in a clear way that involves real change, not just a headline in the newspaper or on the news that something has happened and is a success, when, in their own lives, people see that nothing has changed and the same problems are still there. We need to be able to deliver for people in a real way.

Deputy Pa Daly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus an Aire Stáit. I agree with the Minister 100% that the responsibility of An Garda Síochána is to keep people safe, eliminate crime and eliminate the fear of crime. It is a responsibility of everybody in this House not to exaggerate sometimes low crime figures in an effort to get headlines. In regard to eliminating the fear of crime, the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, spoke about the Garda's text alert scheme. Councillor Tom Barry in Listowel has done amazing work in gathering information and seeking to extend to the town the See Something, Say Something text initiative that was piloted in Tralee. The gardaí in Kerry are very keen on the text system but there seems to be a reluctance in Garda headquarters to pay the small amount - I understand it is only €2,000 - needed to expand the scheme and make people feel safer.

The crime figures for the second quarter of the year that were released at the end of September included some very interesting statistics which, no doubt, reflect the overall reduction in the crime statistics as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions and the new policing environment. As with employment, business and economics, the pandemic may have had the effect of increasing the pace of some changes in the area of crime that were already happening and deepening some inequalities along the way. The first statistic I want to highlight relates to domestic violence. If we break the broader numbers down by gender, a trend can be seen in the 9% reduction in the number of crimes committed where women were the victim compared with the 26% reduction where the victim was a man. This suggests that there has been an increase in the incidence of domestic violence. The need for a separate family law court and trained family law judges has become more urgent than ever.

The second statistic I noted was that relating to online fraud. The take-up of online retail is

increasing at the insistence and encouragement of the Government. This may make sense to an extent during the pandemic but it disadvantages traditional retailers and the customers who rely upon them. It also creates fertile ground for fraudsters, with older and less tech-savvy people being caught more easily by scams. The statistics for the second quarter bear this out, with fraud, up 7%, being one of very few categories across the board to show an increase. Assuming, as is reasonable, that real-world, in-person fraud has decreased, there is very likely a significant increase in online fraud. Online retail is not the easy solution the Government sometimes makes it out to be. Many elderly and vulnerable people are, rightly, more trusting of their local retailer, who cannot open at present.

The third issue I wish to highlight is that of the statistics relating to drugs and weapons offences. The seizure that took place yesterday in Mountjoy Prison is to be commended, as well as the restrictions which enabled that operation. An ever more restrictive policing environment is enabling increasing detection across the board but it is critical that we do not lose sight of the holistic functions of the criminal justice system. An increasing emphasis on security in our society will not lead to less addiction or poverty. If anything, it is likely to lead to the opposite. For the duration of the pandemic and beyond, we must look at ways of keeping people out of prison who do not need to be there. We should, for example, expand the categories of offences for which an adult caution is an adequate punishment, including for minor drugs offences. The Minister of State referred in his contribution to the juvenile diversion scheme. Given the massive disadvantages of having a conviction for a minor drugs offence, consideration might be given to allowing local superintendents to apply the adult caution scheme in such instances, as was previously allowed to be done, in order that people do not have to go to court. As everybody knows, if one is travelling to the US, the question asked is not whether one has a conviction for a minor drugs offence but whether one has ever been charged with such an offence. That has huge consequences for people down the line.

We also need to look at a proper system of accountability within the prison system. As I suggested to the Minister at yesterday's meeting of the Select Committee on Justice, the remit of the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission is supposed to have been extended to include prisons but it has not happened yet. That should be done and consideration should be given to establishing a prisons inspectorate that is independent of the Minister. I also pointed out at the meeting yesterday that there has been a 60% increase in the use of video links for court appearances. In the same way that the Garda fleet has been expanded, consideration should be given to an increase in the number of prison vehicles. Another issue to consider is the small number of paramilitary prisoners - I understand there are 28 - being detained in Portlaoise Prison at huge cost. A couple of hundred prison officers in total are involved in guarding those prisoners. Perhaps talks could take place with a view to reducing the cost to the State of having to guard them.

Finally, the Minister mentioned the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. I ask that the implementation of its recommendations be expedited, if possible.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We all know that the role of community gardaí is central to effective policing in communities throughout the State. That has always been the case but the criminal drugs feud in Drogheda, which saw people in the town of Drogheda and surrounding areas terrorised by the thugs involved, really highlighted the importance of effective community policing. When the feud broke out, we were woefully under-resourced in terms of community gardaí, as had been the case for years, and residents in the area suffered badly as a result. When people were subjected to threats, attacks on their homes and assaults, the local gardaí could not

cope. The town was given short-term allocations of additional gardaí but that was not sufficient to deal with this type of feud. We now have nine permanent community gardaí, which is very welcome and has proved to be invaluable during the Covid-19 restrictions. It is vital that these gardaí remain in their posts to ensure Drogheda is never again left in such dire straits as it was at the time the feud kicked off.

An issue that remains to be addressed is that there is only one superintendent for the entirety of County Louth. There is no superintendent for the town of Ardee and none for Dundalk. That is a huge omission and it must be rectified urgently, particularly given what the county has gone through in recent years.

I commend the work of the community gardaí in Louth, who do fantastic work locally. That work can often be a very hard slog and may seem thankless at times, but it is hugely important. During the first lockdown, community gardaí had a key role in performing safety checks on vulnerable people and the elderly. They even stepped in to provide a meals on wheels service when the usual drivers were not able to do so because they were cocooning.

The pandemic has changed how gardaí do their work. It has also changed the nature of criminality. While the drugs feud in Drogheda has somewhat quietened down for now, we are, unfortunately, seeing an increase in minor assaults. Up to the beginning of November, there had been 167 minor assaults in the Drogheda district, which covers Drogheda, Clogherhead and Dunleer. This is a 56% increase on the same period last year. Half of these assaults took place in homes, which suggests that domestic violence and other violence in the home is on the increase. Community gardaí have a central role to play in tackling crime of this type and they do so every day. This shows the importance of a strong community Garda presence for vulnerable people, especially as many people are more isolated now than they have ever been.

Deputy Pauline Tully: One of the most serious issues in my area and elsewhere in Cavan is that of drug misuse and the crime associated with it. At one time, this would have been thought of as an urban issue but that is no longer the case. It is an issue in every town and village and every rural area. Young people are constantly being brought into this seedy world without realising the consequences. Some are attracted by the promise of easy money from doing drops or acting as a courier for drug dealers but more often than not, it is a matter of young people easily running up sizeable drug debts. They cannot then afford to pay such debts and end up dealing themselves to do so, which gets them more and more deeply involved. In other cases, they or their families are being threatened. I am frequently told of families hearing a knock at the door from people looking for hundreds of euro or even €1,000 by the weekend, because a son or daughter has run up a debt. These people are afraid to go to the Garda about it. I am also personally aware of young people who have taken their own lives because they could not see a way out of debt and were afraid to admit their problems to parents or loved ones.

Drugs have become normalised in society among our young people. They think nothing of taking a substance on a night out. They do not realise how much it can affect their mood or that the high is so quickly followed by the low and the paranoia. Investment in the national drugs strategy and in drug and alcohol task forces is needed immediately. We need a multi-agency approach, such as the Minister has referred to, to tackle this problem head on. The Departments of Health, Justice and Education in particular need to work together. The education aspect is very important because we need to get to young people early to teach them about the dangers of drugs. We also need more gardaí in the national drugs unit. Monitoring of the prisons is also required as drug gangs seem to recruit within them. They seem to have a lot of control in

prisons as was evidenced yesterday by the seizure in Mountjoy Prison. I believe it was the largest seizure of contraband ever in an Irish prison and I say “well done” to all of those involved in detecting it.

On a very different issue, farm thefts continue to occur. These worsen at this time of year when the evenings are dark. Everything from fuel to tools, machinery and livestock are targeted. I have even read recently of rural crime gangs using drones and online mapping to case farms and to identify less protected access routes by which to gain entry. We need more gardaí. We need to see gardaí visibly patrolling in rural areas. Everybody should be confident that, if they need to call the Garda, they will get a speedy response. Many people have reported to me how comforting they found it to witness gardaí walking the beat or patrolling in their areas during the first lockdown. People need to see that on a full-time basis.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I take this opportunity to acknowledge the community gardaí in north Kildare for their magnificent work during the Covid crisis. Together with volunteers and community groups, they got the shopping done, prescriptions and meals delivered, and cups of teas offered and drunk in the garden. It was top-class community policing and social action, just as was seen when the local community garda was so helpful to us when we were setting up the Maynooth community first responders.

In many ways, our community gardaí are the first responders in society. I saw that at first hand growing up because my dad was a member of An Garda Síochána, rooted in his community. My mam used to say he should have been a social worker. In practice, he was a community garda before their time. Today is his anniversary and it seems apt, on the anniversary of his death, to honour and to seek to improve the tradition of community policing among the men and women of An Garda Síochána. I urge the Government to invest strongly and strategically in the kind of community service he believed in and practised in the job he loved. We need more community policing and we need more diversity in An Garda Síochána to reflect our diverse society. We need more gardaí working socially with communities rather than judicially about them.

Whether we like it or not, our prisons are primarily for our poor and our failed. Our jails are heaving with people who have been failed in an unequal social structure. Half of the people in our prisons dropped out of school before their junior certificate and more than a quarter never went to secondary school despite attendance being compulsory up to age of 16. Our community gardaí can and do step in early to work with families and community leaders to keep fragile kids steady. Sometimes they are the first authority figure to show a bit of faith in those who have a reputation for causing trouble when they are in fact just troubled. As a politician, I want to see more and deeper community policing in the less leafy suburbs in order that young lives can be transformed and saved. I want to see the community garda having time to kick a ball or to sit on a wall chatting to kids in the community. I say that because, for me, An Garda Síochána must always be about peace of mind and peace in the heart.

Deputy Martin Browne: I am pleased to be able to talk about community policing given that the safety of my constituents depends on it. I will begin by thanking all members of the Garda, including our community gardaí across Tipperary, for the incredible work they have done to bring our communities together and to alleviate some of the loneliness many have experienced during this pandemic. They have made a massive difference, especially by taking so many drugs out of our communities in Tipperary. They have played a key role in maintaining our sense of community during these difficult times.

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There are, however, still shortfalls in the provision of community gardaí. For example, I have been informed that five community gardaí were promised for Thurles and that their appointment has been approved but I have also been told that the community is still waiting to see them put in place. The number of community gardaí is very low. This is in spite of an unprecedented level of funding being allocated in the budget for 2021.

I recently asked the Minister for Justice whether it was her intention to take on more community gardaí given the increased budget. She told me that she has no role in such matters and that it is the job of the divisional chief superintendent to determine the distribution of duties. I understand that but the Minister went on to say that the official categorisation of a community garda has, in the past, simply referred to those who are exclusively assigned to building relationships with local communities and civil society and that nowadays, all members of the Garda have a role to play in community policing when carrying out their duties. While I agree with everything she said, the Minister's reference to the past when speaking about the position of community gardaí concerned me, especially as she then spoke of the role to be played by members of the Garda in general when it comes to community policing. Will the Minister give her word that she will continue to support the appointment of specific community gardaí, rather than replacing their important role with a reference to community engagement, to which members of the force are committed anyway?

All gardaí play an exceptional role in our communities, but we still need members of the force whose primary role is that of a community garda and all that entails. Community gardaí play a role that prevents criminal activity before it begins. In my constituency, there was an incident in which the case of a public automated external defibrillator, AED, was vandalised. We are thankful that the unit itself was undamaged but if it had been damaged, it could have had serious consequences for anyone who may have needed it. The point I am making is that criminality can often begin with vandalism. In the case I have mentioned, vandalism could have had unintended consequences. Through focused engagement with the community, such as that undertaken by community gardaí, the gateway to criminality can be avoided.

During the pandemic, we have seen community policing units doing great work in our communities. I hope this will be retained as a permanent fixture. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this important matter and I again acknowledge the fine work carried out by all members of the Garda.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Like others, I welcome the opportunity to speak on matters of community safety and crime prevention. I must say, however, that I would prefer to be dealing with concrete proposals and legislation rather than making statements. We have spent six hours today speaking on general statements. This is a Legislature that is meant not only to identify problems but to put forward concrete solutions. One of Government's prime responsibilities is to ensure the safety of its citizens. People must not only be safe but they must feel safe and not threatened in their homes.

8 o'clock

The security of everybody in their homes is so fundamental and it is so undermining to their well-being and mental health if they feel under threat. Crime has a devastating impact on victims. A crime such as burglary is a violation of the family home, which goes well beyond the mere loss of property. People often feel unsafe forever more after such a crime.

As a society, we provide protection through effective policing and we have had much debate in the last decade in this Chamber on effective policing and on how to go about it. We have tried different initiatives. I have argued for a long time for an independent policing authority, a Garda ombudsman and so on and eventually versions of that were put in place. More recently, a comprehensive Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland was established and its recommendations are being put in place. I do not accept all of its recommendations. The Minister knows I have clearly voiced my great fear of bringing the appointment of senior police officers back into the hands of the Garda itself, for example. That was taken out to be an independent decision and it would be a big mistake to reverse that. Much more needs to be done to provide a 21st century model of policing. There is a blueprint out there for how to do that. One of the things we need to do is to have effective policing specialties across the State and to have adequate resourcing for them.

Like others, I want to deal with the menace of drugs, which is devastating communities. It is not only devastating urban communities but rural communities as well. There is not a community or a village in Ireland that is free from the negative impact of drugs. Our policies to date are not working. Many people, including the Minister, have talked about a multi-agency approach and that is required. I welcome the acknowledgement of that but that means the agencies on the ground that will be involved having the resources and the capacity required. That will often mean the agencies working with youth. The agencies involved in community building are the agencies that are deprived of the resources to do that. That would be a mistake. It involves looking at housing and planning and at how we plan our communities. These are critical aspects of proper policing and people being safe. Rat runs through housing estates and dark and unlit spaces where people congregate can often be scenes for drug trafficking.

Members, including the Minister, have talked about youth diversion. We need youth diversion schemes and properly resourced education schemes. If one looks at the overall map of where the drug problem is greatest - and it is bad everywhere - it is often in the areas of the greatest deprivation. Deprivation cannot be disassociated from the issue of drug problems as people in desperate straits often reach out to drugs as a solution. The Minister mentioned having social workers involved but what quite often happens is that young and enthusiastic social workers are working at the coalface in difficult areas but then they get burned out and leave. We need to incentivise social workers to stay in some of the most challenging environments. A premium should be paid to social workers to continue that so they can get on with the work.

I listened with care to the quite incisive comments of Deputy Bruton earlier and he speaks with some authority about his area. Many of the suggestions he has made are important ones that should be acted upon. The horror of the involvement of more children in the drugs industry is a scandal that we need to address. I suggest, as has been suggested on more than one occasion in the past, that we need a statutory offence of grooming young people into crime. As penalties for drug possession and trafficking have increased due to decisions of this House and the other House, the way that drug lords get around that is often to recruit very young children in the expectation that they will not face serious penalties. That awfulness in grooming young people in that way has to be tackled and the way to do that is to make a statutory offence of grooming young people and to have an exemplary sentence for that offence.

One of the most effective things we have done in recent decades on crime has been the establishment of the Criminal Assets Bureau. That was an initiative of former Deputy Ruairí Quinn when he was Minister for Finance in the aftermath of the awful murder of Veronica Guerin. It is the most effective tool we have used to date and quite often it is the only effective

tool we have in dismantling criminal gangs. We need to have that bureau strengthened and localised to take away the assets and the ill-gotten gains of those who keep themselves at arm's length from the commission of crimes and are hard to get at. If they are deprived of the wherewithal to enjoy their ill-gotten gains, that can be effective in dismantling these criminal gangs.

Another issue that is important to look at in all of this is that of bail and of bail supervision. We have to have adequate resources to monitor and assist offenders who are granted bail by the courts. We must give them the wherewithal and support they need to avoid reoffending because too often it is a revolving door in that people commit crimes, come out on bail and commit more crimes when they are on bail. Without being too specific, in my constituency there is one individual who is a personal crime wave every time he is out of prison and that is shocking. We need to ensure we can deal with people and support them back into a more productive future for themselves because nobody wants criminality as a way of life. People want other options and as a society we need to provide those options.

I also want to cover domestic violence. It is often a hidden aspect of crime in our communities but its impact is devastating. Covid-19 has provided a blanket to hide the increased incidence of domestic violence. We saw the figures at the end of last month with the Garda reporting an 18% increase in calls for help relating to domestic violence. Thankfully, there has also been a significant increase of nearly 15% in the detection of offences, particularly of breaches of court orders under the Domestic Violence Acts. I welcome the roll-out of the particular supports across every Garda area and it is something we still have to see the full extent of. When, in the hopeful aftermath of this awful pandemic, we get back to some degree of normality, we will be shocked by the degree of domestic violence that will be uncovered so we have to act now. I welcome initiatives such as Operation Faoiseamh, which is being effective and I commend the proactive nature of Garda intervention that we have seen. I commend all the work of An Garda Síochána, which has been so supportive of communities in this extraordinarily difficult time.

Deputy Patrick Costello: This conversation dovetails nicely with the previous debate regarding community development. If we are looking at how we can support communities in which people feel under siege from crime and anti-social behaviour, we need community development and community policing. In my constituency of Dublin South Central, areas such as Inchicore, Kilmainham and Bluebell have experienced high levels of anti-social behaviour and violence along the canal, on the cycle paths and towpaths. People have come to me in fear of a small number of people on the streets who are engaged in widespread anti-social behaviour and aggression, and disrupting the community. The way to tackle that, in the first instance, is via better community policing which is visible in communities on the ground. There is a move in An Garda Síochána towards small area policing which will support such front-line enforcement, which is absolutely necessary and is to be welcomed.

We must also back up that approach with community development. In this case, that involves the Garda youth diversion projects. Many of these projects are still struggling because of cuts introduced during the recession. We must look at the funding of those projects to ensure they return to the strength at which they were before the recession and have the capacity to meet new demands. One such demand should be an expansion to include those aged 18 to 21 years. While Garda youth diversion projects will do a great deal of good centre-based work, there is also a need for outreach work. The outreach work is often intensive and undermines the ability to do centre-based work, so projects are having to make a choice between these two types of work. It should not be a choice. Given that they serve different functions, it should be possible

to do both.

I am conscious I am sharing time with other Deputies. I commend the work being done to ensure that gardaí are freed up to be part of the communities they are policing. This ensures they are made more welcome by the community and can engage and support community safety better.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome this debate and the Minister's commitment to the town of Drogheda, personally and politically, in the context of the crime wave which struck our town in the not too distant past and resulted in the appalling and barbaric murder of Keane Mulready-Woods and, unfortunately, some other appalling crimes. I welcome the appointment by the Minister of Mr. Vivian Geiran to carry out an important and in-depth analysis of what needs to change in Drogheda and many other communities which suffer greatly as a result of criminals who control the streets, in many cases, at night. The sense of fear and intimidation they create reaches deeply into the hearts and minds of communities that are most deprived of amenities and support from civil society.

The Garda is doing a fantastic job in Drogheda. The addition of 30 gardaí, which were deployed to the town last year as a result of this appalling crime wave and drug-heavy crime, is working extremely well. That does not mean, however, that the gardaí control the streets at night. People are ringing me at 10 p.m. to say that the house next door, where residents may have been absent for a week or so, has been broken into and the residents' belongings strewn on the streets. A piano, which was passed down from generation to generation in one family, was dragged on to the street and burned. That is a symbol of an appalling situation in some of our communities today.

How do we tackle this situation? We do so by empowering those communities, not just by having community gardaí, whom I support fully, but by having the people in those communities controlling their own destiny. Those who obey the law, conform to societal norms and live decent and civil lives must be charge of what happens in those communities. When darkness falls and evil comes out, it must be driven back by communities living in estates that are properly lit, have proper footpaths and amenities and receive the support of society that they do not currently have. That is why I hope the work of Vivian Geiran will lead to significant change and successes. That approach must apply across the country. We cannot allow these thugs to control our lives, particularly the lives of people who are less well-off than many of us. At 10 p.m. the other night, I received a call from a woman telling me the house next door was being broken into and the windows were being smashed. The poor unfortunate person inside that house was unable to deal with the situation and was being intimidated and driven to despair, as were his neighbours, by what was going on. I hate getting such calls.

It is important to mention the important role of primary school teachers for young people growing up in society. National schools are aware of problems with children at the earliest possible stage. It is there that the significant interventions and support that such children need and want should be provided. I welcome all the work taking place in communities, for example, breakfast clubs, the deployment of community gardaí and Garda outreach. However, what we need now is a controlled and determined focus to win this battle. In whatever structures we have to ensure community safety and prevent crime, we do not want some sleepy chairperson or other. I am not referring to anyone in particular when I say that. We need dynamic control and absolute accountability from the local authority and support for it to do its business out of hours and at night. I could go on but a colleague is due to contribute shortly.

Drogheda needs a north inner city type task force. What Mr. Geiran is doing is a start but we must reach out to those who commit these crimes. When we identify them and the needs of their families when they are very young, we should ensure there is proper outreach to them. I welcome much of what the Labour Party spokesperson said in that regard. We must interact with these people to ensure that instead of intimidating their neighbours and burning pianos and whatever other cultural items they can find, we encourage them to participate in society. We should find a forum in which they can participate and encourage them to do so. We should appoint not just community gardaí and social workers to work in these communities but also youth workers who can work with them and reach out and support them.

In Drogheda, the people who deal with crime and the drug problem face major problems. We must reach out to organisations such as the Red Door Project to ensure they have the funding and outreach workers they need to work with those who are in despair and have been caught up in drugs and other problems. I welcome the Minister's commitment to publish the report before Christmas. I hope it will be the start of something and we will get action on it.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank my colleagues for sharing their time in this important debate. I welcome the opportunity to speak on community safety and preventing crime. In my contribution to the discussion on community and rural affairs, I made the point that 11 hours of statements are being taken in the Dáil this week. These are all on important issues but it is impossible to discuss any of them if we are not discussing Covid-19 and what we plan on doing after this current phase of level 5 lockdown ends. It is vital that we have an opportunity early next week to discuss this issue. A debate on the report of the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response has been scheduled for late on Thursday. That is a separate issue as it is on work already done by that committee and its subsequent report. I am referring to the future and how we will manage this pandemic not only in December, although that will be important for many people, but into next year, as well as what we need to anticipate in that regard and the changes we need to make.

I hope we will try to see how, as a society, we adapt to this pandemic while we are waiting for the arrival of a vaccine next year without the need to go in and out of lockdowns. I believe we can do that. I was surprised to hear earlier in the week about Government plans to ban the sale of takeaway alcohol. I know that information did not come from the Minister but from elsewhere in the Government. If we want to keep people safe, we must keep them in structured environments and out of doors, if we can. We must question, therefore, any policy that would drive people out of structured social interactions, such as restaurants, pubs, shops or other such activities, and potentially drive them indoors. There is a risk of incoherency in any policy that could drive people to engage in less safe activities. We want to keep people in structured environments where we know they are safer. We also want to keep them outdoors if we can.

We must also avoid knee-jerk reactions. This has been a difficult year for many people. Covid caused great uncertainty when it first appeared in this country. We had to move quickly and we took certain steps. We have lived with the virus for longer now and we understand it better. There have been moments over the past year where we have let ourselves down in taking knee-jerk reactions to things we have seen. We must avoid that as best we can. We should not punish the many for the actions of the few. We must be very careful that we do not let seep into Irish society the desire to catch people out, blame people and punish people, which we are at risk of doing. We should be wary of that seeping into society. In the first phase of the lockdowns we showed our better nature in how we responded to the crisis, faced down the challenges that were presented to us and came together strongly as a country. I believe we were all proud of that and

when people looked to Ireland from abroad they were impressed by it. We want to keep that spirit as we face the future and not adopt anything that might be more negative and undermine our cohesion as a society.

I commend the Minister on the new approach to community policing, which is one of the better things I have seen in the past year. This involves the use of Garda vehicles that are not marked Garda cars. While the car is owned by An Garda Síochána, it is marked in a way that is not obvious. Gardaí can move about in the community and do the type of soft community policing they are great at doing. They can interact with vulnerable groups that may feel unsafe at particular times and keep an eye on younger groups that are trying to do their best in these difficult times and socialise in a safe way out of doors. The gardaí can let people know they are there and when there are not that many people on our streets every day, it is calming and a reassurance to see gardaí on bicycles, walking down the road or in these new Garda vehicles that are a more softer community response to policing. I hope that as she looks to the future in her own Department and considers the resources she gives to An Garda Síochána, the Minister will continue this highly effective type of policing. The community responds well to it as people like to see it. I hope it can continue and I will support the Minister in those types of initiatives she has brought forward this year.

Deputy Mark Ward: Community gardaí could be the cornerstone of policing if given adequate resources. They are at the forefront when it comes to problem-solving and collaboration with the communities they protect. From first-hand experience of meeting community gardaí, residents and the local police forum in my area of Dublin Mid-West, I know how valuable community gardaí are to our community. Community gardaí are, however, often hamstrung by the policy decisions of their superiors and the Government.

Since 2010, community gardaí numbers have dropped dramatically, with a 45% decrease in Dublin alone. These cuts to the numbers of gardaí on the beat have exacerbated a growing crisis and left our communities very vulnerable. Sinn Féin in government would increase resources to the Garda, including the recruitment of a minimum of 800 new gardaí per year, with priority deployment within community safety.

The decision by the Garda Commissioner earlier this year not to allow community gardaí to work after 7 p.m. at night has left our areas abandoned, vulnerable and at the mercy of crime and anti-social behaviour. The No. 40 and No. 13 bus routes which serve my area have been forced to curtail their services because of anti-social behaviour. These routes account for 47% of all bus stoppages in Dublin this year. It is no surprise that the spike in these incidents coincided with the decision to stop community gardaí working after 7 p.m., adding further to the sense of lawlessness within our community.

My area of Dublin Mid-West is serviced by three full-time Garda stations in Clondalkin, Lucan and Ronanstown, with a part-time station in Rathcoole. There is no point in having Garda stations if they are not fully resourced. When speaking with gardaí in these areas they tell me that resources and Garda numbers hinder them from doing their job. We have a growing population across Dublin Mid-West, with Rathcoole and Newcastle among the fastest growing areas in the State. Garda resources need to improve immediately or we will see an increase in crime and anti-social behaviour. This is having a detrimental impact on people's lives.

The rhetoric we sometimes hear that we are all in this together does not wash any more with the public. When the public sees the Government voting against Sinn Féin motions on

community safety, as happened last month and will no doubt happen again when we vote on the scrambler and quad bike issue the House debated last night, they can clearly see that this Government is more concerned about playing politics than actually improving people's lives.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Community safety and crime prevention are major issues in my constituency of Cork North-Central. There are some brilliant and very tight-knit communities in the constituency I represent but, unfortunately, some people no longer feel safe in their homes or walking the streets. This year, there have been horrific attacks and incidents. In January, a man had petrol poured over him and was set alight. Gangs are roaming the streets attacking people and organising fights through social media.

My colleague, Deputy Ó Laoghaire, and I have published a document, A Safer Cork is Possible, and I ask the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, to consider these proposals. She is aware that a visible community Garda presence on the ground acts as a deterrent to criminals and anti-social behaviour. There should be 20 community gardaí and one sergeant on the north side of Cork city and Cork North-Central, but there are only 13 community gardaí and one sergeant. This is a major shortage in my constituency. An announcement was made in April 2019 that Cork city was to receive 20 additional community gardaí. At that time, there were 32 and now we have 36. This is another broken promise by the Government. There have been savage cuts over the years.

I have listened to Government Deputies talk about what should happen. The reason we have crime, gangs and anti-social behaviour now is that for ten years, the Garda was underfunded and under-resourced, communities were underfunded and there were cuts to youth workers, youth community groups and drug task forces. That is the result of all these cuts by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Government Deputies then come in here and cry crocodile tears talking about their constituents when they could have and should have made a difference. They have let their communities down. Sinn Féin will stand up for people. We need to protect people and we need more gardaí on the ground.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I too commend the work of the Garda, especially during the first lockdown when we could see the involvement of the Garda, local authorities, sporting clubs and individuals. It really showed the best of us, as Deputy Eoghan Murphy said, and people's better nature. I share some of Deputy Murphy's concerns about making sure we appeal to our better nature. I believe that people are willing to listen with regard to how we should conduct ourselves during this pandemic. We could see this halfway through the current lockdown.

On the collection of statistics and the deployment of resources, it is disappointing that the Central Statistics Office, CSO, still publishes crime statistics with a disclaimer that the data should be viewed as statistics "under reservation". While similar issues exist in other jurisdictions, we must try to find a consistent way to record information on the PULSE system. The CSO first suspended the publication of recorded crime statistics in 2014 following a Garda Inspectorate report identifying quality issues in relation to the recording of data on the PULSE system. The PULSE system is the only source of recorded crime data available to the CSO to produce these statistics. If we ask about crime statistics at a joint policing committee meeting, we will be referred to the CSO. It is important, therefore, that we can rely on this source of information. Although we are assured that the relationship between the CSO and the Garda is a good one, surely this issue should have been resolved long ago.

To ensure effective community policing around the country, it is imperative that Garda

resources are allocated objectively. We need to think logically about where we are spending funds and take a long-term view of supporting community policing. Predictive trends in population growth come as no surprise to any of us. The information is readily available but unfortunately rarely used. Over the years, I have seen policing plans being copied and pasted and have been very critical of that. I have looked at them before and after a census of the population and they have rarely taken note of those changes. Too often, we seem to end up chasing population trends and struggling to provide communities with the various resources they need for growing populations, rather than anticipating the increases years in advance. That could be said of many different services. The same is true of the allocation of gardaí and Garda resources, which are ultimately a matter for the Garda Commissioner under the Garda Síochána Act 2005. When we fail to provide communities with adequate policing resources, we put the Garda under immense pressure and communities are underserved as a result. One ends up with reactive rather than proactive policing, one does not get the visibility needed and that stores problems up for the future.

A 2006 UN analysis reported that the ideal policing ratio was 1:333. Our national figures are very good, with a ratio of one garda per 264 people but that is only nationally. The current ratio of garda staffing resources to population in divisions around the country is greatly unbalanced from county to county. The deficit in service provision is particularly pronounced in certain divisions, primarily clustered in the greater Dublin commuter belt and south Leinster area. These areas have had consistently high population growth, not just in the last decade but over several decades and continuously from the 1970s onwards. However, there is no evidence that these long-standing population trends are taken into account when allocating Garda resources, including staffing and other resources. The top five most under-resourced Garda divisions are in the Minister's area of Meath, of which she will be aware, Kildare, Kilkenny-Carlow, Wicklow and Wexford. Meath, with a population of 195,000, had 336 gardaí in August 2020, which is one garda per 580 people. The recommended ratio from that 2006 UN report is 1:333. Meath has the highest ratio of population to gardaí, while Kildare has the second highest with a population of 222,000 and 418 gardaí, a ratio of 1:532.

Every time we do a census of the population, advertisements go out in advance to say we need people to fill in this form. I know the next census has been deferred for a year but I encourage people to fill in the form because we need to plan our services. The problem is that we do not plan our services in line with population growth. It is a postcode lottery in so many areas. I am sure the Minister recognises this. There has been little enough change over the last seven years. In some areas the top five or bottom five have shifted around a little bit but there is relatively little change.

We cannot provide community policing if we do not have the gardaí to do it. I have come across scenarios where there is a safety at work issue, where gardaí have gone out on a call on their own because there was no one there to support them. It is a dangerous thing for members of the Garda to have to do in some environments. I am surprised that that has not been raised by the Garda representative associations, particularly in areas where the ratios are very high. I have raised this consistently with successive Garda Commissioners. I was assured that they knew this was an issue and that the intake from Templemore would be disproportionately deployed to areas where there is such a deficiency. I am not saying that is the only metric that should be used because it most definitely is not. We also need to look at the crime statistics and those statistics have to be reliable. We need people to report crime. We also need to consider the population and look at the type of policing we can provide. The type of policing provided

very much depends on the ratio of gardaí to population.

For years we were hearing about problems in Limerick. The whole city and county ended up getting a deplorable reputation because of a very small number of people who were holding the city hostage. The same happened in Drogheda in the past year and we saw what happened in Dublin central as well, although I accept that there is a difference in that regard. These are situations where a problem emerges and one has to react to that problem instead of catching it in a proactive way. The way we gather statistics, both on crime and on the deployment of gardaí in response to the likes of the census, is absolutely critical if we do not want to find ourselves being reactive to problems. We must be proactive on the basis of planning our services. I was told by an assistant Garda commissioner that any division will try to hold onto what it has and growing areas will always be at a huge disadvantage if that is the approach. There needs to be a fundamental change in how we collect statistics, how reliable they are and how we deploy members of the Garda and the resources that go along with them.

Deputy Dara Calleary: To pick up where Deputy Catherine Murphy just left off, I agree with much of what she and Deputy Gould said. We are given figures on how many gardaí are available but when one actually drills down, the number available for community policing tends to be a very different story. That is the cause of enormous frustration for communities that cannot access basic day-to-day service at Garda stations. There are many gardaí located in the station in Swinford, for example, but they are all allocated to the traffic corps. In other places they are allocated to the emergency response unit, ERU, which does not participate in community policing and so they are not available for community activities. It causes enormous frustration when a Garda station is not available for basic services, or when anti-social behaviour cannot be tackled in towns and villages because gardaí, who might even live in the town, are elsewhere. The first thing we need to do is resolve exactly how many gardaí are available for community policing on a regular basis.

I join with every speaker in thanking An Garda Síochána for its huge work every year, and this year in particular. In this month of remembrance, we remember all who have been lost on duty in An Garda Síochána but particularly Detective Colm Horkan, who died this year. We think of his family and colleagues this evening. There is no doubt that the Garda's visibility and presence, as well as its working with communities, were crucial to the success of the initial lockdown and we should acknowledge it for that.

There are a number of crucial issues related to community safety. The joint policing committees, JPCs, were excellent when they were previously organised by town as well as by county but since they moved to a county basis, in line with so-called reforms by local authorities, we have lost focus and lost the ability to involve communities directly in their activity. We should look at JPCs and try to realign them to municipal districts in order that we can have a greater focus, as well as a greater online presence. Second, CCTV is crucial. Many communities which were previously reluctant to use it, now see the value of it. There continue to be difficulties, however, with the hosting of CCTV between local authorities, An Garda Síochána and local Garda stations. If the Minister and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, were to resolve that issue and give a signal to communities that their concerns about data protection and governance issues will be taken up by An Garda Síochána and local authorities, it could assist in rolling out community CCTV schemes to assist people.

Community gardaí are doing wonderful work and building up excellent relationships. They cannot do it on their own, however. They need the backup and support, as well as a community

budget to work with local festivals and local organisations. It will mean that they are not just there in a policing capacity but in a community-building capacity.

We may need to go back to some basics with An Garda Síochána where gardaí actually live and raise their families in the community in which they serve. By doing so, they can build trust and relationships. We need to look at incentivising through the payroll, gardaí to live and share their families' time in the community. That will then build up trust. Trust is the absolute basis of any kind of community policing.

I welcome the ongoing civilianisation process because that means we get more gardaí into communities. While it is tempting for the Minister and Garda management to invest in the big flashy units and give them the big jeeps, big flashy uniforms and the big stations, the basis of any policing is knowledge, trust, information and relationships. All of those issues are formed and rooted at community level. Community policing is the foundation of An Garda Síochána. It deserves the investment, support and bodies that other sections in An Garda Síochána receive.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I join with others in paying absolute credit to the work of An Garda Síochána, not just in recent months but over a long time, across all our communities. It is the absolute backbone of our community. The work it does every day to keep us safe is what we rely on to keep our society going. The most important point to come out of this debate is the uniform opinion of the House on the important role of community policing.

Other Deputies spoke about geographic specific issues. I want to raise an issue, one which I have raised with the Minister several times and one which is increasingly of concern for all of us, particularly in the capital, that is, knife crime. As per figures from the Minister, knife seizures have increased by a third since 2017. Over 2,000 knives were seized by An Garda Síochána in 2019 with over 1,200 already seized this year alone. The sad thing is that it is not just seizures. Hospitalisations due to knife injuries, stabbings and slashings have gone up by 10%. Sadly, we are seeing an increasing number of deaths from knife crime, including in my own constituency with a very sad case in Dundrum not so long ago.

What can we do to really tackle this? Many measures have already been taken. I commend the good work launched by the Department, the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, on early intervention and education. We can do more, however. We can look to other jurisdictions and the success of countries like Scotland. What can we learn from Scotland? Glasgow was the murder capital of Europe in 2005. The introduction of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow and across Scotland has seen those crime figures, in particular knife crime figures, decline.

One action that proved to be so successful in Scotland - indeed we have done it here before - was a weapons amnesty. In 2006 the then justice Minister, now Senator Michael McDowell, brought in a two-month weapons amnesty which took over 300 guns, knives and much more off our streets. Will the Minister consider the reintroduction of a weapons amnesty to get those vicious weapons out of children's hands, as it is children largely being found with knives, and off our streets?

There is also a need for early intervention education programmes. Deputy Jim O'Callaghan has a worthy Bill on sentencing for knife crime. I appreciate many people will look to that approach. Before we even get to that stage, however, we need to look at stopping the causes of crime and stopping knives getting into young people's hands. That is why we should encourage

those programmes to get members of An Garda Síochána into the schools to warn of the dangers of knife crime. We must make sure those who may have been caught up in these criminal activities have interventions through youth, work and education programmes.

Many people will ask how we pay for this. It is quite simple. An Garda Síochána and its agencies have seized over €16 million worth of criminal funds this year. I put down parliamentary questions to the Minister and, more importantly, to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, on this issue. Where does that money go? We see these goods auctioned with cash taken off criminals. It all goes back to the Exchequer. Does it go back into the black hole?

I speak every day with our party colleague, Councillor Kenneth Egan, who is working on the front line as an addiction counsellor, a youth intervention officer, a county councillor and, most importantly, a boxing coach with young people. Can we not say to those communities most devastated by crime, the illicit drugs trade, as well as knife and gun crime, that we are going to seize the proceeds of crime and plough it back into those very communities to ensure another generation of children are not deprived of their youth and no more mothers or fathers have to get that dreaded phone call that their child has lost his or her life to knife crime?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Community policing, the presence of community gardaí and drug divisional units are important. These are the people with their finger on the pulse of where communities are at and show how information can be got.

The divisional drug unit for Cavan-Monaghan is doing terrific work and is important for our community and society. Unfortunately, recreational drugs are more prevalent, more readily available and are becoming more socially acceptable. The drugs divisional unit in Cavan-Monaghan, unfortunately, needs more resources put into it. It is doing terrific work. Not that long ago, Bailieborough community alert held a public meeting about this very topic at which a number of people attended. Detective Sergeant Mick Kearney spoke that night and gave a very stark presentation about how freely and readily available drugs are in settings that we might normally not expect them to be, such as recreational and sporting settings. It came as a shock to some of the people who attended that meeting.

The drugs divisional unit in Cavan-Monaghan covers a large area comprising two counties. It is located in an old Garda station in Cootehill. For the past nine months, it has been working with drastically reduced staff numbers with one sergeant and three gardaí when it should have one sergeant and five gardaí. I accept this has been due to replacements, retirements, people moving on and transfers. For example, the traffic corps unit has three sergeants and 13 gardaí.

Drug-driving detection has significantly increased by 106%, particularly since lockdown. There are several reasons for that. Gardaí are more visible on the beat, giving them greater opportunity to do this type of detection. This makes drivers and users more aware. A 106% detection rate tells its own story.

Will the Minister give this unit the staff it needs? Drugs units should have two sergeants and ten gardaí. Cavan-Monaghan is currently working with one sergeant and three gardaí. Bigger inroads can be made in terms of the staff required and the expertise needed. The unit is working from the old Garda station in Cootehill. It could do with better facilities and better transport. The staff working there are doing terrific work. My understanding is that both the detective sergeant and the gardaí are interviewed every two years. They only have a two-year contract. As a Government, we need to send a strong message that our divisional drugs units are there in

force, they are fully staffed and resourced and their staff are there permanently. They should not be in place on a transient two-year basis. This unit does a very important and specific job and the resources it receives should reflect that.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Community policing should be at the heart of every town and village in Ireland, with gardaí walking the streets, talking to local people and aware of what is happening on the ground. As the Minister will know, our own county of Meath has the lowest number of gardaí per head of population in the country. As Deputy Catherine Murphy noted, there is one garda for every 580 people. That is a shocking figure and I hope that she will be able to address that.

If a crime takes place in Athboy or my own town of Oldcastle, it can take up to an hour for a Garda patrol car to arrive. Drug dealers are openly selling drugs on the streets, destroying young people's lives. These drug dealers and criminal gangs are relocating to rural areas. They see our towns and villages as safe havens where there is not much chance of getting caught. Johnstown in Navan has a population of between 10,000 and 12,000 people. It has no Garda station. This is another issue I hope the Minister can address. How can An Garda Síochána and community groups work together if there is no Garda station? Moreover, gardaí only man some Garda stations on a part-time basis.

The job of a community garda is to provide an accessible Garda service to the community; establish effective engagement to meet the needs of local communities; use problem-solving initiatives to tackle crime, drugs and anti-social behaviour; engage with young people to develop positive relationships and promote personal and community safety; be accountable to the community they serve; and work with other agencies. These are all great ideas, but without gardaí on the streets or working in Garda stations full-time, none of these initiatives will be successful. We also need more community facilities for young people. We must help them out in any way we can. We need more funding for drug addiction services, which do great work.

I wrote the Minister to ask for a meeting and she said that she would meet me. Some of the issues I wanted to raise are the low number of gardaí per head of population in County Meath, the need for a Garda substation for Johnstown in Navan and areas like Oldcastle and Athboy and the need for full-time deployment of gardaí.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I commend the members of An Garda Síochána on the work they have done in the trying circumstances caused by Covid-19. Unfortunately, they are being let down by underinvestment, neglect and a system that needs root-and-branch reform. The report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland was launched with great fanfare in September 2018. It was promptly left to gather dust on a shelf in the Department of Justice. The previous Government developed a habit of paying for reports on how to fix issues and then ignoring their recommendations. That includes the Duffy Cahill report, which was intended to prevent another Clerys-style closure. Unfortunately, because the Government failed to implement that report, the Debenhams workers have now been on the picket line for more than 220 days seeking a fair resolution to their dispute.

In a recent parliamentary question, I asked why no gardaí were rostered to be present in Monasterevin Garda station for two full consecutive days earlier this month. The question was disallowed by the Ceann Comhairle because the Minister has no responsibility for the matter and it was a question for the Garda Commissioner. People in local Garda management tell me they do not have enough gardaí. Surely this is a matter on which the Minister can comment.

Monasterevin is not the only station in Kildare and Laois with low garda numbers. The report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland heralded a new approach to policing and community safety, with the key aim of ensuring that police are more visible in communities. If the Government takes one thing from this report, it should be the issue of Garda visibility. It is a massive deterrent to all types of crime. I also appeal for an increase in resources for County Kildare. Kildare is a large county and is divided into two constituencies, Kildare North and Kildare South. The entire county has two Garda motorbikes and only one 4x4 vehicle. That is simply not good enough. I am asking for this complement to be increased. Surely that would help.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this matter. I welcome the earlier contributions of the two Ministers. All the right terminology was used, reflecting the requirement for a multi-agency response. They talked about the necessity for family supports. A synergy between all the stakeholders involved in community development and the justice system is needed. I welcome the discussion of an expansion of the youth justice system. That probably needs to be redesigned it. We need a system that is able to deal with the fact that kids are getting involved in crime at earlier ages. I refer both to serious anti-social behaviour and children being groomed by crime gangs to engage in drug dealing. We need a system that will deal with this. We must involve all the stakeholders.

The difficulty is that these services, whether provided by the State or by NGOs, are generally under severe pressure and in need of resourcing. Community policing must be at the very centre of this. I welcome some of what was said by my colleague, Deputy Imelda Munster. She referred to the brutal feuding in Drogheda prompting an increase in community policing numbers. We had one sergeant and nine gardaí. Meanwhile Dundalk, which has similar needs, has one sergeant and only five gardaí, or sometimes as few as three. We have witnessed the significant impact of the increase in numbers on the drugs squad, particularly locally. However, it is also necessary to build relationships with the community. The insufficient number of sergeants in the Dundalk area is a major difficulty, which must be resolved.

I welcome the scoping exercise led by Mr. Vivian Geiran and the communication I have had with the Minister. I welcome the fact that those directing the exercise have made themselves available for communication. I have spoken about the necessity of dealing with Dundalk as an aspect of the problems in Drogheda. Drugs are our greatest scourge. They are a pandemic that will be with us for a long time. We need to deal with it through a holistic multi-agency approach.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I understand that a pay freeze is currently in place for An Garda Síochána but reforms continue to be rolled out. Gardaí are the real knights in shining armour at the moment, policing our country during a time of crisis. Some feel that this is happening rather quickly and by stealth, without incremental pay changes. These reforms include the much-discussed Garda operating model and the roster and duty management system, RDMS. The four-day roster system has worked well during the Covid-19 pandemic. It has ensured better policing and allowed gardaí to have more quality time at home with their families. They are human after all. It has worked well for communities and for the service at large.

An Garda Síochána was supposed to introduce new uniforms for its members last year.

9 o'clock

Is there any update on that? It seems to have drifted down the priority agenda in recent months.

Ardnacrusha in my community has a significant population on the doorstep of Limerick city. Although it is a Clare community, it falls under the remit of Limerick city Garda division, which is understaffed. A garda was based at Ardnacrusha station at the beginning of Covid but we have lost him to the city division. I know that the Minister cannot intervene in this area but I ask that the Garda Commissioner intervene to have that officer returned to Ardnacrusha Garda station. I have said many times in the Chamber that I believe An Garda Síochána need to have capacity to take on what has been dubbed in the media as “mini-CAB” duties. At local housing estate level, An Garda Síochána need to have the capacity to take on the small-time drug dealer, the guy who is living way beyond his means, has luxury cars and a lavish lifestyle and is living a life that most of us could only aspire to or dream of. An Garda Síochána at local level need to have the capacity to deal with that.

The Minister might respond in writing to some of the issues raised.

Criminal Justice (Mutual Recognition of Decisions on Supervision Measures) Bill 2019 [Seanad]: Report and Final Stages

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, wishes to seek a Clerk’s correction in accordance with Standing Order 196. I call on the Minister of State to outline the nature of the correction.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I would be obliged if, in accordance with Standing Order 196, the Leas-Cheann Comhairle would direct the Clerk to make the following verbal correction to the text of the Bill:

On page 36, line 10, to replace the words “Designation of competent authorities” with “Each Member State shall inform the General Secretariat of”.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed. The correction is noted and will be made.

Bill received for final consideration and passed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A message will be sent to the Seanad acquainting it accordingly.

Sitting suspended at 9.03 p.m. and resumed at 9.30 p.m.

Estimates for Public Services 2020: Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2020: Vote 2.

18 November 2020

Appointment of Ordinary Member of Standards in Public Office Commission: Motion (Resumed)

The following motion was moved by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, on Tuesday, 17 November 2020:

That, pursuant to subsection (2)(b)(v) (inserted by section 2 of the Standards in Public Office Act 2001 (No. 31 of 2001)), of section 21 of the Ethics in Public Office Act 1995 (No. 22 of 1995), Dáil Éireann approves the proposed appointment by the Government of Ms. Geraldine Feeney (being a former member of Seanad Éireann and not being a member of the European Parliament) to be an ordinary member of the Standards in Public Office Commission.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division on the motion regarding the appointment of an ordinary member of the Standards in Public Office Commission. Yesterday, on the question, “That the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and that division must be taken now.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 87; Níl, 57; 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>	
<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>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	

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<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</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'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>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</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.

Scrambler Motorbikes and Quad Bikes: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Paul Donnelly on Tuesday, 17 November 2020:

That Dáil Éireann:

acknowledges that:

— the unlawful use of quad-bikes and scrambler motorcycles has resulted in serious injury and death;

— Gardaí do not have the required training, resources or legislative powers to effectively address the unlawful and dangerous use of quad-bikes and scrambler motorcycles;

— the current practice is that Gardaí do not follow or apprehend those using or driving quad-bikes or scrambler motorcycles in an unlawful or dangerous manner;

— the scourge of scrambler motorcycles and off-road motorbikes is at an all-time high in urban centres across the State, with some cases where parents are afraid to allow young children out to play in housing estates and public parks;

— elderly people who use local parks for recreation are afraid to go for their daily walk and that local sports clubs have been forced to abandon their activities where their pitches have been destroyed by the illegal use of scrambler motorcycles and quadbikes;

— there are reports from communities that quad-bikes and scrambler motorcycles are being used for the delivery and distribution of drugs, in order to avoid apprehension by the Gardaí;

— the current legislation is not adequate to effectively address this issue and needs to be reformed, amended and robustly enforced; and

— public parks and community recreational facilities have been damaged as a result of the unlawful use of quad-bikes and scrambler motorcycles, at significant cost to local authorities; and

calls on the Government to:

— bring forward, as a matter of urgency, amending legislation to give the Gardaí powers to seize and detain quad-bikes and scrambler motorcycles when being used unlawfully or in a dangerous or reckless manner;

— extend the relevant legal definition of public place to include public parks, green spaces in estates, public recreational areas and sporting grounds under the ownership of local authorities or clubs;

— ensure that Gardaí are provided with the necessary resources and training to follow and apprehend those using quad-bikes and scrambler motorcycles unlawfully;

— extend the National Vehicle and Driver File database, to provide for the compulsory registration of all quad-bikes and scrambler motorcycles;

— conduct a review of practices in other jurisdictions which result in the police performing a controlled stop on those illegally riding motorcycles and scrambler motorcycles;

— introduce, as a standard operational practice, the successful pilot scheme rolled out in Finglas in 2019, which resulted in the seizure of over 40 motorcycles and scrambler motorcycles which were being used illegally on the roads;

— put in place a campaign to highlight the dangers of scrambler motorcycles and quadbikes, when driven recklessly or in public places;

— run an effective public awareness campaign in the run-up to Christmas to discourage the purchase of such vehicles for children and young people; and

— encourage local authorities to explore the feasibility of providing suitable spaces for the use of registered quad-bikes and scrambler motorcycles in a safe, controlled and responsible manner.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“is concerned that:

— the misuse of scrambler motorcycles, quad-bikes and other vehicles is a matter of public concern and has led to serious safety risks and interference with the enjoyment of amenities for communities in some areas of the country; and

— regrettably, the misuse of these vehicles has resulted in death or serious injury in some cases;

notes that:

— An Garda Síochána pursue appropriate policing strategies with due regard to the need to ensure that responses to the misuse of vehicles do not lead to increased and exacerbated public safety risks;

— An Garda Síochána pursue consistent law enforcement practices by responding appropriately to incidents and local circumstances;

— the existing legislation requires the safe use of vehicles as well as compliance with conditions for driver licensing, motor taxation and insurance, and the relevant legislative provisions have already been subject of close examination by Government departments and advice from the Attorney General;

— Gardaí already have significant enforcement powers in relation to dangerous misuse of vehicles and non-compliance with regulations on driver licensing, taxation and insurance, including seizure of vehicles where appropriate;

— the Government has provided extensive resources to An Garda Síochána to support law enforcement and effective policing;

— Gardaí successes in the seizure of vehicles underline the need to continue to support An Garda Síochána to respond to local situations and provide appropriate resources and technical support; and

— An Garda Síochána continues to provide a robust policing response to the trade in illegal drugs and to adopt intelligence-led approaches to counter the activities of criminal groups, notwithstanding the current pressures on the Garda service due to the restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic; and

supports:

— the Programme for Government ‘Our Shared Future’ commitment to enhance powers available to An Garda Síochána to limit the use of scrambler motorcycles and quad-bikes by those engaged in anti-social behaviour and enact legislation to add to those powers if needed;

— the recent publicity campaign by the Road Safety Authority (RSA) and An Garda Síochána to discourage the purchase of scrambler motorcycles and quad-bikes, particularly in the run up to Christmas;

— the ongoing engagement between Government departments and agencies to assess if there are any further means of strengthening legislation in this area, as well as enhancing enforcement measures, public awareness raising and community-based responses;

— the ongoing development of policing responses by An Garda Síochána;

— the ongoing engagement between An Garda Síochána, local authorities and communities, to support appropriate responses to local circumstances;

— the ongoing work of the RSA to raise awareness of the dangers of misuse of vehicles;

— the additional resources provided by Government in Budget 2021 for youth services;

— the imminent publication of a new Youth Justice Strategy which will provide a renewed framework to enhance responses to youth crime and anti-social behaviour;

— the work of the forum on anti-social behaviour, which was recently convened by the Minister of State for Law Reform, in line with a commitment in the Programme for Government ‘Our Shared Future’; and

— the recent announcement to pilot local community safety partnerships which recognise the need for a collaborative approach between communities, local authorities and services, including policing and youth services, to effectively target issues affecting communities, such as anti-social behaviour, including through the misuse of scrambler motorcycles.”

- (Minister for Justice)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to amendment No. 1 to the motion regarding protecting communities from the unlawful use of scrambler motorcycles and quad bikes in public spaces. Yesterday, on the question, “That amendment No. 1 to the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 57; 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>	
<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>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</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'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	

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<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</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>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</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'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>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

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

Amendment declared carried.

18 November 2020

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 57; 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>	
<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>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	

Dáil Éireann

<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</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>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</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>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</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'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>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		

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<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.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.05 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 19 November 2020.